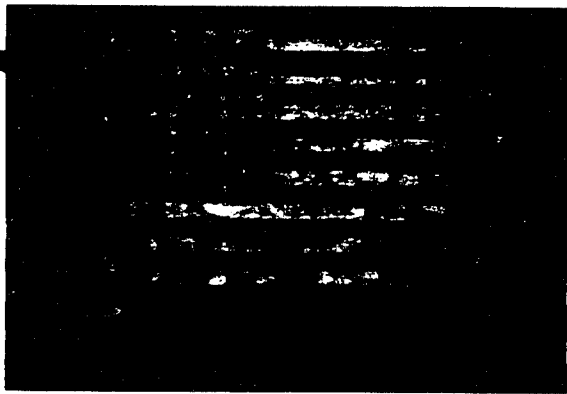




Arthur M.
Schlesinger, Jr.
THE CYCLES
OF AMERICAN
HISTORY



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HOUGHTON
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COMPANY

Foreword

THIS BOOK offers a historian's reflection on the past and the future of the American experiment. The word 'experiment' is used advisedly. The men who established the United States of America believed that they were trying something new under the sun. The idea that a democratic republic might endure ran against all the teachings of history. The vindication of this idea, said Washington in his first inaugural, was "an experiment intrusted to the hands of the American people." The Founders were far from sure of success. Can we be certain even today that the experiment has succeeded? At least it has lasted for two centuries, and that is something.

Section I of this book raises general questions about the ebb and flow of American history. One essay describes the continuing tension between two divergent conceptions of the nation: does America mean commitment to a national experiment? or consecration of a national destiny? A second essay outlines a theory of the cyclical rhythms that characterize American politics. Section II deals with the United States and the great world beyond — foreign policy and the American character; national interests, moral absolutes and human rights; the rise of the American empire and the causes of the Cold War. Section III deals with the United States as a domestic polity — the role and the prospects of government, of political parties and of the Presidency.

Underlying these reflections is the conviction that the cumulative increase in the rate of change has been decisive in the making of the modern world. The last three centuries have seen dazzling revolu-

tions in scientific theory and dazzling advances in the translation of theory into technology. The world has moved faster than ever before, and until recently it has moved fastest of all in the United States.

The American Revolution and the Industrial Revolution began at about the same time. From the start Americans have rejoiced in unremitting technological change. Innovation was unrestrained by custom or tradition or timidity. "I simply experiment," said Emerson, the quintessential American, "an endless seeker, with no Past at my back."¹ It is hardly surprising that the first historian to emphasize the accelerating velocity of history should have been an American. "The world did not double or treble its movement between 1800 and 1900," Henry Adams wrote in 1909, "but, measured by any standard known to science — by horsepower, calories, volts, mass in any shape, — the tension and vibration and volume and so-called progression of society were fully a thousand times greater in 1900 than in 1800."² Acceleration left man and mind far behind. Adams's own education, the best an American could get in the nineteenth century, was, he concluded in the early twentieth century, a total waste; the Harvard freshman he was in 1854 probably stood nearer to the thought of the year 1 than to that of the year 1904. "The law of acceleration," Adams said, "definite and constant as any law of mechanics, cannot be supposed to relax its energy to suit the convenience of man."³

Adams's appeal to scientific law was both romantic and ironic. His notion that history could be reduced to mathematical physics was a delusion, or perhaps an elaborate joke. Still, as metaphor, his point is powerful. William James, who patiently explained to Adams why the second law of thermodynamics did not apply to history, agreed that humanity had experienced only the most preliminary impact of science and technology. "Think how many absolutely new scientific conceptions have arisen in our own generation," he wrote, "how many new problems have been formulated that were never thought of before, and then cast an eye upon the brevity of science's career. . . . Is it credible that such a mushroom growth overnight as this *can* represent more than the minutest glimpse of what the universe will really prove to be when adequately understood? No! our science is a drop, our ignorance a sea."⁴

Humans have lived on earth for possibly eight hundred lifetimes, most of which they spent in caves. "Some five or six score people," James said, "if each . . . could speak for his own generation, would carry us back to the black unknown of the human species, to days without a document or monument to tell their tale."⁵ Movable type appeared only eight lifetimes ago, industrialization in the last three

lifetimes. The static society perceived no great difference; it insisted on the existing stock. The need for new ideas was limited.

The last two lifetimes have seen an achievement that the first two lifetimes of a changing society has not seen. The New York of the 1920s is more than the New York of the 1880s. But the shift has exceeded expectations. It has placed severe and incomprehensible demands and rituals that had stabilized the experience of the young. Children, knowing that they will no longer look to parents as the source of wisdom, learn from their children.

The pace of change grows ever faster. Brothers fly for a few seconds, and we have watched *Apollo II* land on the moon and be launched during the Second World War. The first electronic world rushes from the mouth of the helix was first unveiled in 1945. It makes mankind shudder under the three laws of thermodynamics.

The acceleration of change is not as orderly as the universe. The people of buoyant courage are exhilarating. Henry Adams prophesied the future with flux and flux, strive to resurrect the world.

The hunger for stability has charted change, demoralized the world out of control. That is why, even in the People instinctively defend their belief," said James, "the facts finally drive out old conceptions on the ancient continuity."⁶ Everyone on the Commission. We seek w

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lifetimes. The static societies that consumed most of human history perceived no great difference between present and past. Society subsisted on the existing stock of wisdom for a long time. The functional need for new ideas was limited. Tradition was sacred and controlling.

The last two lifetimes have seen more scientific and technological achievement than the first 798 put together. The shift to a swiftly changing society has not greatly affected the surfaces of daily living. The New York of the 1980s resembles the New York of the 1930s more than the New York of the 1930s resembled the New York of the 1880s. But the shift has profoundly altered inner perceptions and expectations. It has placed traditional roles and institutions under severe and incomprehensible strain. It has cast off reference points and rituals that had stabilized and sanctified life for generations. It has left the experience of elders useless to the tribulations of the young. Children, knowing how different their own lives will be, no longer look to parents as models and authorities; rather, parents now learn from their children.

The pace of change grows ever faster. A boy who saw the Wright brothers fly for a few seconds at Kitty Hawk in 1903 could have watched *Apollo II* land on the moon in 1969. The first rockets were launched during the Second World War; today astronauts roam outer space. The first electronic computer was built in 1946; today the world rushes from the mechanical into the electronic age. The double helix was first unveiled in 1953; today biotechnology threatens to remake mankind. The first atomic bomb fell in 1945; today the world shudders under the threat of nuclear obliteration.

The acceleration of change compels us to perceive life as motion, not as order; the universe not as complete but as unfinished. For people of buoyant courage like William James the prospect was exhilarating. Henry Adams saw change as irreversible, but contemplated the future with foreboding. Others, in the midst of flounder and flux, strive to resurrect the old ways.

The hunger for stability is entirely natural. Change is scary; uncharted change, demoralizing. If the law of acceleration is not to spin the world out of control, society must cherish its lifelines into the past. That is why, even in this age of whirl, so much of the old abides. People instinctively defend the self against disruption. "In this matter of belief," said James, "we are all extreme conservatives." When new facts finally drive out old opinions, we take care to graft the new perception on the ancient stock with "a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity."⁶ Everyone becomes his own Landmarks Preservation Commission. We seek with Eliot the still point in the turning world.

Traditions endure, from which, consciously or not, we draw sustenance. It is not fashionable these days for historians to talk about 'national character.' But of course persisting traits, values, folkways, create a palpable national identity. The reader of Tocqueville is constantly astonished to recognize the lineaments of modern America in his great work, though Tocqueville visited a predominantly agricultural nation of thirteen million people a century and a half ago. Even Crèvecoeur still astonishes by the contemporaneity of his eighteenth-century answer to his own famous question: "What then is the American, this new man?"*

The law of acceleration hurtles us into the inscrutable future. But it cannot wipe the slate of the past. History haunts even generations who refuse to learn history. Rhythms, patterns, continuities, drift out of time long forgotten to mold the present and to color the shape of things to come. Science and technology revolutionize our lives, but memory, tradition and myth frame our response. Expelled from individual consciousness by the rush of change, history finds its revenge by stamping the collective unconscious with habits, values, expectations, dreams. The dialectic between past and future will continue to form our lives.

These reflections are not presented in any confidence that history is the cure for all that ails us. Still the past helps explain where we are today and how we got there. Knowledge of what Americans have been through in earlier times will do us no harm as we grope through the darkness of our own days. During the Soviet blockade of Berlin in 1948, when forebodings of a Third World War swept Washington, a young assistant secretary exclaimed to Secretary of State George C. Marshall at a panicky staff meeting, "How in the world can you remain so calm during this appalling crisis?" Marshall replied, calmly, "I've seen worse."

Americans have indeed seen worse. History, by putting crisis in perspective, supplies the antidote to every generation's illusion that its

*"He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. . . . Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterities will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle. . . . The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions." J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Letter III.

own problems are unique seem worse than trouble they really are. Nuclear wars are modest compared to generation in achieving or to the problems that the republic through the confronted Franklin Roosevelt depression and winning hot? my little Sir," said Eisenhower of a popgun for the crack

Nuclear weapons, however a qualitatively new factor in the life of humanity and stability. So history embrace edge of the past should still complacency. History

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own problems are uniquely oppressive. Troubles impending always
seem worse than troubles surmounted, but this does not prove that
they really are. Nuclear weapons excepted, the problems of the 1980s
are modest compared to the problems that confronted Washington's
generation in achieving independence and fashioning a free state,
or to the problems that confronted Lincoln's generation in bringing
the republic through the glare of civil war, or to the problems that
confronted Franklin Roosevelt's generation in surviving the worst
depression and winning the greatest war in American history. "So
hot? my little Sir," said Emerson, warning us not to mistake the sound
of a popgun for the crack of doom.

Nuclear weapons, however, are the fatal exception. They introduce
a qualitatively new factor into the historical process. For the first time
in the life of humanity the crack of doom becomes a realistic possi-
bility. So history embraces discontinuity as well as continuity. Knowl-
edge of the past should inoculate against hysteria but should not in-
still complacency. History walks on a knife edge.

No one knew the risks of history better than Henry Adams, whose
name is invoked more than once in the pages that follow. Humanity,
Adams well understood, had been subjected to a succession of tech-
nological shocks, each of which by itself would have taken decades to
digest and control. Every shock increased the velocity of history. The
nuclear shock threatens the end of history. "Man has mounted science
and is now run away with," Adams wrote to his brother on 11 April
1862, a few days after the Battle of Shiloh, while the *Monitor* and the
Merrimac were maneuvering around Newport News. "I firmly believe
that before many centuries more, science will be the master of man.
The engines he will have invented will be beyond his strength to
control. Some day science shall have the existence of mankind in
its power, and the human race commit suicide by blowing up the
world."⁷

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