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The Hagiography Factory

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Schlesinger: The Imperial Historian by [Richard Aldous](#)

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For close to half a century, Arthur Schlesinger Jr was perhaps the most recognisable liberal intellectual in America. With his tortoiseshell glasses, bow ties, and neatly stencilled hair, he played for the literary side of Kennedy's best and brightest, which was meant to balance out the number-crunching prowess of Robert McNamara and the Whiz Kids. In his dozens of books of American history – several of which remain indispensable – Schlesinger was among the chief assemblers of the King James Version of American liberalism. His Cold War manual, *The Vital Center*, is one of the period's shrewdest pieces of liberal propaganda. He effectively made the aspirationless politics of the 1950s look like a tough-minded creed that could sustain the faithful through the Cold War. Unlike his kindred spirits in Britain and France – Isaiah Berlin and Raymond Aron were more formidable thinkers – Schlesinger had a particularly intimate relationship with power. But one of the fascinating paradoxes of Richard Aldous's biography is how slight Schlesinger's influence in Washington actually was, despite his own pride in it, when compared to his influence on the American reading public, which he counted for nothing. In his later years, Schlesinger was best known as the custodian of the Kennedy myth, tirelessly springing to the defence of his old patron on the sofas of talk shows and in the letters pages of magazines. What makes Aldous's book of more than incidental interest during the Trump years, though, is the perspective it provides on the current travails of American liberalism.

Schlesinger was born and bred to be a progressive historian. His parents were outspoken activists and feminists. On his mother's side, Schlesinger was a *Mayflower* Wasp who claimed descent from George Bancroft, the Michelet of American historical writing. His father was a Midwest-born social historian with a German-Jewish background, for whom the prairie populism of the turn of the century was still an animating inspiration. Arthur Senior and

Elizabeth Schlesinger believed in the political necessity of an educated citizenry and a muscular government that could restrain the market. State education was an article of faith. When the family moved from Ohio to Massachusetts for Arthur Senior to take up a professorship at Harvard, it seems to have genuinely pained him to extract Arthur Junior from his state school, where he was performing poorly, and release him into a feeder academy of the New England elite. It is a feat of restraint that Aldous doesn't psychologise in his account of Arthur's teenage years. Over the space of a few pages, we learn that young Arthur chose to follow his father to Harvard, where he lived in the dormitory where Senior was a fellow, enrolled in Senior's classes and legally changed his middle name from Bancroft to Meier so that he could officially be 'Junior'. Aldous suggests this last decision 'reflected the balance of power in the family', where Schlesinger's mother 'was always being put down'.

Arthur Senior did not shirk. He got Junior's undergraduate thesis published by a reputable house in New York, edited the manuscript, oversaw the index and had a colleague review it for the *New York Times*. When Junior's second book, *The Age of Jackson*, appeared a few years later, Senior successfully pressured his friends on the Pulitzer jury to award it the prize. As Aldous points out, Arthur Senior was outdone by Joseph Kennedy Sr, who not only had JFK's undergraduate thesis published, but then made *While England Slept* a bestseller by buying up thousands of copies and stashing them in a Boston warehouse. Like Schlesinger Senior, Kennedy Senior also strongarmed the head of the Pulitzer jury into delivering for his son's second, ghostwritten book, *Profiles in Courage*.

Junior was only two years ahead of JFK at Harvard, but despite their shared interest in American lore, they barely knew each other. Kennedy was a rank-and-file FDR supporter as an undergraduate, but Arthur Junior was a Popular Front member of the Communist-controlled American Student Union (contrary to what his own sons indicate in their hyper-filial edition of Schlesinger's letters). During a year abroad at Cambridge, Schlesinger went on to make several friends and acquaintances on the left, including Eric Hobsbawm. His early work focused squarely on class conflict. In his first academic article, written while he was an undergraduate, he presented the New England Transcendentalist Orestes Brownson as a 'Marxist before Marx', claiming that any other theory of class conflict was superfluous in a country which already boasted an analyst who 'interpreted history in terms of the inescapable conflict between those who profited from the existing order and those on whom its burden chiefly fell'. His book on Andrew Jackson tried to explain why he was not simply the champion of white frontiersmen (one reason his portrait is back up in the Trump White House), but, more important, fought on behalf of downtrodden men in the eastern cities against a National Bank that had been captured by the financial elite (another, disingenuous,

reason Trump identifies with him). In an early article on the Civil War, with fresh moral clarity courtesy of the Nazi menace, Schlesinger challenged the widespread liberal view of the day that the war had been about states' rights, and not about slave owners determined to preserve their human capital. Reading the early Schlesinger is a poignant reminder of how permeable the boundaries between liberalism and socialism still were in America in the late 1930s, and how much Schlesinger took that for granted.

Aldous hints that Schlesinger's march from liberal progressivism to the liberal centre began during the Second World War. He first worked for the Office of War Information, where he reported on military morale and on race relations in the South, submitting dispatches which he would later regret and paper over in his memoirs. Aldous has gamely dug up some of the more revealing passages ('The tragedy of the situation is that no improvement would be made by giving more power to the Negro. The southern Negro would abuse power even more than the reactionary southern white ... The only hope in the situation lies in activity by the southern liberals, and this hope is scant'). He resigned from the OWI in 1943, along with several others, protesting that it had become nothing more than 'a glorified advertising agency', though Republicans were not unjustified in complaining it was a campaign engine for Roosevelt. Following an unhappy spell with nothing to do, a friend of Senior's brought him on at the OSS (the precursor to the CIA), where he edited the classified magazine *Psychological Warfare Weekly*. There he witnessed some Soviet espionage firsthand. In an extraordinary episode, Aldous recounts Schlesinger's discovery that his colleague, Maurice Halperin, had planted a communist *Daily Worker* story about Bolivian politics in the magazine. It was a sign of Schlesinger's political alertness that he not only quickly spotted the suspicious material but also showed Halperin that Moscow had actually failed to grasp what was best for the international left (with which Schlesinger still associated himself) on the ground in La Paz. The higher-ups at the OSS did not believe that Halperin was a spy, and Halperin succeeded in demonstrating that Schlesinger's own sources were Soviet-fed. Junior was reprimanded and given a poor performance report.

It is hard to say how much these wartime intrigues stung him. But by the end of the war he had developed a complicated, market-tested public presence. Schlesinger was still eager for standing among leftish and left-liberal academics and New York intellectuals, but he also yearned for wider popular appeal. In 1946, well before McCarthyism, he published a detailed exposé of the American Communist Party in Henry Luce's *Life* magazine. In Schlesinger's telling, the minuscule communist presence in the country had ballooned into a vast left-wing conspiracy. 'Communists are working overtime to expand party influence, open and covert, in the labour movement, among Negroes, among veterans and unorganised liberals,' he wrote.

In his quest to find communist moles, he passed on rumours directly to his old bosses at what was now the CIA. (In a move reminiscent of Isaiah Berlin's academic blackballing of Isaac Deutscher, Schlesinger would later try to out the historian William Appleman Williams as a communist to the president of the American Historical Association.) The *Life* article cost Schlesinger many of his friends on the left, but it won him new admirers, including the actor Ronald Reagan, who later said Schlesinger's lurid fresco of the Hollywood communist underworld contributed to his political awakening.

But Schlesinger's anti-communism during the 1940s was still tempered by a commitment to democratic socialism. In a 1947 symposium on 'The Future of Socialism' in the *Partisan Review*, he made an ardent case for political gradualism, or what he called 'libertarian socialism', or, more fumblingly, 'not undemocratic socialism'. The nub of his argument was that American leftists and communists had wildly inflated the fighting spirit and strategic cunning of the American capitalist class. 'In fact,' he wrote, 'it is in the countries where capitalism really triumphed, it has yielded with far better grace (that is, displayed more cowardice) than the Marxist schema predicted ... In the United States an industrialist who turned a machine-gun on a picket line would be disowned by the rest of the business community; in Britain he would be sent to an insane asylum.' Indeed, Schlesinger looked to Attlee's Britain as the model for what America could become. Instead of fighting an international war on communism, Schlesinger said that Joseph Kennedy Sr had been right to argue that the Soviet model should be allowed quietly to fail, which in any case would only take a few years in the countries that tried to make a go of it.

Two years later, however, in *The Vital Center*, Schlesinger had replaced Attlee with Churchill as the saviour of the Liberal International he envisioned. The book showed that Schlesinger's wish to be a New York intellectual had given way to a desire to make it as a liberal sage. It synthesises the great themes of Cold War liberalism – Arthur Koestler's image of 'totalitarian man', Reinhold Niebuhr's stress on the fallenness of humanity, Hannah Arendt's theory of twin totalitarianisms – into an easy-listening orchestral arrangement.

Schlesinger viewed the coming political conformity of the Eisenhower era as the hard-won end of Western civilisation. The ages of Jackson and Roosevelt had been marked by fierce conflict over the levers of control in American society. In both periods, in Schlesinger's telling, the president was willing to use the full power of the executive to challenge capital interests and intervene in the domestic economy. Though Roosevelt's New Deal was initially backed by widespread anti-capitalist sentiment, the liberals in power had sensibly restrained their reforms from plunging into utopian upheaval. The great age of liberal political tinkering had begun. Newer and better deals as far as the eye could see. Fair Deal, New Frontier, Great

Society, *ad infinitum*. This was the standard view of the end-of-ideology politics that flourished in the 1950s. Schlesinger's book drove home three points with startling clarity. First, he advised progressive liberals to cut off contact with the sort of socialist and leftist currents that had nourished their liberalism. Second, he counselled a gentle rapprochement with the 'non-fascist' right, who, after all, were only classical liberals coming in from the cold. Third, he showed how to master the rhetoric of what Garry Wills called at the time 'Bogart liberalism'. He thought American liberals should become 'hard-boiled', as opposed to 'soft' – like American leftists who had never tested their mettle by wielding power. If you wanted to fight the excesses of capitalism, Schlesinger argued, you didn't need such weaklings on your side. Soviet communism itself was unmanly to the core, 'something secret, sweaty and furtive like nothing so much ... as homosexuality in a boys' school'. To be sure, its prissiness should even so be met with the threat of nuclear war.

The tragedy of Arthur Schlesinger is that in the following decades he failed to recognise the political side effects of his legendary ideological manoeuvre. It wasn't a surprise that as a toughened war veteran in the 1940s, who romanced the responsibility of power, he was attracted to the political arena. He was one of the founders of the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), an anti-communist interest group which sought to inoculate American liberalism from its right wing by partly absorbing its conservative programme. Schlesinger realised early on that he was better suited to being a counsellor to princes than a prince himself. His books and journalism had made him famous by his early thirties, but it was his pamphlets and lavish personal letters – to Truman, Lyndon Johnson and other Democratic worthies – that sealed his reputation as a sought-after adviser. By the 1956 presidential election, both contenders for the Democratic nomination – Averell Harriman and Adlai Stevenson – (mis)took him for their confidant. Throughout the 1950s, he saw himself as a latter-day, wised-up New Dealer fighting for the common man against the financial elite. In his diaries, he even claimed the mantle of 'populism' for himself and his party. He still understood his duty as a liberal through the prism of class conflict, with redressing economic and racial grievances at the top of the agenda.

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What seems to have changed all of this was Kennedy. Schlesinger's relationship to JFK was founded on mutual admiration. During the war Schlesinger had kept tabs on his old classmate, who first achieved celebrity as a war hero in the pages of the *New Yorker*. Kennedy, in turn, read Schlesinger's book and articles and sent fan notes. At a dinner party in Washington, Schlesinger was surprised by Congressman Kennedy's command of foreign affairs, but otherwise found him 'kind of on the conservative side'. So by the time Schlesinger

was recruited by President-Elect Kennedy to serve as his all-round intellectual handyman – speechwriting, ad hoc foreign policy trips, entertainment for Jackie – it was clear to Schlesinger and his fellow liberals that Kennedy was not one of them. For one thing, he was even more fervently anti-communist, and he believed the New Deal agenda had largely exhausted itself. In his diaries Schlesinger appears perpetually worried that he would be cast aside like other progressive liberals in the administration. When Kennedy pushed through the biggest tax cut in a generation, Schlesinger swallowed his dissent. J.K. Galbraith, his close comrade, steadily lost ground to the more enterprising Walter Heller, who perhaps inadvertently helped ease the transition between Keynesianism and the coming era of neoliberalism. ‘Heller, you’ve won,’ Galbraith told him in 1963. ‘The president told me to shut up about my opposition to tax cuts.’ If Kennedy’s star has risen in the historiography over the past few decades, it’s not only because he still figures as a martyred saint for American liberals, but because even some neoconservatives now claim him as their own.

You get a sense of Kennedy’s instincts for delegation when you consider just how much use he got out of Schlesinger – and how well the dividends are still paying. Most of Schlesinger’s time at the White House was spent on foreign affairs. He was regularly sent to South America and Europe to conduct negotiations and gather information for his crisp summary reports to Kennedy. He was also one of the most able defenders of the opening act of the Vietnam War. When Noam Chomsky attacked ‘conformist intellectuals’ who served American power no less faithfully than the commissars did the Kremlin, Schlesinger was one of his prime exhibits. In a highly competitive field, his talent for lying directly to the public was impressive. The method was simple: appeal to the public’s common sense while brazenly withholding facts, even widely available ones. ‘The Vietcong could not possibly be interested in a peace settlement as long as they think they could win the war,’ Schlesinger wrote in 1965, backing a massive escalation in the US bombing campaign at the very moment Hanoi was open to an armistice. In this sense at least, Aldous has chosen an apt subtitle for his biography: Schlesinger was an ‘imperial’ historian in his willingness to take up the burden of the American empire’s PR, though ‘The Imperious Publicist’ would have served just as well.

But the main reason Kennedy recruited Schlesinger was for his prose. ‘When you write the history, Arthur,’ is a refrain in Schlesinger’s JFK chronicles. Aldous reports the interesting fact that Kennedy encouraged competition among his court historians: Schlesinger had to fight it out not only against Kennedy’s main speechwriter, Ted Sorensen, but a handful of lesser writers. The JFK White House was a hagiography factory from the get-go. Intellectuals were back in vogue. Schlesinger brokered lunch between Kennedy and Alfred Kazin (their exchanges appear to have been weightier than the mutual flattery of those between Obama

and Marilynne Robinson). But Schlesinger's main duties kicked in after the assassination. *A Thousand Days*, Schlesinger's 1032-page memorial – a page for every day of his service to the presidency – is mostly devoted to JFK's innovations in the Third World. But the gilding of the myth was already well underway: he shows Jackie with a volume of Proust permanently in hand, while no global current is below the president's radar. Schlesinger largely succeeded in his task of elevating a relatively minor presidency, at least legislatively, as the natural final panel of the triptych that began with Jackson and Roosevelt.

The one disappointment of Aldous's biography is that it starts to fall off after Kennedy dies, and Schlesinger becomes the on-call Kennedy consigliere. It is understandable that Aldous does not want to bore us with, say, the endless stand-off between Schlesinger and Seymour Hersh at the gates of Camelot. He continued to be flat-footed in his attacks on student movements, always prescribing bigger doses of liberalism for students in revolt against the cure. He became a critic of the Vietnam War as practised by his friend Henry Kissinger, though he never saw the problem as anything much more than unfortunate ideological excess. At the same time the post-JFK Schlesinger was in some ways a more interesting, and more reflective character. Without Kennedy to seduce him away from his progressivist roots, he returned to form. In the *New Republic* in the 1970s, he was quick to call out Jimmy Carter's financialisation agenda as a neoliberal betrayal of the vital centre, Reaganite in all but name. Similarly, he looked with foreboding on one of the neoliberal flagships, the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), which was launched in the following decade (it did not cross his mind that the DLC was something like the economic complement of the ADA that he himself had helped to found some thirty years before). In the 1990s, Schlesinger settled into a gentle scepticism towards Bill Clinton. While he never saw Clinton's impeachment hearings as a welcome chance to deal a blow to the imperial presidency – 'Gentlemen always lie about their sex lives' – he was repelled by some of the 'triangulations' of the sweet-talker of Arkansas. When Clinton pilfered Schlesinger's famous slogan for his welfare reforms, Schlesinger fired back:

President Clinton, as suggested by his reference to 'the vital *American* centre', is using the phrase in a domestic context. What does he mean by it? His DLC fans probably hope that he means the 'middle of the road', which they would locate somewhere closer to Ronald Reagan than to Franklin D. Roosevelt. In my view, as I have said elsewhere, that middle of the road is definitely not the vital centre. It is the dead centre.

The problem was that Schlesinger never considered the possibility that the vital centre had

been on life support all along. His great-man version of US history and his aversion to anything that resembled a structural explanation had long blinded him to some of the main contradictions in American postwar liberalism. Perhaps the most salient of these was that the same New Deal order which had attempted to enshrine labour's ability to bargain with capital was in conflict with the movement to open unions to blacks and others long barred from entry. By the mid-1960s, as Reuel Schiller has persuasively argued, the increasingly open legal conflict between labour and the civil rights movement had started to expose the loose foundation of the postwar American liberal order. When Carter turned his back on the ideal of full employment by the 1970s, rejecting a Congressional bill in support of it, it had become too obvious for even Schlesinger not to notice. He saw Carter's agenda for what it was: a willingness to let the poor fall by the wayside based on an implacable faith that paying down debt would lift all boats. But Schlesinger – unable to give up his great man schema – still thought the ship could be righted by installing another Kennedy (Teddy) on the throne.

Today there are two stories told about Schlesinger's disenchantment and his trajectory in the postwar landscape. There are those – George Packer and Co – who argue that Schlesinger became a caricature of the sort of elite figure he had fought in his younger days: the limousine liberal, the cocooned radical, running from fancy party to fancy party on the Upper East Side, losing all touch with America, dissipating himself until only the bow tie remained. Then there are those who say, with Chomsky, that he became so enamoured of power, of his own voice in the king's ear, that he lost all sense of his principles. He became besotted with power at a time when, unusually, power was besotted with historians. He lost himself in the minutiae of campaigns, elections, reputational indexes and Kennedy Inc. Aldous's book suggests that neither assessment is satisfactory: Schlesinger's brand of liberalism withered because its members were determined to end all cross-breeding with ideological formations to their left. These experiments had once made liberalism a flexible and capacious creed. Instead progressive liberals became spongers off their neoclassical relations.

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