

What the Historian Owes the Negro

Emergence of long-observed facets of Negro history brings with it the challenge to develop new perspectives on this nation's past

By BENJAMIN QUARLES

JUST AS the Negro's place in American life is now changing, so is his place in American history. The true role of the Negro in our country's past is emerging from the shadows. Like other aspects of our national life, history is now being desegregated; old outlooks are giving way to new.

The role of Negro brawn in the physical building of America is not an unfamiliar story, but today's readers are prepared to go further—to reflect, for example, upon Margaret Just Butcher's carefully considered statement that "some of the most characteristic features of American culture are derivatives of the folk life and spirit of this darker tenth of the population." It is no longer somewhat unsettling to come across a book that credits the Negro with enlarging the meaning of freedom in America, giving it new expressions. In today's schools, a youngster would react more receptively than ever to finding out, for example, that the first non-Indian to explore portions of Arizona and New Mexico was a Negro; that a Negro was the first to die at the Boston Massacre; that a Negro wrote the second book of verse published by any woman in colonial America; that a Negro was the first Chicagoan; that a Negro was one of

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the three commissioners who laid out the city of Washington; that a Negro preached the first Protestant sermon heard west of the Mississippi; that a Negro invented a vacuum cap that revolutionized the sugar industry; that another Negro invented the shoe-lasting machine that had a similar effect in the shoe industry; that a Negro accompanied Peary at the discovery of the North Pole; and that the first American fatality in World War II was a Negro.

NEGRO history's coming of age springs from no single cause. In recent decades anthropology and related fields have exploded racial myths. Thoughtful people have sensed the peril inherent in the kind of racist dogma that helped to spawn a Hitler and to create a Dachau. And the Negro's own stepped-up drive for equal status since World War II has called for a revitalized study of our country's past. In the larger cities—New York, Washington, Detroit, and Los Angeles, among others—colored parents have requested that social studies books used in the public schools deal adequately and fairly with minorities. Because they now know their past better, Negroes are no longer ashamed of it. Gone is the defensive, apologetic tone.

Another reason for the new Negro history is the changing historical image of Africa. "The existence of African history has, in recent years, achieved widespread recognition," writes Robert I. Rotberg of Harvard, in his authoritative *Political History of Tropical Africa*. No longer is it tenable to believe that when the Europeans first ventured down the African coastline in the mid-1400s, they found the natives living in barbarism and savagery. No longer can it be said

that when the ancestor of the American Negro arrived in the New World he was "culturally naked."

In the last twenty-five years a growing number of white historians have viewed the Negro from new and fresh angles. These include Dwight L. Dumond, an authority on the abolition movement and the ante bellum free Negro; Kenneth M. Stampp, who portrayed slavery and the slave somewhat differently from the traditional viewpoint; James M. McPherson, who saw the Civil War Negro as a participant rather than as a spectator; and C. Vann Woodward, whose *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* gave us a new perspective on race relations in the South. The number of articles on the Negro submitted to *The American Historical Review* also is multiplying, according to Henry R. Winkler, managing editor. To write or to read Negro history is now no longer to venture into *terra incognita* or to take an excursion, at one's own risk, through history's underworld.

Why has Negro history been so late in coming into its own, and why in so many quarters are the shores still only dimly seen?

"The use of history is to tell us what we are, for at birth we are merely vessels, and we become what our traditions pour into us," Learned Hand has written. But this phrase, trenchant as it is, requires one major modification: We become what our *traditionalists*, i.e., our historians, pour into us. Events of the past do not exist of themselves, but only as they reach us via their chroniclers.

Much of history is interpretation. Its most trusted interpreter is, of course, the professionally trained historian, his

name trailed by clusters of letters. Guardian of the sacred word, he knows that he is expected to bring an objective intelligence to his work—to winnow and sift sensitively and then to relate what it was that actually happened. This is a tall order. For despite his professional training, the historian's own values and beliefs are likely to be intrusive. His own social outlook may give a "personal equation" to his reconstructions of the past. This tendency, however natural, poses a real problem. One who works from what Oliver Wendell Holmes called an "inarticulate major premise" may well wind up with something less than the whole truth. History then becomes image-making with footnotes, its brush strokes blurred by what logicians call the fallacy of initial predication.

Such historical introspectionism has inevitably worked to the detriment of the various minority groups in America—the Asiatics, the Spanish-speaking peoples, and immigrants from southern Europe—all of whom have been treated as "out-groups." Negroes, especially, have been the objects of this narrow-mindedness on the part of historians. Speaking in 1840, Henry Highland Garnet, then beginning a long career as a militant clergyman, clearly stated the problem: "All other races are permitted to travel over the wide fields of history and pluck the flowers that blossom there—to glean up heroes, philosophers, sages, and poets, and put them into a galaxy of brilliant genius; but if a black man attempts to do so, he is met at the threshold by the objection, 'You have no ancestry behind you.'"

A RESEARCHER is often engaged in a subconscious mission, his conclusions already lodged in the back of his head. He has, in Herbert Butterfield's words, "a magnet in his mind," one that impels him to extract from the documents such data as fit into a framework already fashioned. When, as he combs the sources, this researcher comes across a reference to Negroes, he turns the page as though it were blank. When one goes fishing for facts, writes historian Edward Hallett Carr, what he catches will depend partly on chance, but primarily upon other factors, such as "the part of the ocean he chooses to fish in," the kind of tackle he selects, and the kind of fish he wants to catch. And, to take Carr's figure a step further, an unwanted specimen is likely to be quickly thrown back into the water.

As often as not this mind-set of the historian takes the form of glorifying his own. Historians are not immune to ancestor worship. To puff up one's own ethnic group is not the exclusive province of a Hitler (whose favorite subject was history). As practitioners of the dictum, "Be to her faults a little blind,"

Be to her virtues very kind," historians tend to reflect rather than to correct the group mores. This ethnocentric attitude has had serious implications for the Negro. Since American history has been written, in the main, by men of old English stock, the role of the Negro could hardly come in for a rounded appraisal. Such a historian felt no kinship with the colored people, no identity. To glorify one's own is certainly no sin, but in a many-faceted culture such as America's this in-group emphasis may amount to a denigration of other component population elements.

Four years ago the American Historical Association and two of its counterparts in Great Britain—the Historical Association of England and Wales, and the British Association for America Studies—agreed to launch a joint Anglo-American study entitled, "National Bias in the School Books of the United Kingdom and the United States." History teachers had long been strongly suspicious that a strong national slant characterized the textbooks of both America and England; it hardly need be added that the joint committee of historians found (in their recently published book, *The Historian's Contribution to Anglo-American Misunderstanding*) this to be true to some degree in every one of the thirty-six works put under examination. If two nations as close as these have reason to be concerned about the textbook bias each shows against the other, imagine, if you will, the kind of attitudes that English and American textbook writers might exhibit toward peoples of another color, peoples with whom they discerned few ties and felt no sense of community.

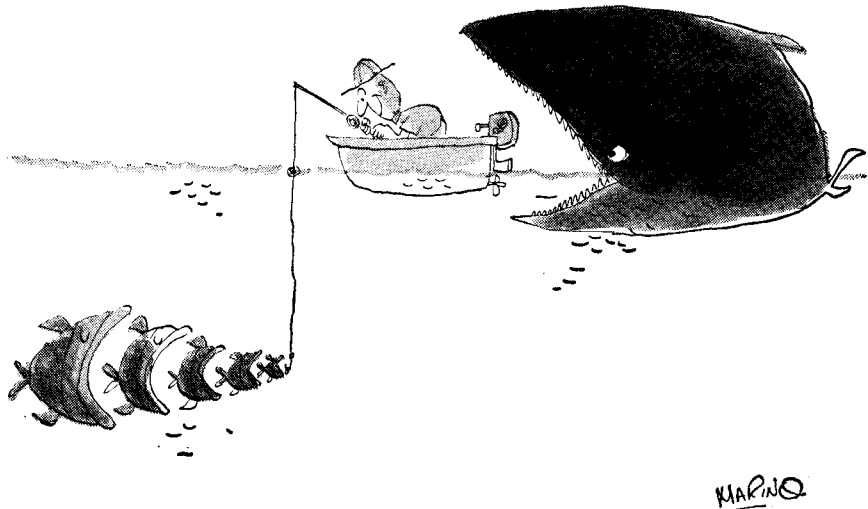
An almost complementary refrain to group glorification has been the historian's tendency to take his cue from the civilization or culture that is currently dominant. For the past five centuries the dominant peoples and nations have been of Germanic-tribes origin and have been located in Europe. Nobody can touch

the historian for hindsight—he knows to begin with "where the bodies are buried." He knows that for half a millennium the nations of Western Europe were destined to predominate. Thus, it is natural for him to have a Eurocentric view of the modern world, to believe that non-Western cultures were below par if not permanently inferior. Less blatantly, but no less surely, writers of history have shared Tennyson's belief, "Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay."

The fact that these dominant nations of Europe were white was bound to make a deep impression on observers. Europe was equated with white, which in turn was equated with civilization and progress. Non-European was equated with non-white, which in turn meant outside the pale—stagnant if not primitive, lesser breeds standing in long-time tutelage to Western man. These assumptions, reflected in the writings of generation after generation of historians, certainly did the Negro no service.

The belief in white superiority has been fully shared by historians. No less than other Americans, they have found it possible to subscribe simultaneously to the all-men-are-created-equal dictum of the Declaration of Independence and the theory of "divine-right white." Hence, the historian's treatment of the Negro has been more of a conditioned reflex than of an examined premise.

It follows, then, that the great majority of historians have operated under the assumption that the role of the Negro in American life was hardly worth considering. They believed that the Negro contributed very little to our country's history, and, if asked whether on the whole the Negro has been an asset or a liability, they would have answered quickly, as if no reflection were required. Basically an "unperson," the Negro was viewed by the historian as part of a monolithic mass that was to be classified as the cause of something or the effect on



something—with causes and effects, however varied, being alike in one respect: their threat to the general welfare, the common good.

Moreover, the sources used by historians reflected the currently unflattering attitude toward the Negro. No concept was more deeply rooted in American thought than that of Negro inferiority. Whites who crossed the color line were publicly punished. Within a dozen years after the first Negroes landed at Jamestown, the Virginia court ordered one Hugh Sidey to be whipped for “defiling his body in lying with a Negro.” From the beginning Negroes were not thought to be assimilable; they were not considered fellow parishioners in the church or even fellow roisterers at the tavern.

This conviction of Negro inequality was strong throughout colonial America. Even in New England, with its sparse colored population, the free Negro was placed on a different footing from others, reflecting the view that he was inferior. Phillis Wheatley, bred in Boston although born in Africa, took note, on the eve of the Revolutionary War, of the prevailing attitude toward the Negro:

Some view our sable race with
scornful eye,
“Their colour is a diabolic die.”

The Founding Fathers, revered by historians for over a century and a half, did not conceive of the Negro as part of the body politic. Theoretically, these men believed in freedom for everyone, but in actuality they found it hard to imagine a society in which Negroes were of equal status to whites. Jefferson, who was far more liberal than the run of his contemporaries, was nevertheless certain “that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government.”

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, most of the people of the United States were tolerant of slavery.

Southern spokesmen assured all who would listen that the Negro, by color, culture, and nature, was peculiarly fitted for slavery. Indeed, it was for him an upward step in civilization, plus a sheltered way of life. Writing as late as 1929, the authoritative U. B. Phillips stated that “the home of a planter or of a well-to-do townsman was likely to be ‘a magnificent Negro boarding-house,’ at which an indefinite number of servants and their dependents and friends were fed.”

THE corrosive race issue inevitably entered into the historian’s treatment of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Most historians, having an aristocratic conception of tragedy, were more deeply moved by the suffering of the rich than that of the poor. Hence, it is not surprising that the misfortunes of the bankrupt and ruined planters would evoke a sympathetic response. The race issue emerged more pointedly in the historian’s assessment of the trying Reconstruction decade. He tended to identify with the defeated and stricken white Southerner, rather than with the newly freed Negro people. Therefore, he was prepared to accept at face value the appraisal of Reconstruction formulated by fellow guildsmen such as William A. Dunning, Walter L. Fleming, and John W. Burgess.

Southern sympathizers to the core, these writers made the Negro the whipping boy of Reconstruction. Their charges were familiar: Negro legislators wasted money or stole it; the Negro was given the ballot but he didn’t know what to do with it. To an ex-Confederate soldier such as Burgess, who exerted a strong influence on Reconstruction historiography, nothing good could come from the Negro. “A black skin,” he wrote, “means membership in a race of men which never of itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason.”

Turn-of-the-century historians shared the Burgess viewpoint. The new imper-

ialism of the Western powers, starting in the 1870s, reached this country in the 1890s with the Spanish-American War. With it came the concept of the “white man’s burden”—the mission to spread Anglo-Saxon civilization to backward peoples in far-away places. Applying the Darwinian theory of evolution to social development, historians now discovered added support for their belief in the basic inequality of dark-skinned peoples.

For the next third of a century—down to the eve of World War II—American historical thought and expression were pervaded by a justification of Jim Crow, whether by a Virginian such as Philip A. Bruce or a Californian such as H. H. Bancroft, historian of the West. Like their predecessors, these interpreters of the past would have scoffed at the charge that they were prejudiced. To them the inferiority of the Negro was an undeniable fact, not an assumption, and certainly not a manifestation of bigotry.

The prejudgment of the scholar has not been the only hurdle for Negro history. There were more conscious considerations, such as the paucity of source materials. John Chavis of the Detroit Historical Museum has posed the problem of the researcher in Negro history. “Where are the diaries, the family Bibles, the correspondence in fancy script tied in dusty bundles? Where are the silver services, the porringers, the samplers, the furniture dark and glossy, the oil portraits of awesome ancestors?”

HISTORY is written from the viewpoint of the articulate, of those who had the foresight to put their thoughts on paper. Unless records of an event or a person exist in sufficient supply, the historian is handicapped, his emphasis may lack balance, and his conclusions must be that much more tentative.

Much of the historical information about Negroes must be dug out; it is not readily available in printed form as are papers of the Presidents or other men of great place—the Hamiltons, Clays, and Calhouns. The Negro has not been articulate in a literary sense; indeed, he was relatively unlettered and hence lacking in a literary tradition. And those Negroes who could read and write were not fully aware of the importance of preserving records—minutes, letters, and fugitive publications. The problem, too, of Negro history is that the Negro, unlike many of the later arrivals in America, never had a foreign press; his past has been so interwoven with the American past as to make it difficult to separate the strands. [See “The Racial News Gap,” *SR*, August 13.]

Another conscious consideration in Negro history-writing is the matter of dollars and cents. A historian likes to feel that his manuscript will attract publishers and readers; he may shy from



a topic that would seem to present abnormal difficulties in getting attention. The questions that run in the mind of the historian are down-to-earth: "If I were to tackle subject X, who would finance research on this kind of topic? Who would publish it? Who would buy it?" A manuscript with a limited sales potential may never see print, no matter how meritorious or path-breaking.

Negro history manuscripts have been prominent among those lacking pocketbook appeal. Manuscripts that challenged deeply held beliefs about the Negro have not been welcomed by publishers, who have not wished to antagonize potential white buyers, particularly in the sensitive South. Even in more liberal centers booksellers have been skittish about Negro-history titles, feeling that the demand would be small.

This hesitancy by white publishers and authors concerning Negro history had the predictable effect of making Negroes bestir themselves. As early as 1883 this desire to bring to public attention the untapped material on the Negro prompted George Washington Williams to publish his two-volume *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880*. A many-sided man—soldier, theologian, lawyer, public officeholder—Williams was hailed as a "Negro Bancroft." His effort was a worthy one, although his style was grandiloquent.

THE first formally trained Negro historian was W. E. B. Du Bois, whose doctoral dissertation, published in 1895 (*The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*), became the first title to be published in the Harvard Historical Studies. Du Bois was not destined to give independent scholarship his chief devotion; turning to civil rights, he became one of the founders of the NAACP, and editor of its organ, *The Crisis*.

It was with Carter G. Woodson, another Harvard Ph.D., that Negro history took a quantum leap. Convinced that unless something were done to rescue the Negro from history's oversight, he would become "a negligible factor in the thought of the world," Woodson, in 1915, founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. During the preceding twenty years an American Negro Academy had been founded in Washington, and a Negro Society for Historical Research had appeared in New York. But these organizations had lacked a Woodson. In 1916, he began publication of a scholarly quarterly, *The Journal of Negro History*. To bring out book-length studies, Woodson, in 1920, organized the Associated Publishers, with himself as president of the board of trustees.

Writers for Woodson's publication strove for objectivity, to avoid chauvin-

ism or overstatement. They knew that their books and articles would be received with some puzzlement by Negro glorifiers—black supremacists who, in the words of A. A. Schomburg, "glibly tried to prove that half of the world's geniuses have been Negroes and to trace the pedigree of nineteenth-century Americans from the Queen of Sheba." ("Lord, forgive me if my need/Sometimes shapes a human creed," wrote the Negro poet, Countee Cullen.)

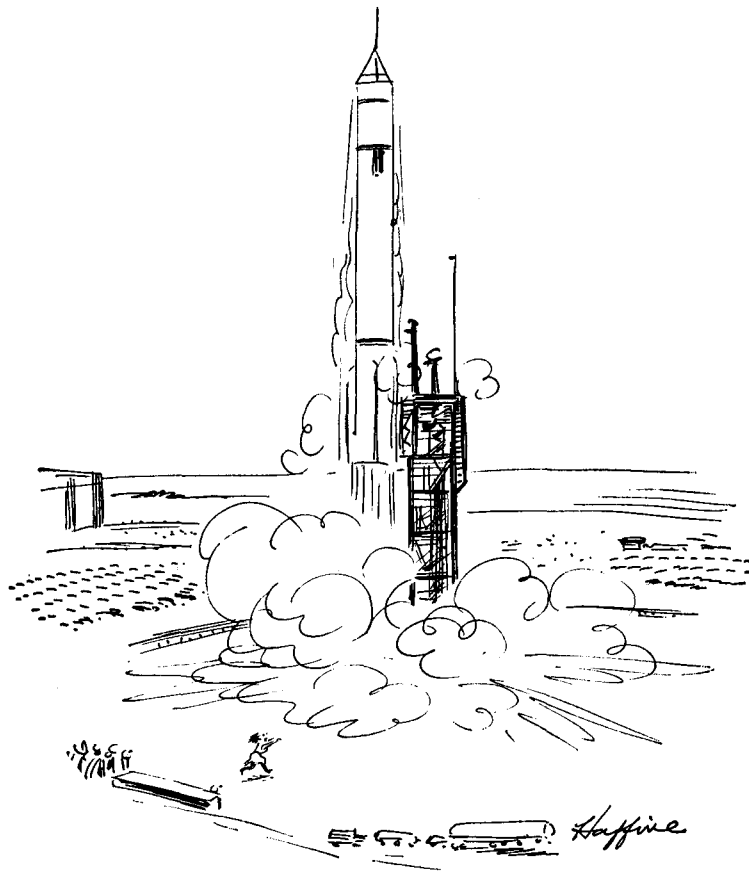
NEGRO historians had to be careful because they knew that the data they presented often seemed incredible to the reader, being so unexpected. But the care exercised by the professionally trained Negro historian was no guarantee that he would be read. This problem of a slim audience for histories written by Negroes was eloquently stated by George A. Myers, a Cleveland barber-shop proprietor who personally knew the great historian, James Ford Rhodes, and asked him to give credit in his widely read writings to the valor of the Negroes who had fought in the Civil War. "Negro historians might write until their hands palsied, and all they might write would not be given the credence of one chapter in your history," wrote Myers, a Negro himself. "Plainly speaking, it makes a difference who says it." Rhodes ignored Myers's Macedonian cry in 1915. But

since then, as has been noted, the picture has changed.

The new emphasis on the Negro as a contributing participant to American life since he arrived on these shores does not require that historians undergo professional retraining. Historians will continue to view the past from the vantage point of the present (as if there were any other way) and they will continue to take pride in their own country or group (as if there were anything wrong with this, within reason). Nor, as desirable as it might be, can we expect most historians to enter into the thinking and the feelings of people they regard as different from themselves.

But the careful reader, of whatever hue himself, has a right to expect that the historian recognize that the record of the colored American has something to add to the knowledge and understanding of our country's past, something to add to the story of human collaboration and interdependence. Readers have a right to expect that the historian be led to examine more closely anti-minority assumptions that may have crept into his thinking.

To say that the historian is morally accountable would be gratuitous. But to the extent that he helps to shape the national character in a pluralistic land such as ours, to that extent a special responsibility may inescapably be his.



"The car keys, Arthur, you've got the car keys!"

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Report from Geneva

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The editor of SR has been in Geneva where he has taken soundings at the Conference of the Eighteen-Nation Disarmament Committee of the United Nations.*

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND.
A SENSE OF SHOCK and revulsion seizes the world when a young man, laden with gun and ammunition, mounts a college tower and proceeds to slaughter people at random. There seems to be little concern, however, about a rapidly developing world situation in which the sky itself could become an atomic gun-mount with the entire human race vulnerable and exposed to nuclear holocaust. What gives the matter special point is that the world has not yet found an adequate way of safeguarding human society against irrational decisions and actions on the level where nation confronts nation.

Here at Geneva, representatives of a special United Nations committee have been meeting for the purpose of finding some way of keeping modern weaponry under control. The delegates recognize that the continued development and spread of nuclear explosives and missiles can create a situation, not too far distant, when "civilization" will be forced to move underground in order to cope with the ceaseless threat of a sudden hurricane of nuclear fire.

Two specific areas were marked out for possible agreement by the Geneva Conference. One involved a halt to the further spread of nuclear weapons. The second involved an extension of the present ban on nuclear testing to all

environments, whether in the air, sea, outer space, or underground.

At the start of the current session last January, there seemed to be reasonable grounds for believing that effective agreement was possible in both areas. Of all nations, the United States and the Soviet Union had most to lose by the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Both countries had spent enormous sums on their nuclear arsenals in pursuit of a commanding world position. If, therefore, a dozen or more countries were to build or acquire nuclear weapons, the practical effect would be to reduce heavily, and perhaps ultimately to wipe out, the military superiority of the major nuclear powers. To be sure, these major powers would continue to possess superior stockpiles, but the significance of such superiority would be measured more in terms of prestige than military might, since a relatively small number of nuclear weapons could destroy any nation, large or small. Hence it seemed inconceivable that the United States and the Soviet Union would lose any time in reaching agreement on the best way to slam the door on the spread of nuclear weapons. And if these two nations could agree, it was not considered likely that other nations would stand in the way of general agreement.

Similarly, a comprehensive test-ban agreement was regarded by the U.N. delegates as being in the best interests of both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Underground testing is prodigiously expensive. The refinements in the size and type of nuclear weapons produced would not be enough to offset the cost

or the grim consequences of a world nuclear arms race.

But the expected agreements on non-proliferation and on a comprehensive test ban have not materialized at Geneva. The two nations that stood to gain most by agreement have been unable to agree.

ON the non-proliferation issue, the United States took the position that atomic weapons could not be excluded from the arsenals of its military alliances. The Soviet Union took the position that the United States was proposing a treaty containing a loophole that would give West Germany access to nuclear weapons.

Thus the problem at Geneva was not just the need to work out the precise details of a treaty but to deal with the reality of Germany. In private discussions with other delegates, the Russians expressed their bewilderment at the attitude of the Americans. They found it inconceivable that the United States should permit West Germany to rearm at all, let alone be part of a nuclear force and perhaps even have access to the atomic trigger. Twenty million dead Russians in one war—quite apart from the toll of previous wars—represented enough reasons to oppose any treaty which would make an exception for the one nation which, the Russians insisted, could not be trusted with access to overwhelming force.

The Americans have replied by saying, first, that their draft proposal would not have the effect of giving West Germany command of any nuclear switchboard, and that, second, it is a serious error to assume that what has happened before will necessarily happen again; Germany today is not the Germany of the Thirties.

The Russian rejoinder is that the United States itself has publicly assured its NATO allies that they are full military partners. If the United States is to be taken at its word, say the Russians, NATO becomes the loophole through which West Germany becomes a nuclear power. And if the United States contends there is no danger of a revival of German militarism, they add, it is ignoring the evidence of a neo-Nazism observed by the German press itself.

In any case, the Russians say they are not prepared to sign a nuclear non-proliferation treaty that implicitly or explicitly excludes West Germany. Finally, the Russians profess to be mystified by the fact that their own proposed draft for a non-proliferation treaty has been virtually ignored by the United States. They would like their draft to have detailed study and consideration. They would like some indication by the Americans that the Russian draft even exists. Moreover, the Russians believe it is now