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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Cycles of American History* by Arthur M. Schlesinger

Review by: Robert C. Bannister

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Some minor points or oddities intrude in Tischler's otherwise excellent book. They include, for instance, the seeming incongruity of citing a British tune (on p. 71) in the midst of a section on "100% Americanism" instead of George M. Cohan's big hit of the first World War, "Over There"; occasional repetition of previously cited material (for one, the Hanson references on pp. 124 and 164-66) which gives the reader a sense of *déjà vu*; incorrect dates for Antonín Dvořák's years as head of the National Conservatory (1892-95 rather than 1891-94, on p. 130); and the concoction of a fictitious name for the Institute for Studies in American Music at Brooklyn College (p. 208).

More troublesome, the book is replete with typographical errors, a really surprising fact given the reputation of the publisher. Errors are so numerous that one doubts the pages were ever proofread prior to publication. Surely the author of such an important book on American music should have been better served. At the very least, this press owes the author a new, corrected printing, and the sooner the better.

*Peabody Conservatory of
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MARGERY MORGAN LOWENS

The Cycles of American History. By ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986. xiii, 498p. Index. \$22.95.)

American politics, Arthur Schlesinger argues in the title essay of this collection, has alternated in thirty-year cycles between devotion to the public good and to private gain. Thus, Theodore Roosevelt assumed the presidency in 1901, Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933, and John F. Kennedy in 1961. So also, the 1890s, the 1920s, the 1950s, and the 1980s have embraced private profit bordering on greed. Although the "Reagan Revolution" perhaps promises to exceed its allotted time (or so it seemed to Schlesinger in 1985), the 1990s should mark a healthy swing of the pendulum back to public purposes. In a word, this too will pass—a theme that echoes through many of the fourteen essays in this volume, most previously published but now revised and updated.

Cycle theory aside, most of the remaining essays in *Cycles* will neither surprise nor disappoint readers familiar with Schlesinger's earlier work. Examining national character, foreign policy, and domestic politics, he assesses the state of the nation from the perspective of the now-embattled liberalism he outlined almost four decades ago in *The Vital Center* (1949). The American "tradition" (as he now terms his intellectual forebears) combines Calvinism and classical republicanism, leavened by a pragmatic

spirit of “experiment” through which the founders sought to escape the less happy aspects of the colonial legacy. The “countertradition,” in contrast, is “moralistic,” “utopian,” and “ideological.” Schlesinger’s major themes are no less important for being familiar, whether he is condemning “Holy Wars” against communism, defending elitism, or arguing for “affirmative government.” Topical essays include a call for professional associations to take a lead in preserving human rights, a plea for the abolition of the vice-presidency, and a proposal for restoring the American political party. Two final essays provide a ringing defense of JFK against recent critics, and an affirmation of the importance of leadership in democracy.

In the process, *The Cycles of American History* also tells a good deal about the limits and strengths of Schlesinger-style liberalism. Whatever the merits of his cyclical theory (and the numbers never quite add up), his interest in it at this stage of his career not only echoes a similar interest of his father, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., but places him in the curious company of the dyspeptic Henry Adams, and even of William Graham Sumner—company that suggests cosmic resignation more than reasoned hope for better days. Women, gays, and even blacks make largely cameo appearances, the first two as evidence of “faction” (p. 262), all three obliquely as claimants on our “entitlement society” who must subordinate their specific goals to the public good if the Democratic party is to rise again. “Affirmative government” is discussed extensively, but with barely a nod to “affirmative action,” “comparable pay,” and similar issues that now agitate public debate. A new “working partnership” (p. 254) of labor, business, and government is envisioned, with no mention of the sorry state of the labor movement or of the many important critiques of welfare-state corporatism that have dominated scholarship for two decades.

Offsetting these problems, however, Schlesinger’s vision also brings us back to issues that recent historians too easily forget: the need for a genuinely global perspective, the centrality of politics (and power) in human affairs, and the limits of reason in a world more complicated than most Americans are willing to admit.

Swarthmore College

ROBERT C. BANNISTER

Past, Present, and Personal: The Family and the Life Course in American History.

By JOHN DEMOS. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. xiii, 215p. Index. \$17.95.)

Professional historians in our time suffer a sinking sense of inconsequence. They write almost solely for scholars like themselves, in areas of increasingly