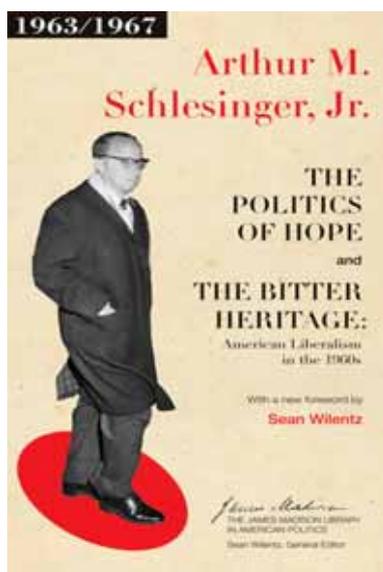


Schlesinger: The 'Humble' Liberal

REVIEW

Marco Mariano



Arthur Schlesinger Jr.
The Politics of Hope and The
Bitter Heritage: American
Liberalism in the 1960s.

Princeton: Princeton University Press,
2007. vii+576 pp.

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In 1967 Arthur Schlesinger wrote that ‘The fight for equal opportunity for the Negro, the war against poverty, the struggle to save the cities, the improvement of our schools - all must be starved for the sake of Vietnam’. Gone were the glory days of cold war liberalism, when the rise of the national security state and the welfare state seemed to reinforce each other as they provided legitimacy for the idea that a limited but assertive federal government was the solution, rather than the problem, for America. This new edition of Schlesinger’s *The Politics of Hope and The Bitter Heritage* is, among other things, a reminder of the potential and the inner contradictions of American post-war liberalism.

The collection of essays in *The Politics of Hope* is an account of Schlesinger’s liberal advocacy in the 1950s and early 1960s, which by and large developed and updated the views he had fully articulated in *The Vital Center* (1949). His essays on the role of individuals and ideas in history and politics popularise his assumptions as a historian who dedicated most of his career to the study of figures like Andrew Jackson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and John and Robert Kennedy, and believed that leadership and ideas, rather than impersonal forces and anonymous masses, are the engine of historical change.

At the same time, his essays on American politics bring to light the nuances that make Schlesinger a rather strange bird in the golden age of liberal consensus. Born and raised in a militantly Progressive household, Arthur Jr. never fully disavowed such an upbringing, as his emphasis on conflict as a recurring theme in American history aptly shows. In his comments on Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America* he argued that the suffocating liberal unanimity that Hartz lamented was all but the essence of the American political tradition. Incidentally, his emphasis on conflict within a broad framework of liberal consensus was just another legacy of *The Vital Center*, which has been dismissed all too frequently as an uninteresting and predictable anti-communist rant.

Finally, the essays in *The Politics of Hope* reflect the author’s attempt to come to terms with a changing international scenario at a time when the rigid dichotomy of the early days of the cold war was obviously inadequate to account for the tensions within the communist camp and the new challenges and opportunities posed by

decolonisation. By now a critic of the ‘domino theory’, Schlesinger came to develop a critique of one of the consequences of that approach—US involvement in Vietnam.

In *The Bitter Heritage* he distanced himself both from the liberal hawks within the Johnson administration and the radical historians and activists who read the escalation in Indochina as just another chapter in the history of US imperialism. Rather, he advocated a ‘middle course’ out of Vietnam based on reducing and eventually halting the bombings on North Vietnam, pressing for reform in Saigon, and negotiating over South Vietnam with parties including the Vietcong. Schlesinger believed that the US had an obligation to support its allies and dismissed the mass protests against the war as politically detrimental means to satisfy the emotional needs of pacifists and radicals. At the same time—in a typical *Vital Center* fashion—he attacked the ‘obsessive anti-communism’ embraced by Washington as both inadequate to the present crisis and inconsistent with the tenets of American post-war liberalism. What was needed was a ‘rational’ approach, which clearly showed that Vietnam was no Korea, that international communism was now polycentric, and that the interplay between communism and nationalism in Vietnam was crucial. The mistake of the Americanisation of the war pursued by the Johnson administration was a reminder of the harm that liberalism can do when it lacks a Niebuhrian sense of humility and ‘irony’, and when it is disfigured by omnipotence and dogmatism.

However, 1967 was a bad time for a convincing defence of tough-minded, cold war liberalism. At a time when the Great Society was in disarray and many of the ‘best and the brightest’ were leading the war effort, both the Old and the New Left were ready to point out that the ‘vital center’ could not hold anymore.





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The editors would like to invite academics and post-graduates to submit articles on a broad range of topics pertaining to American and Canadian Studies. Some of the disciplines previously covered in 49th Parallel include history, literature, film, popular culture, politics, photography, the visual arts, and their relation within an international comparative framework. The use of film, pictures, sound, and creative web designs will be considered for placement in the e-journal.

Submissions should comply with the following:

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