

Observations on the pendulum of American history

Randy Farmer Books

Most of the works the eminent historian Arthur Schlesinger has produced have been in the form of lengthy, thorough examinations, most notably "The Imperial Presidency," "The Age of Jackson" and "A Thousand Days: JFK in the White House." So it is somewhat of a surprise that Schlesinger's latest attempt in documenting history, *The Cycles of American History*, is a book consisting of 14 essays. The gracefully written pieces deal with a diversified set of subjects, such as the curious feature of American foreign diplomacy that mixes imperialism with occasional humanitarian good works. Or the awkward give-and-take of affirmative government with the survival-of-the-fittest nature of our capitalist system.

Schlesinger's background, that of a man of letters and a public servant, uniquely qualifies him to discuss such delicate and complex topics in length and scope. And "The Cycles of American History" will undoubtedly contribute to his deserved stature as a historian.

For in "Cycles," Schlesinger displays a nimbleness of mind that enables him to weave the past's philosophies, observations and analyses, and use them to help probe, define and forecast the current American political, economic and social world.

As a historian, Schlesinger is mindful of the role historians play in interpreting history. "The aim of history," Schlesinger writes, "is to reconstruct the past to its own pattern, not according to ours. All epochs, said Ranke, are equally close to God. But historians, try as they will to escape, remain prisoners of their epoch."

And, appropriately, Schlesinger is aware of his prejudices. Schlesinger is, of course, a political liberal, having served in the Kennedy administration. So it isn't surprising that Schlesinger forecasts another swing of the periodic political pendulum from right to left. "We may conclude that public purpose will have at least one more chance. At some point, shortly before or after the year 1990, there should come a sharp change in the national mood and direction — a change comparable to those bursts of innovation and reform that followed the ascensions to office of Theodore Roosevelt in 1901, of Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 and of John Kennedy in 1961. The 1990s should be the return in the generational succession for the young men and women who came of political age in the Kennedy years." The swing he sees is one between public and private interests.

Characteristic of Schlesinger's book is his ability to tersely smash received wisdom like fine porcelain. "Ronald Reagan is cited as the inevitable product of the television age. But Reagan, one surmises, would have been equally successful in the age of radio, like Franklin D. Roosevelt, or in the age of newsreels, like Warren G. Harding, or in the age of steel engravings and the penny press, like Franklin Pierce. Presidential candidates in the television era — Johnson, Nixon, Humphrey, McGovern, Ford,

Carter, Mondale — hardly constitute a parade of bathing beauties calculated to excite Atlantic City."

Perhaps the most challenging and maverick essay in the book is the one in which Schlesinger proposes the abolition of the office of the Vice Presidency of the United States. The office, he argues, has been one of historical insignificance because it allows the office holder to languish from presidential neglect and lack of responsibility. In modern times, the vice president, Schlesinger argues cogently, is nothing more than a lackey for the president, expected to be faithful to the end. Is that true preparation for the presidency?

He backs up his argument with the evidence of discontented comments from former office holders. As Theodore Roosevelt commented on the office, the vice presidency is "an utterly anomalous office (one which I think ought to be abolished.)" John Adams once called the vice presidency "the most insignificant office ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination received."

Consequently, "There is no escape," Schlesinger writes, "it seems to me, from the conclusion that the Vice Presidency is not only pointless but even a dangerous office."

The office is dangerous, Schlesinger contends, because of the undemocratic possibility of an unelected vice president becoming president and appointing his would-be successor, as happened when Nixon resigned.

"In 1974 the Twenty-fifth Amendment gave us a President appointed by a man shortly thereafter forced to resign to escape impeachment for high

crimes and misdemeanors; the new President, had he died in office, would have been succeeded by a man he alone had appointed. So long as Section 2 of the Twenty-fifth Amendment survives, this result, so antipathetic to democracy, can happen again."

In case of presidential vacancy, he proposes that the Secretary of State serve as Acting President for 90 days while special elections are being held. If the secretary is found unsuitable for the office because of his nationality or age, next in line would be secretary of the treasury. And then on down the line of the 1886 list of presidential succession.

The approved secretary would serve

out the term if the election was within 120 days of the quadrennial election. Two elections would take place if the vacancy occurred 120 days before a midterm election. Schlesinger says that the system is modeled after the French method of replacing presidents.

The French, for example, held elections after the death of George Pompidou, and in less than 2 months had a president "freely chosen by the people." "Which government was the more legitimate — the elected government of France after the death of Pompidou or the appointed government of the United States after the resignation of Nixon?"

Stars

from page 3

me out of a dressing room, threw my notebook out of a tenth story window, tried to run me down with the Ramones' tour bus, and spanked a small child who accidentally collided with him in a hotel lobby. Of course, as lord of the Ramones, Melnik doesn't have it easy. The world's greatest punk rock band isn't exactly *academus plurus brainicus*.

Elliot Saltzman, road manager for Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, almost matches Melnik's carnivorousness.

At a club in Raleigh, Elliot and I engaged in throat-ripping, ear-smashing verbal slugfest. Soon, the entire audience was staring, wondering if perhaps we were feuding Greek gods of obnoxiousness. Elliot and I both felt refreshed and parted amicably. The argument concerned shoes.

Later, at a wild, post-concert

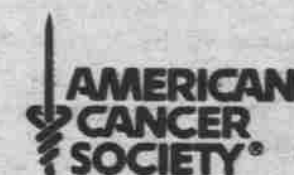
party, Joan Jett autographed my pants and scrawled a sultry message across the T-shirt of my official photographer, Chip Cheek. Joan is real cool. What do I mean by cool? To me, a cool person is one who, if you were laying in a gutter dying of Nigerian Flu, would blow smoke in your face and kiss your nose.

There is only one thing in the world as fun as rock 'n roll (and all its fringe benefits) . . . professional wrestling. Wrestlers are ridiculously nice. There must be a law somewhere which sternly states: "When outside the ring, pro-wrestlers must be pleasant and polite as Saint Francis of Assisi."

In "real life" Ric Flair comes across with the venom of a smurf. J.J. Dillon could fill in for Mr. Hooper on Sesame Street. The only scary experience I endured while interviewing a pack of pro-wrestlers occurred when I stumbled into a dressing room. Before me stood a 400-pound wrestling legend named Dusty Rhodes. He was naked. Panicking, I hurled my pen at Dusty's torso and fled. After two months of intense psycho-therapy, I have yet to fully recover my peace of mind.

Heck, who needs peace of mind? Without turmoil and confusion life becomes a soggy sausage. I love to creep around back stage trying to infuriate rock stars I don't like. Once I told the guitarist for Glass Tiger that the band wasn't raunchy enough. The guitarist told the singer, and soon the whole group was breathing fire down my neck. Now, that's fun!

The girls, the road managers, the music . . . rock 'n roll is a wonderful creation. Sometimes I dream that I am being chased by criss-crossing rainbows and pulverizing E chords through a sorority house full of bikini clad Kiss fans. Then again, maybe it's not a dream at all.



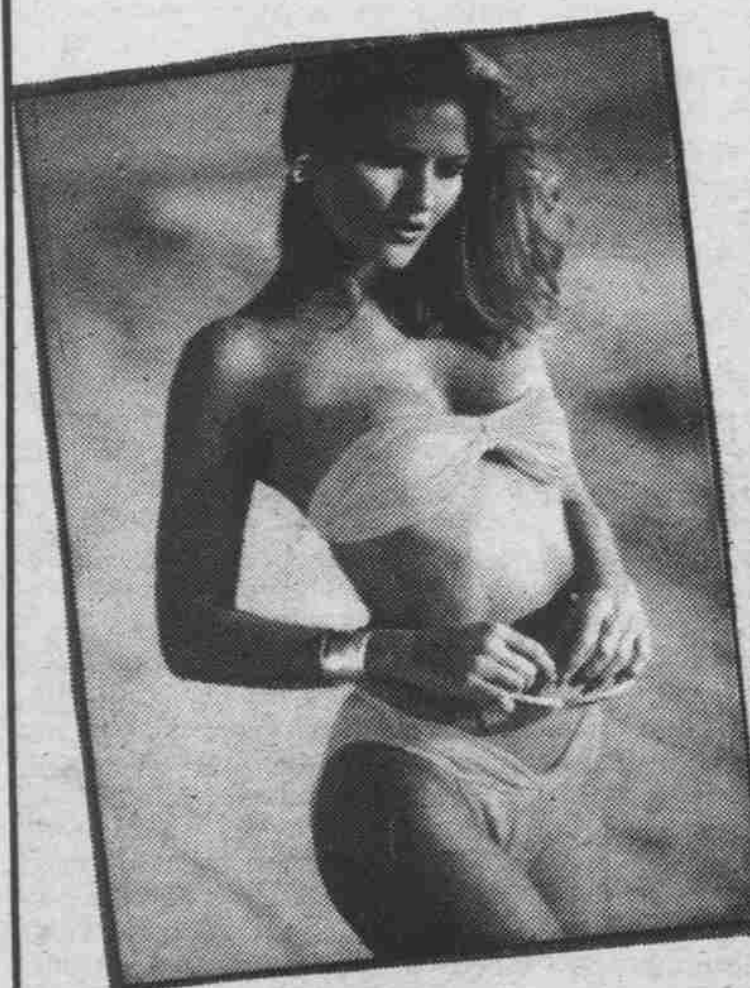
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