

## Is History Bunk?

By RAYMOND SWING



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I DO not know the circumstances under which Henry Ford said that "history is bunk" or what particular discovery adduced the observation. All I know is that I set down Henry Ford to be an anti-intellectual lout for saying it. Now I confess I may have been mistaken. Like so many others these days, I have been watching history being made. I have seen instance after instance in which what happened need not have happened or at any rate did not obviously express a basic force that inevitably produced it. I also have realized that I have not known precisely what produced an event before my eyes. I also appreciate that nobody ever will know all about it, certainly not a writer of history living at a later time. To be sure, the historian will have access to information not now disclosed to me, in the way that Robert Sherwood, with Harry Hopkins's papers in hand, could write a history of World War II immeasurably superior to anything any journalist in Washington could have produced during the war. The historian does have more of a certain kind of knowledge. But he also has less of another kind. He might not be able to write with any assurance if he were too acutely aware of what he did not know. The history he does write obviously is incomplete, hence in part incomprehended.

It may be that Henry Ford saw this clearly and was astonished to find a factual observation about history scorned as loutish. He may have seen as in a sudden vision that man and men, making decisions, are then bound by them and that the sum total of their decisions is history and that this history appears logical and indeed

dominated by an unmistakable destiny. Then he may also have seen that each decision might quite easily have been otherwise so that all history would have been otherwise save for the makers of history being influenced by the most obscure causes. And he may have appreciated that the most minute and obscure causes are utterly unknown to the historian, who really has no accurate knowledge how a given action came to be produced or how close it came to being a wholly different action. Not only were unseen influences at work on the makers of history but on those who marked or molded the makers of history in their childhood or their private lives. The more one contemplates the innumerable turnings of the road not taken and the inscrutable forces at work in avoiding taking them the less didactic one will be about history having a discernible causation.

Let me be specific. The causes of the American Civil War are familiar to all. They include such determi-

nants as economic rivalry between Northern industry and Southern agrarianism and the profound disagreement over state rights and the institution of slavery. But the history of the Civil War is also one of what individual men did and did not do. Thus the men who caused the firing on Ft. Sumter precipitated the war. Of all the individuals involved in this event four are notable though few histories mention them.

TO understand this period it must be appreciated that the election of 1860 showed that all sections of public opinion in North and South were opposed to war. Not a single element or faction favored it and the 1860 election must count as one of the most one-sided referenda ever held. Hence Lincoln, though a minority President, in being opposed to war expressed a virtually unanimous desire of Americans. Then Ft. Sumter was fired on and the war became unavoidable. But firing on Ft. Sumter was not unavoidable. As I said, four men had a part in producing it, individuals so obscure that only specialists on that era have ever heard of them. In telling about them one comes to realize, if not why, then at least how history came to be made in the firing on Ft. Sumter.

President Lincoln wished to withdraw the Federal garrison from Ft. Sumter, but also felt that to do so would weaken Federal authority unless accompanied by an action strengthening it somewhere else. His duty, as he saw it, was to keep the authority undiminished. So if Sumter was to be evacuated—and it lay in the harbor of the chief city of the chief of the seceded states — some other Federal fort in the South should be reinforced. He obtained Cabinet approval for an expedition to reinforce Ft. Pickens, off the Florida coast, and a Capt. Adams was put in command of the expedition fitted out for this purpose. But Capt. Adams, on



—Acme.

Henry Ford: "History is bunk."

arriving at Ft. Pickens, learned that during the last months of the Buchanan Administration a secret agreement had been made not to strengthen the Pickens garrison because of the inflammatory effect feared from such an action. Told about this agreement, Capt. Adams took it upon himself to defy the instructions of his Commander-in-Chief and returned with his mission unfulfilled. Had he fulfilled it the garrison of Ft. Sumter would have been withdrawn and the fort would not have been fired upon.

But even this presumptuous naval officer did not make the firing inevitable. Three men were sent by the Confederate Government at Montgomery to negotiate with Major Anderson, commandant of Ft. Sumter, for his withdrawal. The garrison was near the end of its food supply and after Capt. Adams's failure it became essential to send in stores. A convoy was arranged for this purpose and President Lincoln took utmost pains that this convoy should not lead to fighting and so start a war. He sent a personal envoy to the governor of South Carolina telling him the convoy was coming, that it was bringing only food, and that no belligerent action would be taken if the convoy was not attacked. Major Anderson had instructions permitting him to withdraw if the food did not arrive in time. He so informed the three envoys from Montgomery when they called on him. But they tried to put pressure on him not to wait for food and without any authorization to do so in those terms they delivered an ultimatum calling on him to leave the fort in sixty minutes! He explained that under his orders he could not accept such terms but they were not changed and in sixty minutes the war had begun.

I AM not arguing that had these four men not been born there would have been no Civil War. I am not saying some other fort would not have been fired upon at another time with the same consequences. I simply say that this is the way the Civil War started. And if the firing on Ft. Sumter might have been avoided so might any subsequent event precipitating the war. Who can tell? All public opinion was against war; only a few hotheads wanted it. In retrospect one can hardly say the Civil War was worth what it cost since every positive result achieved in its course might have been won by peaceful means. Yet most historians do not write about the fortuitous way Ft. Sumter came to be fired upon or about the four men—or indeed only one, Capt. Adams—who precipitated it. A notable exception is J. C. Randall, to whose



Surrendered German snipers in Normandy—"the invasion hung by a thread."

"Lincoln the President" I am indebted for these facts.

Another example of underemphasized and obscure history is to the point out of my own journalistic experience. I happen to have been eyewitness of one of the most decisive actions of World War I, the attempt of the Allied fleet to force the Dardanelles in March 1915. Had this succeeded, Constantinople would have fallen, Turkey would have withdrawn from the war, the German position on the Continent would have been flanked, and the war would probably have been won in 1916. Millions of men who died would have lived, the United States would not have entered the war, and there would not have been, in 1918 at any rate, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.

As an eyewitness of the attack on the Dardanelles forts—the greatest action of naval power against land fortifications in history up to that time—I must report that the action succeeded and that the Allied naval command abandoned its objective not knowing its own success. Had the fleet come back after the first day it could have finished reducing the forts and sweeping away remaining mines and sailed triumphantly to an undefended Constantinople. I say this because I was in the Turkish fort on the Asiatic side of the narrows—the main defense—when the Allied attack began, and I came back into the fort in the evening after the attack ended. The German gunners had worked hard but their earthen defenses were in ruins. Only two long-range guns still were usable and for these only

some thirty-five shells remained. The fort across the narrows was completely wrecked, the lesser batteries down the bay were mostly stilled. The infantry which Liman von Sanders was to command in repelling the subsequent Gallipoli landing had not yet assembled. The road to Constantinople was open.

But the Allied fleet did not come back and its failure to do so is surely one of the most fateful decisions in our times. Here indeed history was made and the destiny of Europe and America determined. Here then is an opportunity for the historian to examine men, minds, and moments and illuminate not only how things happened but why. But little heed has been paid these decisive hours. It happens that Winston Churchill, author of the strategy of flanking Germany, was to suffer the greatest loss of prestige because it miscarried. His history of World War I also is the best source of information about what took place aboard the flagship *Suffren* of the Allied fleet the night of the first attack. In a midnight council the Allied naval command decided not to send the fleet back into the straits and this he relates in "The World Crisis."

On the morning after the attack I was under orders as a guest correspondent to be ready to retreat into Anatolia with the garrison when the fleet returned and finished the operation of forcing the straits. The little village of Chanak Kale was partially in ruins; its streets were clogged with debris. The fort could only have fired an hour or so with effectiveness and

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**U.S.A.** *Of all contemporary writers about the American scene none more nearly deserves the title of Democratic Liberal, bestowed upon him below by Lloyd Morris, than Gerald W. Johnson, who in his truly "Incredible Tale" writes brilliantly about the "immortality of the average man." This omnipotent fellow's course in the past fifty years has been altered by four men of tremendous power: Wilson, Lenin, F. D. Roosevelt, and Stalin. With these Mr. Johnson deals with artistic skill and historic sense—while John Gunther, reporter extraordinary, seeks in "Roosevelt in Retrospect" to simplify the complex personality of the one whom history conceivably may find the most important of them all. Both of these books, having been written with spirit and honesty, contribute immeasurably to our understanding of democratic United States as it has been, not without struggle, during the first chaotic half of the twentieth century.*

## Odyssey of John Q. Public

**INCREDIBLE TALE.** By Gerald W. Johnson. New York: Harper & Bros. 301 pp. \$3.50.

By LLOYD MORRIS

**T**HE SUBTITLE of "Incredible Tale" declares its epic subject. In this vivid, absorbing, enlightening book, Mr. Johnson narrates "the Odyssey of the average American in the last half century." Here, for the first time, the history of our momentous era is interpreted in terms of its impact on the lives, the minds, and emotions of the plain people of this country. The people's leaders—great or otherwise—are mortal and pass from the scene. But the average man is immortal, Mr. Johnson holds. He is always on hand, not individually, but in the mass. Any hope for the future rests upon him. As a democratic liberal, Mr. Johnson believes that the average American will prove equal to the immense responsibilities which confront him now and will continue to afflict him for years to come. This faith rings out vigorously from the pages of "Incredible Tale" and is justified by the tale itself. For it is, obviously, the story of an education; the difficult education to which the plain people of the United States have been subjected during the past half century.

An American born in 1900, Mr. Johnson reminds us, has endured a variety of experiences unique in history. "His life has been attacked by armed enemies, his living has been attacked by impersonal economic forces, his moral certainties have been wrecked by science, art, philosophy, and, above all, by time and change." During his lifetime a world order has disintegrated, and civilization has

been changed beyond recognition. There have been two global wars and five ancient empires have collapsed in ruins. Science has unlocked the basic power of the universe and today we face the dire consequences of that triumph. Meanwhile the course of everyone's existence has been altered by the emergence of four world figures, men of tremendous power:

Wilson, Lenin, Franklin Roosevelt, and Stalin.

Two major themes, always in counterpoint, dominate Mr. Johnson's record of the Odyssey of the average American. One is the growing concern of the plain people with their government; the other, their expanding involvement in world affairs. Over the past fifty years, as Mr. Johnson shows with cumulative impressiveness, the American people have become increasingly determined to make democracy work in the United States and to forge their government into a potent instrument for the advancement of their collective welfare. Their resolution was expressed in the attack on privilege and "invisible government" in the era of Bryan and Theodore Roosevelt. It became articulate and forceful in the great reforms of Woodrow Wilson's first Administration. And since the inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt it has become the overriding issue of our national politics. Mr. Johnson's dramatic account of the gradual evolution of the concept of the "welfare state" in the minds of the American people is genuinely illuminating. As things stand today, he concludes, with democracy engaged in a worldwide contest with Communism, "democracy has won, at most, a chance to prove its ability to furnish the kind of gov-

**THE AUTHOR:** Gerald W. Johnson says he wrote "Incredible Tale" because "I feel that my generation has a unique position in the world that it is overlooking for the most part. I hope it may reduce somewhat the fears that are sweeping the country, that seem to me wholly unjustified." The book, his seventeenth, represents a distillation of his life's experience—a life that began nearly sixty years ago in Riverton, N. C. (pop. six kin), of which his grandfather was postmaster. Johnson père was a country newspaper editor, who sang Baptist hymns, tenor or bass as required, in a succession of North Carolina parishes. Gerald in footstep established the *Thomasville (N. C.) Davidsonian* at age twenty and three years later became music critic for the *Greensboro Daily News*, where, barring World War I service, he remained until 1924. The next year, then professor of journalism at the University of North Carolina, his first book was published. Other works followed in almost annual succession while he was editorial writer for the *Baltimore Evening Sun* and *Sun*, 1926-43. All are in an historical vein save "A Little Night-Music," the best known being "Roosevelt: Dictator or Democrat?" (translated into German, Portuguese, and [sic] English), "American Heroes and Hero-Worship," and since his retirement to free-lance, "Woodrow Wilson" (with the editors of *Look*) and "An Honorable Titan." No politician, he has continued to comment on critical issues in publications scholarly to slick, and currently finds himself—while collecting material for a book on 1812-61 Baltimore—"rattling about the state" lashing the Ober and Mundt bills. In 1946 Johnson, "a New-Dealer, a Bad-Dealer, but not a Double-Dealer Democrat," defined a liberal as "a man who is aware of perils ahead and therefore alert, but who is convinced that the opportunity is greater than the danger." Today he would amplify: "A liberal is a man who never overlooks the obvious facts and makes his political philosophy conform." —R. G.

