

## CHAPTER II

### THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS- PART I

*“In the days of Jackson, as in all periods of rapid social adjustment, there was a close correspondence between the movement of politics and the movement of ideas.”*<sup>1</sup>

In *The Age of Jackson*, published in 1945, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. set out the cycle of the tides of American politics, of the ebb and flow between reform and reaction, and of the influence of ideas on those tides in the first great American period of reform. In 1948, he spoke at Connecticut College on “The Democratic Process,” and made explicit the link between the Jackson and Roosevelt periods. In the late 1950’s Schlesinger completed the story of the great reform eras in can politics with *The Age of Roosevelt*.

The *Age of Jackson* is the story of the labor- intellectual alliance that became Jacksonianism. The argument of the book is that Jacksonianism was not mainly a conflict of the frontier against the city, but of Eastern intellectuals and laborers the business plutocracy. Much of the book resembles ideas in his father’s *New Viewpoints in American History*. Schlesinger later recalled:

not think I was consciously aware of it at the time, and I do remember reading it some years later and being surprised at the extent to which I was developing insights he had already set forth. I have no doubt that he had communicated to me the substance of those insights in the incessant (and fascinating) conversations we held through the years on all manner of historical topics.<sup>2</sup>

Both Schlesingers saw the essential dynamic of Jacksonianism, and of history, as class conflict, but a conflict that need not lead to violence. As George Bancroft had explained:

The feud between capitalist and laborer, the house of Have and the house of Want, is as old as social union, and can never be entirely quieted; but he who will act with moderation, prefer fact to theory, and remember that every thing in this world is relative and not absolute, will see that the violence of the contest may be stilled.<sup>3</sup>

The Schlesinger-Jackson theory of history believed that class conflict was the central force of political action. Although the dynamism of capitalism was the key factor in the overthrow of feudalism and the flowering of freedom, and of the West’s material prosperity, the new capitalist class sought to enrich itself at the expense of the rest of society. But in a democratic society, other classes could unite to curb the worst excesses of capitalism without resorting to revolution. To the degree that ruling classes permitted peaceful reform, they co-opted revolutionaries, and thereby made themselves more

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<sup>1</sup> Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1949), Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Cunliffe.

<sup>3</sup> Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson*, Preface.

secure. Thus, liberal reformers preserved the capitalist society that supported the business classes with whom the reformers contended.

A test of the competence of a ruling class was its willingness to permit reform. When the moneyed classes foolishly did not allow moderate reform, violence resulted, as in the Dorr Rebellion.<sup>4</sup> While Schlesinger admired aristocrats like Alexander Hamilton and Theodore Roosevelt for their sense of social responsibility, he had no patience for the new plutocracy, with its short-sighted, selfish vision. Left to itself, the capitalist ruling class was apt to behave irresponsibly- for example by applying free market theories to labor relations, but not to its own cartels.

As *The Age of Jackson* opened, the old Federalist aristocracy had been replaced with a class of industrialists who, with no concern except their own short-term profit, were using the Bank of the United States to loot the country. The beginnings of industrialism and the consequent depersonalization of the economy had created a need for government intervention.<sup>5</sup> Schlesinger reminded the reader that Adam Smith favored government intervention when necessary to restore competition.<sup>6</sup> Over the anguished protests of the moneyed classes, liberal Jacksonian reformers made necessary changes in capitalism, leaving the system stronger than ever; years later, even the business classes would thank the reformers.<sup>7</sup> For example, Roger Taney, in his *Charles River Bridge* and *Bank of Augusta vs. Earle* decisions destroyed entrenched privilege and helped open the way for capitalist expansion.<sup>8</sup> Disappointing both radicals and conservatives, Taney tamed the corporations without destroying them.<sup>9</sup>

The main mechanism through which labor and the intellectuals fought the business classes was the strong, Democratic President. Schlesinger's Presidential favorites of the period--Jackson, Van Buren, and Polk-- all shared an affinity for the people, and a disregard for opposition. Andrew Jackson cared not a bit for his popularity, just for his program.<sup>10</sup> And when the Congress obstructed him, he went over its head, directly to the people". As Franklin Roosevelt put it, "It seemed sometimes that all were against him--all but the people of the United States."<sup>11</sup> Although two-thirds of the press, dominated by business, opposed his stand on the bank issue, as did almost all of the people with property, Jackson prevailed.<sup>12</sup> Like Jackson, Polk feared what he considered to be the conspiracy to pauperize agriculture and labor for the benefit of the business community.<sup>13</sup> Schlesinger agreed with Polk, and believed the struggle to restrain the business class to be the main issue of past and present American politics.

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, 416.

<sup>5</sup> Favoring government intervention when competition failed, Schlesinger would be quite predisposed to the views of John Kenneth Galbraith, whom he would meet a few years later.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, 97.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 328.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, 329-337.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, 100.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, 51.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 94n.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, 93.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, 62.

Schlesinger took a charitable view of the faults of his Democratic Presidents. He defended the spoils system as narrowing the gap between people and the government.<sup>14</sup> As Howard Zinn observed, “Jackson the slaveholder, land speculator, executioner of dissident soldiers, exterminator of Indians,” did not appear in Schlesinger’s book.<sup>15</sup> The only mention of Jackson’s Indian policy was of Jackson’s “great energy and resource in putting down some Indian uprisings” in the War of 1812.<sup>16</sup>

One fault that Schlesinger was more than ready to excuse was Presidential usurpation of authority. He believed that in times of crisis, the President must wield extraordinary power. And the ages of Jackson and Roosevelt were the two high points of American class conflict. As the new order replaced the old, the President did what needed to be done. Brushing over Jackson’s questionable assertion that the President is the final arbiter of the Constitution in regards to the Executive branch, Schlesinger stated that Jacksonianism, “like all great democratic movements, ran into trouble with the courts.”<sup>17</sup> Schlesinger acknowledged the charges of executive despotism hurled at Jackson, but found them to be nothing more than last resorts of the greedy class whose selfish interests a populist President was restraining. Having failed at rational debate, the moneyed classes entered into the “psychological stage of opposition,” and resorted to calling the people’s President mad, dictatorial, or evil. If charges against the President would not stick, the opposition wondered if the President were not sick, with his evil advisors ruling in his stead.<sup>18</sup>

One common quality good Democratic Presidents shared was intelligence. Jackson’s intelligence “expressed itself in judgment rather than in analysis,” while Van Buren had an “acute and reflective mind.”<sup>19</sup> And whatever their intelligence, these Presidents found themselves quite comfortable around intellectuals. Van Buren “cultivated the companionship of intellectuals and men of letters.”<sup>20</sup> Brusque with strangers, Jackson became comfortable and relaxed among his aides. And his aides were apparently the “greatest collection of intelligence ever put together in”<sup>21</sup> the 19th century. Schlesinger introduced the reader to Jackson’s kitchen cabinet that collection of intellectuals, writers, and newspapermen which Schlesinger saw the driving force behind Jacksonianism. From the famous Roger Taney to the obscure Henry Gilpin, Schlesinger drew adept sketches of the brains behind Jackson. Schlesinger summarized, “Thus, a fighting executive, surrounded by a corps of intimate advisors devises a program to meet the pressures for change.”<sup>22</sup>

Of special interest in the Democratic intellectuals was Schlesinger’s ancestor, George Bancroft. “I do feel a sort of intellectual and political kinship with old George,”

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, 47.

<sup>15</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York, 1980), 124.

<sup>16</sup> Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 36.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, 322.

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Democratic Process: Lectures in the American Liberal Tradition* (New London, 1948), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 50.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, 39.

<sup>22</sup> Schlesinger, *The Democratic Process*, 11.

revealed Schlesinger.<sup>23</sup> Bancroft, a Jackson, believed that “A man of letters should be a man of the people.”<sup>24</sup> William Prescott disagreed, and complained that Bancroft abandoned the “muse of history” for the “strumpet of faction.”<sup>25</sup> Bancroft had entered Exeter at age eleven, Harvard at age thirteen, and served in a variety of important posts, including Ambassador to the Court of St. James, Secretary of the Navy, and Acting Secretary of War for Polk during the Mexican War.<sup>26</sup> For working with the Democrats, Harvard and Winthrop Square labeled him “A traitor to his class.”<sup>27</sup>

Schlesinger did not stop with an analysis of Jacksonianism; he took the reader on a guided tour of the conservative opposition’s mind. As Schlesinger explained, after a few years, the reformers, their great leader gone, fell to bickering among themselves. Bright young men joined the conservative party, fought and defeated the party’s old guard, revived the conservative opposition, and, taking advantage a conservative flow in the tide, swept the reform party out of office.<sup>28</sup> A believer in the two-party system, Schlesinger always yearned for “an intelligent position,” something like the tough-minded, honest, Federalist party, which favored a strong central government. But the triumph of Jacksonianism destroyed the intelligent opposition once and for all. No longer could even the plutocratic party claim not to have complete faith in populist democracy.<sup>29</sup>

The result of the chicanery for conservatism was to “revive it politically, while ruining it intellectually.” The party that opposed the people had to pretend to or it. As a result of the contradiction, no conservative ruler would be able to govern effectively, except for the Machiavellian Hanna or the super-executive Taft.<sup>30</sup>

Led by shrewd young Whigs, the conservatives disguised their pro-business interests in populist rhetoric, the Whigs claimed that no real class distinctions existed in America, that everyone was a capitalist. The Democratic party always had some trouble refuting the charge, Schlesinger admitted. (No wonder, considering that even thinkers of the liberal wing of the party like Schlesinger favored a modified form of capitalism as the best economic system.) Passing watered-down reforms, such as the minimalist bank law changes of 1838, the conservatives co-opted the Democrats.<sup>31</sup> (Just as the Democrats, by passing meaningful reforms, co-opted the revolutionaries.) “Homespun” conservatives, such as the aristocrat-in-disguise William Henry Harrison, or the sincere but naive Davy Crockett campaigned against “oppressive” big government which supposedly favored business over the people Working against the people’s strong President, the conservatives made the case for Congressional prerogative.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Letter to Cunliffe.

<sup>24</sup> Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 370.

<sup>25</sup> Cunliffe, *Pastmasters*, 369.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Canary, *George Bancroft*, (New York, 1974), Preface.

<sup>27</sup> Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson*, 256.

<sup>28</sup> Schlesinger, *The Democratic Process*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 305.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, 279.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*, 286.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, 277-278.

A few years later, in 1950, Schlesinger spelled out the characteristics a modern “intelligent opposition” should possess. Not bound to any blueprint for society, the party should accept gradual change, be libertarian, and look beyond the narrow interests of the business class. Seeing (too optimistically) some hope in the new young Republican leaders, Schlesinger hoped that the revived Republican party would favor some social welfare, espouse civil rights and civil liberties, and urge a strong national defense. Accepting Schlesinger’s suggestions would be the Republican party’s “only likely condition for survival.”<sup>33</sup>

Besides studying the liberal and conservative political intellectuals, Schlesinger paid some passing attention to another type of intellectual: the utopians. Schlesinger admired thinkers like Thomas Jefferson who did not let their dogmas stand in the way of effective action.<sup>34</sup> But for some intellectuals, dogma meant everything, and practical experience nothing. For utopian communitarians such as the Fourierites and the Transcendentalists who accepted the benefits of society but ignored their responsibilities to society, Schlesinger had little patience.<sup>35</sup> Only Thoreau, who forsook both benefits and responsibilities seemed to Schlesinger intellectually consistent.<sup>36</sup> Schlesinger wanted not happy dreams, but productive action: “All the prose about brotherhood and the pretty experiments in group living made no conservative sleep less easily at night. The politicians might have sold their souls to Party, but at least they had something to show for it.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, “Exercise rather than literature saved democracy.”<sup>38</sup> To sum up the imperatives of American life, Schlesinger turned to Walt Whitman, who recognized man’s innate imperfection, but hoped that a “large, resolute breed of men” would join together to make democracy work.”<sup>39</sup>

Although Schlesinger had not expected *The Age of Jackson* to outsell his wife’s book *Twins at Our House*, which celebrated the Schlesingers’ two eldest, Stephen and Katharine, the book sold 60,000 copies and won the Pulitzer Prize for History.<sup>40</sup> Another honor came Schlesinger’s way when the Junior Chamber of Commerce named him one of the ten outstanding young men of the year “for showing through his Pulitzer Prize history *The Age of Jackson* how the world of ideas and the realm of action cooperate.” Also winning the award that year was Representative John F. Kennedy, for “civic responsibility and fighting for veteran’s housing.”<sup>41</sup> In addition, *The Age of Jackson*

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<sup>33</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. “The Need for an Intelligent Opposition,” *New York Times* (Apr.20, 1950), section vi, 13, 56-58. Despite Schlesinger’s prodding, the Republicans refused to become a libertarian intellectual party. Part of the problem related to Carver’s Law: “The trouble with radicals is that they read only radical literature, and the trouble with conservatives is that they don’t read anything.” John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times* (Boston, 1981), 31.

<sup>34</sup> Schlesinger explained that Jefferson overcame his agrarian anti-statist ideology to govern the nation effectively. Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson*, 512.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, 363, 382-384.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, 386-388.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, 368.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, 512.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, 389-390.

<sup>40</sup> *Time*, “Combative Chronicler,” 59.

<sup>41</sup> “Junior Chamber of Commerce Picks Louis, Bolte, Beirne Among Ten Leading Men of the Year,” *New York Times* (Jan.20, 1947), 11:4.

earned Schlesinger a Guggenheim, which he planned to use to write *The Age of Roosevelt*.

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