

## THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS- PART II

### THE AGE OF ROOSEVELT

*“Liberalism vs. Communism and Conservatism” -title of one of Franklin Roosevelt’s speech material files.*<sup>1</sup>

In the late 1950s Schlesinger published the first three volumes of *The Age of Roosevelt*. He had been contemplating the project since the late 1940’s, when he told an interview that he hoped to write the first “wholly objective” study of the Roosevelt years.<sup>2</sup> If Schlesinger’s work was not wholly objective, it was nevertheless a major accomplishment, which traced the intellectual history of reform, in theory and practice, through the New Deal years. Together with *The Age of Jackson*, *The Age of Roosevelt* detailed the two great periods of American reform, showed the philosophical and practical courses the American intellectual could take in improving the world.

‘The first volume, *The Crisis of the Old Order*, covered the period from peace-making at Versailles to Franklin Roosevelt’s inauguration. The book opened with a prologue of inauguration day 1933; Schlesinger thereby reminded the reader of the shadow hanging over the chimerical success of the 1920s. Among the voices of doom on that day in 1933 was Reinhold Niebuhr, warning, “Capitalism is dying and it ought to die ... There is nothing in history to suggest the thesis that a dominant class ever yields its position or its privileges in society because its rule has been convicted of ineptness or injustice.”<sup>3</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, the man of action, would prove Niebuhr wrong and save the American system spite of the ineptness of the business class.

The *Crisis of the Old Order* traced the role of the intellectual in American politics from Theodore to Franklin Roosevelt. Four chapters on Theodore Roosevelt’s New Nationalism and Woodrow Wilson’s New Freedom began the volume. While the New Nationalism hoped to cope with economic concentration through regulation, the New Freedom sought a solution in the restoration of free-market competition. Although Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson might not have agreed, Schlesinger found the aims of the two Presidents essentially similar: Roosevelt and Wilson both recognized the necessity of active government intervention in economic affairs to protect the common man.<sup>4</sup>

Schlesinger quoted from his aristocrat hero, Theodore Roosevelt: “I have no especial respect or admiration for and no trust in, the typical big-moneyed men of my country. I do not regard them as furnishing sound opinion as regards either foreign or domestic policies.” Roosevelt had no use for “government by plutocracy, for government by men very powerful in certain lines and gifted with ‘the money touch’ but with ideals which in their essence are merely those of so many glorified pawnbrokers.”<sup>5</sup> Strong government was necessary to prevent both. And Wilson, too, once in power, realized, “if he aspired to Jeffersonian ends he might have to relinquish Jeffersonian means.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston, 1960), 649.

<sup>2</sup> “An Interview with Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.,” *New York Times* (Mar. 10, 1946), 8:3.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order* (Boston, 1956), 5.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, 33.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, 28.

Schlesinger plainly favored bourgeois progressive reformers over populist radicals, for “Progressivism originated far less than Populism. But it executed much more.”<sup>7</sup>

The American reform impulse had come to a crashing halt when the First World War ended. As Schlesinger stated in another book, “Progressive idealism became less a cause than a refuge.”<sup>8</sup> Schlesinger took the reader on an intellectual tour of the new age; like the disaffected thinkers, the reader was on the outside, looking in. The reader visited one intellectual after another, all of whom yearned, as did America, “for the man who could transform the money madness into the benevolent order of service they dreamed of in their moments of exaltation.”<sup>9</sup>

Schlesinger spent little time with the Republican Presidents- just enough to give a Mencken-like sneer and move on. The reader heard Warren Harding lament, “I am not fit for this office and never should have been here.”<sup>10</sup> “The man who builds a factory, temple...The man who works there worships there,” preached Calvin Coolidge.”<sup>11</sup> But with Herbert Hoover, the best pure capitalism had to offer took charge; his Presidency would provide the fairest test of the business community’s competence to govern.<sup>12</sup>

Drawing from Galbraith, Schlesinger gave a Keynesian, demand-side explanation of the depression. The growth of industrial concentration and monopoly, unchecked by government, had introduced rigidities into what had been a flexible free-market system. As a result, the productivity gains of workers became profits not for the workers, but for the owners, who saved those profits, instead of spending them. Supply, stimulated by growing productivity, rose; demand, cashiered away in millionaire’s savings accounts, fell. The governmentally-sanctioned excess of supply over demand made a crash inevitable. By mistaking the interest of the business class for the national interest, government had ruined both.<sup>13</sup>

Despair followed. Both intellectuals and workers began to lose faith in not only the old order of capitalism, but in democracy itself. Fascism and Communism promised realism and efficiency. Many people expected that the 1932 election would be the last. But “there was emerging the hope of salvation,” for Franklin Delano Roosevelt had appeared.<sup>14</sup> Governor Roosevelt did agree with Fascists and Communists that businessmen and politicians had run out of ideas, but instead of giving up on rational thought, Roosevelt sought a new source of ideas: college professors.<sup>15</sup>

Schlesinger saw Roosevelt’s darker, manipulative side, but respected Roosevelt nonetheless as a man with “a sense of frailty of human striving, but who remained loyal enough to life to do his best in the sight of God.”<sup>16</sup> No philosopher, FDR declared, “I am a Christian and a Democrat, that’s all.”<sup>17</sup> Schlesinger explained Roosevelt’s conception of the Presidency. Like Teddy, Franklin believed that the President could

---

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Faces of Five Decades: Selections from Fifty Years of The New Republic, 1914-1964* , Robert B. Luce ed., (New York, 1964), 26.

<sup>9</sup> Schlesinger, *Crisis of the Old Order*, 76.

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

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, 88.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, 159-160.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, 313-314.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, 398.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, 410.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston, 1958), 585.

do anything not explicitly forbidden by the Constitution, considered the Presidency as a “place for moral leadership,” and felt that the President should represent all classes.<sup>18</sup> The great man had arisen. Roosevelt’s election portended that “the collapse of the old order meant catharsis rather than catastrophe.”<sup>19</sup> But in the interregnum, the “nation teetered on the dark edge of unreality.”<sup>20</sup>

The story of Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency began in the next volume, *The Coming of the New Deal*. The book told of the first two years of President Roosevelt’s first term, up to the 1934 election. Of the three volumes, *The Coming of the New Deal* was, because of its subject matter, the weakest. The book detailed the birth (and in some cases death) of the New Deal agencies and programs, including AAA, NRA, TVA, and Social Security. Although the material is essential a complete study of the period, it did not complement Schlesinger’s polemical style. Schlesinger had never been especially talented at analyzing bureaucracies.

What Schlesinger does have a gift for is biography; the highlights of *The Coming of the New Deal* are the mini-biographies of the President’s assistants and administrators. The reader meets the men who made the New Deal--from Henry Wallace, ruminating on “The Strength and Quietness of Grass” for the radio, to Colonel Hugh M. Johnson of the NRA and his ambitions to remold humanity.<sup>21</sup> Biographies of less outrageous figures, such as Tugwell, Brandeis, and Frankfurter were also deft and interesting. But too often the color faded as the book bogged down in a slow exposition of the goals and achievements of the agencies.

Schlesinger sympathized with most of Roosevelt’s programs. He generously justified the NRA as a worthy attempt to set up the government as “countervailing power” to the business power in the nation, and as a long overdue, if temporary, achievement of “national solidarity.”<sup>22</sup> The Tennessee Valley Authority, although prevented from restructuring the valley’s social order, did integrate the most backwards of farmers into the American mainstream. And with Social Security, “the constitutional dedication of federal power to the general welfare began a new phase in human history.”<sup>23</sup> What Roosevelt had achieved was “the revival of community.”<sup>24</sup>

Helping Roosevelt was the brain trust. As newspaperman Arthur Krock described it, no other group has ever been “more honorable in money matters, more ruthless in material methods.”<sup>25</sup> Life in Washington was difficult: “They often suffered frustration and disillusion. They worked to the edge of collapse. They had moments when they hated Washington and government, and Roosevelt. Yet for this was the happiest time and the deepest fulfillment they would ever know.”<sup>26</sup> Much of the inspiration came from Roosevelt himself, for Roosevelt’s “greatest resource lay not in charm, of manner or skill at persuasion. It lay in his ability to stir idealism in people’s souls.”<sup>27</sup> But although

---

<sup>18</sup> Schlesinger, *Old Order*, 483-484.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, 485.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, 456.

<sup>21</sup> Schlesinger, *Coming of the New Deal*, 34.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, 173, 176. “Countervailing power” is a Galbraith phrase.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, 315.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 354.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, 544.

President Roosevelt assembled an outstanding team of advisors, Schlesinger believed that Roosevelt never properly exploited his following among American intellectuals as a whole.

In the contest for honor in America, the businessman was losing to the college professor, for the businessman's greed and incompetence had cost him his revered place in society. As Schlesinger wrote, "Across the fingers of the businessmen, it now seemed, fell not a statute, but the intellectual pride of a bright young man."<sup>28</sup> The business community lashed back. The intellectuals in government provided a handy target, especially since the President was adopting a non-partisan stance and was too popular for the moment to attack personally. The businessman Eugene Meyer complained "the most immediate danger (is) the inexperience of young intellectuals who are now apparently directing the policy of the administration." *Nation's Business* summarized, "The differences between the man of thought, and the man of action seem fundamental and irreconcilable."<sup>29</sup> While Americans went hungry, millionaires complained about "a sinister conspiracy of college professors." Schlesinger found the selfish performance of the rich lacking in taste and dignity. "Was there not, he asked, "something indecent when those who suffered so little pretended to suffer so much, and did their best to prevent the government from helping the real sufferers?"<sup>30</sup>

The third volume of the series, *The Politics of Upheaval*, was the best. The narrative began in 1935, with the New Deal under siege by the extremists of the Left and Right. Schlesinger's adroit characterizations of America's lunatic fringe--Dr. Francis Townsend, Father Charles Coughlin, the Fascist Gerald K. Smith, and Huey Long--are engaging and pointed.

Ideologues complained that Roosevelt was attempting the impossible: there could be no middle ground between socialism and capitalism. On the impossibility of compromise, Herbert Hoover and *The New Republic* could agree. Schlesinger, observed, "The protagonists on both sides saw themselves as hard-headed realists. But in fact they were all unconscious Platonists, considering abstractions the ultimate reality."<sup>31</sup> In Washington, D.C., President Roosevelt faced the responsibilities of power that his critics did not. More concerned with improving the lives of the common people than with theory, he preferred "existence to essence."<sup>32</sup>

The New Deal itself began to take a more pragmatic course. Having tried to cope with economic concentration through national planning institutions such as the NRA, Roosevelt turned to less ambitious, more capitalist, and more practical alternatives. The shift marked the change from the First to the Second New Deal.

The effort of 1933 had been to reshape American institutions according to the philosophy of an organic economy, and an ordered society. The new effort was to restore a competitive society within the framework of strict social ground rules and on the foundation of basic economic standards--accompanied, as time went on, by a readiness to use the fiscal pulmotor to keep the economy lively and

---

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, 476.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, 473.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, 496.

<sup>31</sup> Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 176.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, 647.

expansive.<sup>33</sup>

“The First New Deal told business what it must do. The Second New Deal characteristically told business what it must not do.”<sup>34</sup> The change was characterized by the shift in the intellectual center from Columbia to Harvard Law School, from Rexford Tugwell to Felix Frankfurter and Louis Brandeis, from evangelists to lawyers.<sup>35</sup> The guiding intellectual light of the Second New Deal was John Maynard Keynes, who found “capitalism” and “socialism” useless abstractions.<sup>36</sup> While Schlesinger regretted the reversion to free-market clichés, he was willing to let the progressive state evolve gradually. As his father wrote, “If history teaches anything, it is that society, to advance safely, must make haste slowly.”<sup>37</sup>

Doctrine was Roosevelt’s nemesis, even the doctrine of Congressional liberals. Rexford Tugwell, himself one of the President’s most liberal advisors, complained that the liberals in Congress “are like Chinese warlords, who decide battles not by fighting, but by desertion... They rush to the aid of any liberal victor, and then proceed to stab him the back when he fails to perform the mental impossibility of subscribing unconditionally to their dozen or more conflicting principles.”<sup>38</sup> Roosevelt urged the Democrats to unite, for “If we insist on choosing different roads, most of us will not reach our common destination.” Consequently, Schlesinger approved of Roosevelt’s alliance with the Southern Congressmen, who could be counted on to pass New Deal legislation of which they might personally disapprove.”<sup>39</sup>

Schlesinger’s writing is best when his partisan mood matches his topic. Indeed his whole world view is combative. His friend Mary McCarthy remembers that the Schlesinger home in Cambridge saw many distinguished guests, none of them Republicans. “Arthur just doesn’t like Republicans,” she noted, “there is a certain amount of Cowboys and Indians about him.”<sup>40</sup>

*The Politics of Upheaval* concluded with a fine account of the election of 1936. The battle was the people, led by Roosevelt, against the business community. The issue was Franklin Roosevelt’s “determination to rescue public policy--and the whole moral tone of politics—from what he regarded as the debasing consequences of business domination.”<sup>41</sup> The parallel between Jackson and Roosevelt became clear. The President wrote a friend, “The country is going through a repetition of Jackson’s fight with the Bank of the United States--only on a far bigger and broader basis.”<sup>42</sup>

Schlesinger explained the similarity of the two populist leaders: aristocratic country squires sure enough of themselves to transcend the petty interests of their class,

---

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, 385.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, 392.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, 390-393. Some historians have argued that Schlesinger First/Second New Deal distinction is not as clear as Schlesinger implies, and that Schlesinger’s analysis relies too heavily on the analysis of Tommy Corcoran, one of President Roosevelt’s advisors from the Second New Deal. Cunliffe, *Pastmasters*, 367-368.

<sup>36</sup> Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 402.

<sup>37</sup> Schlesinger Sr., *In Retrospect*, 41.

<sup>38</sup> Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 414.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, 414-415.

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

<sup>41</sup> Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 411.

<sup>42</sup> Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 248.

Jackson and Roosevelt put the good of the nation first. At the Jackson Day dinner, Roosevelt reminded the audience about the General's problems:

An overwhelming proportion of the material power of the nation was arrayed against him. The great media for the dissemination of information and the molding of public opinion fought him. Musty reaction disapproved him. Hollow and outworn traditionalism shook a trembling finger at him. It seemed that all were against him--all but the people of the United States...History so often repeats itself.<sup>43</sup>,

As Roosevelt put it, "There's one issue in this campaign. It's myself, and people must either for me or against me."<sup>44</sup>

In the last chapter, Schlesinger quoted American writers, including Will Durant and Roger Baldwin<sup>45</sup> who had given up on democracy. Around the world, from Hoover to Hitler and Stalin, leaders could see no choice between unrestrained capitalism and totalitarianism.<sup>46</sup> Franklin Roosevelt had proved them wrong.

As a teenager, Arthur Schlesinger and watched Louis Brandeis, Felix Frankfurter, and Franklin Roosevelt save America. The lessons of the New Deal, with a re-evaluation of man's nature, provided Schlesinger with a philosophy that would help to restore liberalism's sense of direction after the Second War, when Franklin Roosevelt was no longer there to lead the way.

---

[This is a chapter from David B. Kopel, \*The Highbrow in American Politics: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and the Role of the Intellectual in Politics\*. Honors Thesis in History, Brown University, May 1982. Awarded Highest Honors, and the National Geographic Society Prize for best History thesis. Other chapters are available on-line at <http://www.davekopel.org/schlesinger/main.htm>.](http://www.davekopel.org/schlesinger/main.htm)

---

<sup>43</sup> Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 503.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, 577.

<sup>45</sup> who stated, "Civil liberties like democracy are useful only as tools for social change. Political democracy as such a tool is obviously bankrupt throughout world," *ibid*, 646.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, 647