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Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.:

The Politics of Hope and The Bitter Heritage

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Introduction

Mankind, Emerson once said, is divided between the party of Conservatism and the party of Innovation, between the Past and the Future, between Memory and Hope. Neither Memory nor Hope provides by itself an entirely persuasive basis for political action. But the distinction expresses a deep contrast in human temperament and purpose. Some people resent change and others welcome it. Some are satisfied with what we have; others think we can do better. “It is,” wrote Emerson, “the counteraction of the centripetal and centrifugal forces. Innovation is the salient energy; Conservatism the pause on the last movement.” Some believe that life’s the fool of time and time must have a stop. Others believe that time will forever outstrip our pretenses and outwit our platitudes—that, as Bacon put it, “He that will not apply new remedies must expect new evils; for time is the greatest innovator.”

A good many of the pieces that follow were written by an American liberal in the United States in the 1950’s—written, that is, from the viewpoint of Hope in an age of Memory. They were written in the belief that, contrary to the view then held by many Americans and (apparently) by most people outside America, the America of the ’50’s did not necessarily represent the triumphant culmination of the American experiment; that America, as a nation, had not necessarily solved all its problems or achieved all its objectives; that the promise of American life had not found perfect fulfillment in a consensus of togetherness and a rhetoric of moralism and self-congratulation; that the American people would not be satisfied forever with a diet of clichés and pieties; that they could not, from

now on, be counted as permanently hostile to style, wit, intellect, innovation, and idealism; that the impulses of Hope, gathering beneath the surface, would soon break out and launch the United States into a new and more entertaining epoch.

I could not believe that my country had ground to a halt because, as an historian, and especially as the son of my father, I was well aware of the existence of a cyclical rhythm in our national affairs. The basic fallacy has always been to suppose that the current state of things represents the essence of the American reality. But our reality has always been dialectic. A generation ago my father traced back the historic alternation between Innovation and Conservatism to the start of the American republic.¹ By this analysis, the '50's, far from expressing a final capitulation of America to the *status quo*, were rather an entirely predictable decade of Memory after two decades of active and exhausting Hope. So far as the historian was concerned, there was no reason to suppose, because we acquiesced for a season, that acquiescence would ever after be the American way.

The correctness of this cyclical view has been shown, I think, by the long way we have already come in the '60's. We are beginning to recover the qualities which the rest of the world—and many Americans too, some with relief, others with foreboding—imagined that we had forsworn forever. We no longer seem an old nation, tired, complacent and self-righteous. We no longer suppose that our national salvation depends on stopping history in its tracks and freezing the world in

¹ The essay, originally published in the *Yale Review* in 1939, is reprinted as "The Tides of National Politics" in *Paths to the Present* (New York, 1949).

its present mold. Our national leadership is young, vigorous, intelligent, civilized, and experimental—and rare in this world in being any of these things. Our mistakes these days tend to be the mistakes of rationality, not the mistakes of complacency.

Self-righteousness has ceased to be the main instrument of our diplomacy. Instead, idealism sends thousands of young Americans to the ends of the world as farmers or teachers or engineers for the Peace Corps. The life of the mind enjoys a new freedom and a new status. There has never been such official interest in and support of the arts. Wit has become respectable; it is even presidential now. Satire has burst out of the basements of San Francisco and Greenwich Village. People feel free to make jokes about anybody or anything. The word “togetherness” has passed from the language. Few would describe American society any longer in last decade’s condescending vocabulary of conformism and homogenization.

In short, the older American faith in leadership and diversity and contention and individualism and experiment and irreverence is beginning to reassert itself. We are Sons of Liberty once again; or, at least, we admit this as a legitimate ambition. We have awakened as from a trance; and we have awakened so quickly and sharply that we can hardly remember what it was like when we slumbered. Our complaints now are that we have not made more progress, not that our capability for progress is extinct. The peculiarities of the ’50’s, some of which are recounted in the pages to follow, have almost the air of a forgotten nightmare.

It is important not to overdo this. Self-congratulation is as dangerous for the party of Hope as for the party of Memory. It would be premature to suppose that we are approaching the millennium—that the day

is imminent when all turmoil will be over, when Satan will be cast into the life of fire and brimstone, and mankind will behold a new heaven and a new earth. It would not only be premature; it would be wrong. By American tradition, the party of Hope is humane, skeptical, and pragmatic. It has no dogma, no sense of messianic mission, no belief that mortal man can attain Utopia, no faith that fundamental problems have final solutions. The empiricism of the American party of Hope stands in sharp contrast to the millennialism which still inflames the ideologists, whether of the American right or of the European and Asian left—the notion that a golden age existed in the past, or will exist in the future, which mankind can achieve through the proper combination of incantations and exorcisms.

José Figueres, the Latin American patriot, calls his *finca* in the Costa Rican uplands “La Lucha Sin Fin”—the struggle without end. Freedom is inseparable from struggle; it is a process, not a conclusion. And freedom, as Brandeis said, is the great developer; it is both the means employed and the end attained. This, I believe, states the essence of the Politics of Hope—this and the understanding that the struggle itself offers not only a better life for others but a measure of fulfillment, even of pleasure, for oneself.

I am indebted to Paul Brooks of Houghton Mifflin for suggesting this book and to Anne Barrett and Helen Phillips for seeing the volume through the press. I am also indebted to my father for continuing counsel and tolerance; and my father and I are both indebted to John F. Kennedy for vindicating the cyclical theory of American politics.

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