

work, becoming class president and valedictorian in high school. During his years at the University of Buffalo, Hofstadter dabbled in radical politics. His energetic and charismatic girlfriend and future wife, Felice Swados, was a staunch leftist. As a graduate student at Columbia during the Great Depression, he attended meetings of the Young Communist League with her: "While Felice's commitment to party discipline led her to the edge of intellectual surrender," writes Brown, "Hofstadter's radicalism was of a more cerebral, critical, and pessimistic kind." Still, Hofstadter joined the Columbia graduate unit of the CP for a few months, abandoning it in February 1939 out of repugnance for the Moscow show trials. Hofstadter's first tussles against anti-intellectualism, Brown observes, were against the left. Indeed, Hofstadter was anything but a fan of the New Deal, which he, like many on the left, viewed as a poor substitute for sweeping reforms that would directly attack powerful industrialists. According to Brown, Hofstadter's "most visceral memories were of the weaknesses and inconsistencies of the old liberalism; its failure to end the Depression, contain fascism, condemn racism, or develop a productive intellectual system to counter native veneration for the yeoman and frontier."

Hofstadter, who landed a job at the University of Maryland during World War II, was determined to write his way into the big time. And he did. The books and essays poured forth from his typewriter. Like many successful academics, Hofstadter knew that it took a ritualized schedule that was never deviated from to crank out the necessary words. All his life, Hofstadter followed it. He published a critique of Social Darwinism at age 28 that was well-received; but it was his first whack at the struts of the Progressive school, in his wildly popular *The American Political Tradition*, that made his name. Pungent, whimsical, and searching, it consisted of a collection of 10 biographical sketches

of notable Americans from Jefferson to FDR, along with group portraits of the Founding Fathers and the robber-barons of the 1920's. Hofstadter dispensed with the pieties of earlier generations and depicted flesh-and-blood human beings whose motives were sometimes less than lofty. Never much interested in archival research, Hofstadter offered something else—lively prose, irreverent asides, and sweeping judgments. He had a special flair for bringing characters to life, portraying Theodore Roosevelt as a kind of closet fascist who wanted "stern dedication to nationalism, martial values, and a common spirit of racial identity and destiny," writes Brown. Lincoln was as much opportunist as great emancipator. Jefferson an egalitarian? In truth, he was an aristocrat. Or was he? Where Hofstadter was concerned, reputations existed to be overturned, but it was a necessary corrective to decades of pious historical interpretations. Besides, as he himself said, he was an admirer of H.L. Mencken and wanted to infuse his writing with more than a pinch of wit and buffoonery. He did. Fifty years after its publication, *The American Political Tradition* still sells thousands of copies a year.

For all his playfulness, however, Hofstadter represented something of a serious change in the way America understood itself—he was the avatar of a new, and largely Jewish, immigrant generation that viewed populism as almost tantamount to nativism. He was, moreover, part of a new generation of historians that wasn't breaking with shibboleths of an older one—it was demolishing them. In essence, the old progressive historians like Charles Beard and Vernon Parrington had romanticized the Populists as noble agricultural workers standing up to industry. Beard, in a kind of watered-down Marxism, was obsessed with economic forces as the motor of history. He portrayed the Founding Fathers, for example, as drafting the Constitution almost solely to protect their own

financial interests. The notion that they could have been animated by more noble aspirations was foreign to him. The Populists, for Beard and Parrington, by contrast, were unblemished heroes because they were farmers who were standing up against the avaricious plutocrats of Wall Street. Beard also opposed America's participation in World War II, accusing Franklin D. Roosevelt of tricking the United States into an unnecessary conflict. Hofstadter would have none of this. He viewed this as a hopelessly romantic and sentimental view of America's past. He saw, by contrast, that racism, anti-Semitism, and right-wing sentiments were an ineradicable part of populism. As tempting as it might be to revere the yeoman farmer, it was delusional.

Hofstadter knew of whence he spoke: The University of California history department contemplated offering Hofstadter a job, but one member wrote, "I am not yet quite sure that he is the man we want. His point of view strikes me as rather typical of the New York Jewish intelligentsia, although I do not even know that he is a Jew." Some of these older, nationalistic historians believed that Jews lacked the innate ability to comprehend Anglo-American history, just as English departments refused to accept Jewish professors because it was believed by some that they would never be able to understand the great works written by George Eliot or William Shakespeare. Mercifully, change was inevitable. Lionel Trilling had been the first Jew to win tenure in the English department at Columbia. Daniel Bell, Jacques Barzun, and Seymour Martin Lipset taught there as well. They jokingly called it "the Upper West Side Kibbutz." There never has been such a concentration of intellect at an American university and might never be again.

Hofstadter's efforts to combat obscurantism reached their high-water mark in his book *Anti-*

*Intellectualism in American Life.* Hofstadter railed against radical political activism, arguing that the evangelical movement was the crucible in which the anti-intellectual impulse was formed. He could barely conceal his contempt for the evangelical Protestant belief in unmediated access to God and the notion that the Bible was the real source of religious authority. He even went back to Cromwell and the English Civil War to argue that the fact that "successive waves of Millennialists, Anabaptists, Seekers, Ranters, and Quakers [who] assailed the established order and its clergy, preached a religion of the poor, argued for intuition and inspiration as against learning and doctrine" left a deep mark on the fledgling American nation. How far was it from such riff-raff to Sen. Joseph McCarthy?

Hofstadter was too subtle a historian to draw such a link explicitly, but he did, as his biographer notes, have a penchant for the sweeping assertion over the qualified statement. But that's partly why his work has lasted. Hofstadter searched for big explanations for even bigger events.

Perhaps his most controversial stance was to propound what has come to be known as the consensus school of history. As the consensus school saw it, the era of conflict in the United States was over in the 1950s. It was, as Daniel Bell put it, the end of ideology. The New Deal had cemented its gains. The only opponents to continuing the New Deal were the nutcases on the right, who were diagnosed, by Hofstadter and others, as suffering from a kind of psychological illness. In the collection of essays, *The Radical Right*, Hofstadter, Seymour Martin Lipset, and others argued that the right suffered from status anxiety and paranoia. In a 1962 lecture at the University of Southern California, Hofstadter joked that conservatives had "lost touch with reality....We certainly cannot commit them all to mental hospitals, but we can recog-

nize their agitation as a kind of vocational therapy, without which they might have to be committed." By loftily dismissing any conservative concerns as irritable gestures, as Lionel Trilling suggested, the Left helped sow the seeds for the conservative backlash. Conservatives, who have perfected their own form of victimization politics, relish citing such snobbish statements in order to condemn liberals as incorrigible elitists. Still, at a moment when right-wing evangelicals exercise a stranglehold over the GOP and the Bush administration deflects, or tries to deflect, concerns about economic problems by turning to the standbys of flag-burning, gay marriage, intelligent design, and abortion, Hofstadter, it must be said, was on to something when he decried the "paranoid style."

To his credit, Brown makes numerous telling criticisms of Hofstadter. Was there a touch of hauteur in Hofstadter's approach? Indeed, there was. As Brown emphasizes, Hofstadter was afraid of the unwashed masses, viewing them as unpredictable, capricious, and easily manipulated. At times, it seems that Hofstadter confused his own personal anxieties with America's.

The irony, however, was that in his own lifetime Hofstadter, who always fretted about the durability of liberalism, would be vilified, not by the right, but by the student left as "square." The sorry story of the rise of the radical left at Columbia and elsewhere is ably recounted by Brown. It's a reminder that the far left did almost as much to cripple liberalism as the right. One anecdote suffices to convey the sheer zaniness of the late 1960s: After referring to the Nazi-Soviet pact at San Francisco State University, Brown writes, Hofstadter was shouted off the stage. Yet Hofstadter was an opponent of the Vietnam War, who marched at Montgomery in 1965, and who, in a brilliant article for *The New York Times Magazine*, showed that America the omnipotent was a fanci-

ful myth; in fact, America had lost wars in its history, Hofstadter noted, and, for that matter, World War I was won on the cheap by entering at the last moment. In any case, Hofstadter never was viewed as a full-fledged enemy by the Columbia student left; he returned to his office one day in April 1968 to find a note stating "The Forces of Liberation have, at great length, decided to spare your office (because you are not one of them)."

Such small kindnesses did not spare Hofstadter the fate of being attacked at great length by a new generation of historians who sought to revise the revisionist. The young radical had become an old fogey, at least in the eyes of his successors. The social critic and historian Christopher Lasch complained in 1965 that the postwar generation of immigrant scholars had itself become compromised in its quest for status and power—as though Lasch and others were somehow free of ambition. Hofstadter himself, though he regretted the social and political upheaval, recognized that conflict had again moved to the center of American politics in the late '60s.

Was Hofstadter's generation of liberals too weak to fight the radicals on the right and left? Was there something inherently flawed in liberalism that made it easy prey? Brown never really contemplates those uncomfortable questions, which have acquired a new importance as liberals engage in a fresh round of self-mortification to divine how they might challenge the right's political dominance. What role Hofstadter might have played is impossible to know. He did not live to see the resurgence of the right. He died of leukemia in October 1970 at age 54. He would surely be dismayed by the unexpected turn American politics has taken, but more than pleased by his fine biography.

**Jacob Heilbrunn** is a writer in Washington D.C.

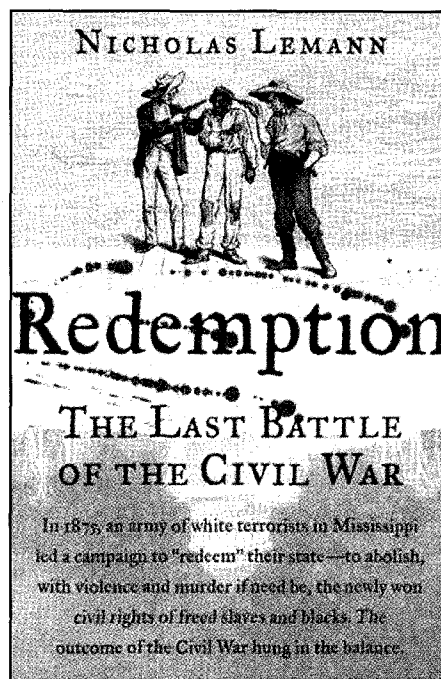
# The Savage South

Lessons of an American insurgency.

By Jon Meacham

Albert T. Morgan was desperate and on the run. A Radical Republican in Reconstruction-era Yazoo City, Miss., he had managed to get elected sheriff in 1873—briefly, and only after great trouble from local whites who for a time refused to vacate the courthouse. Now, on Sept. 1, 1875, Morgan, who was white himself, was under assault from the White Leagues, armed groups dedicated to overturning the Southern military defeat in the Civil War by campaigns of violence and intimidation. At a public meeting in Yazoo, a town at the edge of the Mississippi Delta, a defiant white opened fire on Morgan, a veteran of the Union army, as he was making a campaign speech. To strike Morgan was to strike a blow against black voting and civil rights. As a bloody melee unfolded, Morgan slipped through a window and, from hiding, wrote the Reconstruction governor of the state, Adelbert Ames. “We must have U.S. troops,” Morgan wrote. “Can’t we get help from somewhere?” A follow-up letter was even more urgent: “Can nothing be done? I am in great danger of losing my life.... My friend, I fought four years; was wounded several times; suffered in hospitals, and as a prisoner; was in twenty-seven different engagements to free the slave and save our glorious Union—to save such a country as this!”

The ultimate answer from President Grant’s Washington about whether federal troops could establish order and enforce the laws—laws that would have allowed blacks to vote—was depressing and epochal: No. As usual, politics was paramount: Grant later recalled that Ohio Republicans prevailed on him to hold off from intervening in state affairs



## Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War

By Nicholas Lemann  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$24.00

to placate national Republican sentiment for a limited national government. And so the terrorists—the word is chosen with care—won.

Tragically, of course, Morgan’s plea for help from the federal government to right racial wrongs in the South was one that would be repeated for nearly a century. The cry from the darkness of Yazoo would be most fully answered, I suppose, 90 years later, when, in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday, President Lyndon B. Johnson told Congress that God would favor the undertaking he proposed: a federal Voting Rights Act. While the story of Selma is well known—and 1965 is

rightly celebrated as a high-water mark of American liberty—1875 never makes the roll call of crucial years in the American story. (It is, to say the least, no 1776 or 1865.)

With the arrival of Nicholas Lemann’s brilliant new book, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War*, however, both the year and its larger meaning stand a fine chance of receiving the notice and study they deserve. Lemann tells the riveting and largely unknown story of how the white South mounted a successful insurgency in the wake of Lee’s surrender, winning by terror and murder in the shadows what could not be won on the field. (The account of Morgan’s horrific experience in Yazoo is drawn from Lemann’s telling.) At a brisk 212 pages, *Redemption* is accessible and important, and we cannot really understand race or political power in modern America without understanding what happened in the South a decade after Appomattox. “Once the federal government had made it clear, most dramatically in Mississippi in 1875, that it would not enforce black people’s constitutional right to vote,” writes Lemann, who is now the dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, “it left the way clear for the Southern states, after a time, to take that right away explicitly.” In this light, it is clear that the dark spirit of the South did not die in April 1865—and one large lesson of Lemann’s book, a lesson with deep resonance today, is that wars can be won or lost in the aftermath almost as completely as they can be in the pitch of organized battle.

A significant disclosure to the reader: I am not an objective reviewer of this book. A contributing editor of this magazine, Lemann was a generous counselor to me when I was an editor of *The Washington*