“Out of History, Into History”

Presented by

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I have always looked forward to this evening of the Harrington Lecture, although I must admit that I have done so with more pleasure in some other years. The festive spirit of the occasion, the warmth that comes from such a gathering of friends and fellows, and in years past the ever-tasty pie—all of these have contributed to make this one of my favorite events of the academic season. And then there is the lecture itself, the avowed purpose of our annual get-together. But I think my favorite part of the evening is its climax, when next year's speaker is announced. I like the suspense of it, as well as the obvious delight on the part of the named individual, who does not yet know the kind of trouble that he or she has let him- or herself in for. Sometimes I used to make a game of trying to guess who the next speaker would be, which often led me to ask myself which of my colleagues I would most like to hear. Year in and year out, the answer to that question was the same, at least after I knew he had been here long enough to be eligible. That person was Stephen Ward. I am sorry that I never got the chance to hear Steve give a Harrington Lecture. I know it would have been a good one, delivered with the wit and warmth that made Steve such a wonderful colleague. The best I can do now is to remember him with mine. So I would like, if you will permit me, to dedicate this lecture to the memory of my friend and teacher, Stephen R. Ward.

You may recognize the quotation that I have taken for my title. It comes from the last sentence of a great American novel, *All the King's Men*, by Robert Penn Warren, a book that deals seriously with the problems of human beings and their history. It asks compelling questions about the meaning and morality of historical study—and of history itself. I'll be returning to Warren's novel later and to its conclusion at the end of my remarks, when its significance should be more apparent than it is now—if I have done my job in this lecture, that is.

We have heard a great deal lately about "the end of history." It was the title of a much-discussed book by Francis Fukuyama, published in 1992, which drew its inspiration from the events that brought the Cold War to a close. Simply stated, Fukuyama's thesis was that the West's victory over Soviet-style communism had ushered in a reign of liberal democratic capitalism that left the world bereft of the kind of conflict that constitutes history. In the era of peace and prosperity to follow, human thought and behavior would no longer be shaped by the struggle against absolutism, which according to Fukuyama is what history has been about. Although anyone watching the nightly news might be tempted to say that the end of history is one of those academic ideas that is every bit as silly as it sounds, it is nonetheless rooted deeply in Western thought and is a key element in both

of the West's grand organizing theories of history, by which I mean Christianity and Marxism. In Christian doctrine, the end of history is scheduled to follow the Battle of Armageddon and the second coming of Christ, leaving behind a world populated by saints and devoid of conflict. For Marxists, history ends with the revolution that unites ownership with production, resolving the class struggle that has determined the shape of history in the past. Whether one viewed history as good versus evil or as owners versus producers, the important thing was that one day the struggle would come to an inevitable (and predetermined) end—and so would history. Just as both systems generated principles that gave order and meaning to human behavior, they both guaranteed an escape from the forces that brought pain and suffering to human life. They both offered a way "out of history."

Fukuyama was not the first writer to suggest that humanity had reached the end of historical time. The monks who compiled the Nuremberg Chronicle at the end of the fifteenth century left only a few blank pages at the end on which to record the events that would precede the second coming. In the early years of America both Puritan theologians and the more secular Founding Fathers saw the eclipse of the Old World in the development of the New. Lenin saw something similar in the creation of the Soviet state. And Mario Savio, spokesman for the Free Speech Movement at the University of California, entitled a famous essay published in 1964, "An End to History." All of these reports of history's demise were as premature as accounts of Mark Twain's death, of course, which should come as no surprise to anyone here.

This peculiar feature of the West's grand historical systems, that their ultimate promise is one of escape from the forces that they describe, has been a contributing factor for some time now in an assault on the idea of history itself. This has come about partly because the big systems have failed as predictors of the future; like Macbeth's tomorrows, history goes on and on. Related to our disillusionment with grand schemes is the deep-seated pessimism of our time, as illustrated by the popularity of such meta-historians of decay as Arnold Toynbee, Oswald Spengler, and more recently, Paul Kennedy. If history is not progressive it is depressing, which is why it so often seems to be of interest only to conservative intellectuals, doom-decriers, and others whose purpose in life is best described as pointing with alarm. The more we know about history, the less we like it, and the less we like ourselves. This idea has been expressed most forcefully by W. H. Auden, in the Coda of his last published complete poem, "Archaeology" (1973):

From Archaeology
One moral, at least, may be drawn,
To wit, that all
Our school textbooks lie.
What they call History
Is nothing to vaunt of,
Being made, as it is,
By the criminal in us:
Goodness is timeless.

What we hear in these lines is a kind of historical despair, coming from a man who embraced, albeit at different times, both Marxism and Christianity.

One of the most intriguing characters in *All the King's Men* is called the Scholarly Attorney. He is a man who takes learning seriously—Warren informs us that he wears a Phi Beta Kappa key on his watch—who has been driven to madness by the problem of historical causation. Abandoning his successful career in the law, he spends his time writing Christian tracts heralding the coming of the Apocalypse. What he writes is mostly nonsense, of course, but it points to a serious problem. All of our attempts to understand the larger purpose of history take us beyond the realm of what we know—too far for any of them to be true or even credible. We may long for a way "out of history," but trying to find it in all-encompassing theories only adds to our sense of the futility of history as a discipline.

Another factor in our rejection of the study of history is the way we have seen it used in our own time. By now we might well be asking ourselves if there is anything that history cannot be made to justify. Hitler employed it to explain the extermination of the Jews in Europe, as did Stalin and Mao Zedong to justify their respective reigns of terror. These uses, and many others, have led to the not surprising view that history is all propaganda anyway, not to be trusted or even taken seriously as a motive for human behavior. If the Bosnians and the Serbs are determined to kill one another, we think, they will have no trouble finding excuses for doing so in their history. Even worse, the history on which they base their enmity is spurious, made up for the occasion to satisfy their desire for blood. This may be a popular view, based on a kind of moral fatigue as much as anything, but it is also reflected in the academy, where historicism, relativism, and ideology studies are all in the ascendancy. What is missing from all of these methods of interpretation is any ultimate or transcendent sense of the value of history as a discipline; they all view history in the limited and contingent manner of post-modern analysis. These approaches to history are not without value and may indeed take us as far as we can legitimately go in the world

that we inhabit; they are certainly preferable to the old-style, triumphalist history that granted virtue to power and violence. But they all contribute to the general sense that history is an untrustworthy discipline.

I think it is worth noting that history is not the only form of study whose end has been predicted in recent years. In the 1950s the idea of the end of politics was briefly in vogue, exemplified by Daniel Bell's book, *The End of Ideology*, and supported by the consensus school of American history. And in 1995 John Horgan published a book entitled *The End of Science*, which was advertised in *The New Yorker* as "the controversial book that dares to say science is history." I think I saw some of my colleagues in the sciences flinch at that, and I must say that I don't blame them. No one likes to be referred to as useless and passé. But take heart, my friends, science, political or otherwise, can lay claim to the kind of direct practical applications that disciplines in the humanities, such as history, cannot. The loss of confidence in ideas, which makes up so much of the post-modern intellectual climate, at least in the West, has taken its greatest toll on those of us who have nothing more tangible to offer.

As long as I am in the confessional part of my lecture—the manifesto part will come later—I should say that my own interest in history grew out of a keen awareness of its potential for misuse. As I struggled years ago with the official—historical—explanations of the Vietnam War, it at least occurred to me that human beings might be better off without history, that whatever benefits we gained from knowing something about our past were outweighed by the mischief that historical knowledge seemed always to produce. How else to explain our obvious tendency to keep on making the same mistakes? But history is a function of memory, and a world without history would be a world in which humans no longer remembered. That is not the world we live in, nor would many of us want it to be. Which means, whether we like it or not, that history is an inescapable part of our lives, and it seemed to me then that the best we could do was to minimize the damage by getting it right.

You might be wondering, in light of what I have said so far, what I could possibly mean by "getting it right." The answer is probably even less substantial than you might imagine. I am simply not prepared to make extravagant claims for the purpose of history, or to offer an expansive response to the question: What is history for? It seems to me that there has been too much of that sort of thing already. We have, I think, long since passed the point where George Santayana's famous remark, that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it, has become a mindless cliché. Remembering history does not automatically prevent its repetition; it may in

fact guarantee it. That is what we have seen in places like Bosnia and Rwanda, where people kill each other because they think they always have—or, more accurately, because their scurrilous leaders use invented history to make them believe they always have. The important thing seems to be *what* history is remembered, then how it is interpreted, by whom, and for what purpose—all of which undermines the proposition that there is an accurate version of history waiting "out there," as they liked to tell us in the *X-Files*, for some ideal historian to discover. My own awareness of this problem goes back to my undergraduate interest in history, as I struggled to understand, and later to refute, the Johnson administration's fatuous application of the "lessons of Munich" to its decision to fight a war to "stop aggression" in Southeast Asia. If there are such things as timeless principles of human behavior that cut across continents as well as centuries, what Immanuel Kant referred to as "universal history," the truly difficult problem is to distinguish those principles from the significant-seeming ephemera that dominate particular events, places, and times. What makes this so problematical, of course, is that the events, places, and times that have the most resonance for us, and whose "lessons" we are most likely to elevate to the level of universality, are always our own. It might be worth noting here that the individual who is least likely to fall under the spell of this sort of historical presentism is the one who knows the most and has thought the most deeply about history as a discipline.

Such individuals are never very confident about their own historical judgments. They recognize the difficulty of separation—of separating the past from contemporary concerns, and of separating themselves from their own attempts at historical understanding. Our greatest problem is that we have no choice but to live in the present and must feel the force of its concerns and prejudices. The best we can do is to acknowledge these forces—and fight to resist them. We must, as Richard Hofstadter said of societies, find ways of checking our own tendencies. I think this issue is what Auden was addressing when he wrote:

> We live here. We live in the Present's unopened
> Sorrow; its limits are what we are.
> The prisoner ought never to pardon his cell.

We are always mistaken, always subject to error, when we use history to justify the present.

Which takes me back to the question I posed a few moments ago: What is history for? But before I try to answer that question, I feel required to say a little more about what I think it is not for. Having brought up Kant and idea of "universal history," I should confess that I do not believe in it, at

least not in the all-encompassing sense in which the term was originally used. Is there a single force that drives human history? Thinkers as diverse as Augustine, Kant, Hegel, and Marx all thought so. And so, by the way, does Francis Fukuyama. All were attracted to that view by the apparent directionality of history, driven by what we might call the paradox of progress. We know that human beings learn, and that what they have learned in the past has permitted them to make headway in their struggle against nature. Indeed, material progress of this sort has become institutionalized with the rise of the scientific method as a vehicle for change and discovery. Why do I refer to this as a paradox? Because progress can only be a meaningful (or measurable) concept if we know the goal toward which it is moving; thus all universal histories require an ultimate end to history to serve as that goal. Although many environmentalists would disagree, and so would I, we might take the view that the human conquest of nature is history's end or purpose. One problem with that proposition is that human beings are a part of nature, and that our real historical struggle has been less against our material surroundings and more against each other and ourselves. How could we win this struggle and thus bring human history to a close? Only by controlling humanity in a way that eliminates much, if not all, of what it means to be human. That might have sounded good to the compilers of the New Testament, or to Marx, or even to such determinists as B. F. Skinner. But it does not sound good to me.

On the matter of universal history, I might say with the British historian, H. A. L. Fisher: "Men wiser and more learned than I have discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. Those harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following upon another as wave follows upon wave." Fisher's tragic view of human helplessness in the grip of history may be a bit exaggerated—along with his modesty--but I think his analogy that compares the flow of history to waves is a particularly apt one. We know a great deal about the forces that account for waves in lakes and oceans and bodies of water generally—certainly more than Galileo, who got it wrong. Yet trying to predict their normal, periodic patterns takes us into the realm of chaos theory, the relevance of which for human history, by the way, would make a great topic for another lecture in this series. And we should remember that the waves are just an epiphenomenon of the water before trying to determine their end. It is the same for humans and their history.

This might be a good time for a definition, to give you some idea of what I think history is and is not. What it most certainly is not, is simply the past. Historian E. H. Carr once asked whether history is the examination of

past events or the events themselves. The distinction is not a trivial one, or quite as straightforward as it may seem. At any particular moment, historical interpretations exist, but the past does not, at least not any more. There are those who wonder if it ever did. The best we can do after the fact is to attempt to draw a picture of the past from artifacts, records, and memories, none of which are ever entirely accurate or complete. The historian must also come to terms with the problem of scale, in much the same way as the model-builder or the cartographer must. In theory, at least, history might be written to include every detail, every fact, everything that constitutes the reconstructed past. It still would not be the past, of course; and such history would be no more useful, or serve its purpose any better, than would a map made as large as the area it charted or a model airplane the same size as the original. Reduction in scale to a manageable level is a necessary part of all history. As Paul Klee said of painting, history does not reproduce what we see so much as it makes us see.

But how to accomplish that reduction in scale without doing violence to the past events that history is supposed to be about? Interpretation and the inevitable search for meaning require that history must be more than just a road map of the past; it is not enough for history to be an accurate scale model. For a start, we need to follow the standard set by Lytton Strachey, the founder of modern biography: "The exclusion of everything that is redundant and of nothing that is significant." Which leaves us only with the small problem of trying to determine which is which.

Beyond the matter of what to include, there is another issue that complicates the relationship between history and the past. What I am referring to here is the continuous nature of time, and the way that it confounds our efforts, however hard we try, to separate it neatly into past, present, and future. I always find it curious when I hear someone refer to the "dead past." The past isn't dead, as William Faulkner famously remarked; it isn't even really past. Although we might note that Faulkner came from the history-haunted state of Mississippi, the problem of the continuing past is a universal one. All of our attempts to understand the present are colored by our understanding of the past, and all of our attempts to understand the past are affected by the fact that our world has been produced by it. And we have a similar, if reciprocal, problem when we try to project our own time into the future. I think that is what T. S. Eliot was trying to say when he wrote in "Burnt Norton":

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained I time past.

If this seems paradoxical, there is a good reason for it. Just as the past conditions our attempts to make sense of it, the writing of history changes the past, or at least what we can know of it, which for any practical purpose is the same thing. It is, in a retroactive way, yet another application of Werner Heisenberg's famous uncertainty principle.

What history is turns out to be a difficult question, despite the certitude with which history is defined by prep school teachers, politicians and professional patriots. If it is not the past, or even some distillation of it, what then can it be? For starters, it is a narrative, an attempt to describe what happened, and how, and why. The value of historical narration is directly related to the problem of causation. Doesn't that sound scholarly? And I guess unnecessarily so. What I am talking about here is telling a story, the same for the historian as for the writer of fiction. History betrays itself when it moves too far away from story telling, when historians attempt to embrace science at the expense of literature. I think that is what Auden was warning against in "Under Which Lyre," his 1946 Phi Beta Kappa poem for Harvard University, when he included in his new, humanist's decalogue, "Thou shalt not commit a social science." Another of Auden's updated commandments, by the way, is "Thou shalt not do as the Dean pleases"—these are all, clearly, words to live by.

Beyond the inherent value that lies in any good story, narrative history humanizes its subject as well. The best stories, after all, the ones that we find ourselves most drawn to, are stories about people; this is a truth that any novelist knows—or any reader of novels. And the best narrative history depicts its human subjects in a way that reveals their weaknesses as well as their strengths—another connection with the writing of fiction. It is difficult, if not quite impossible, for this kind of history to be triumphalist or otherwise self-serving. Its main message tends always in the direction of humility, for historical figures and for ourselves. It says: There were once these people, who accomplished great things and sometimes failed, who were brilliant and sometimes simply stupid, who developed complex systems of thought that often served them well—and that all turned out to be as fallible and flawed as the human beings who believed in them. Can it be any different for us?

The lesson we should learn from this is the one that thousands of years ago the Greeks already knew—the virtue that lies in moderation. The worst things always happen when we attach certainty to principle, when we see salvation or security in forcing others to live according to our particular vision of the right. There is a peculiar human blindness to the consequences of such behavior, which leaves us vulnerable to the seduction of excess.

Although countless thinkers have warned us of this tendency—Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* come immediately to mind—the long human history of war and oppression offers little hope that we are willing to listen and learn. There might be something useful in certainty and in believing that we are right, but there is wisdom in knowing that we might be wrong.

We would not be quite human if we found this an easy injunction to follow. The best history may teach us humility, but that does not mean that it is a simple lesson for us to learn. Part of the problem arises from the fact that we cannot count on the humility (or even the honesty) of others, and especially of those who employ history as a servant of power. This is where, as I have mentioned a couple of times, my real interest in history began, with the obvious abuse of the historical record by those who led the United States into war in Vietnam. It is fair to say that I was drawn to history as a discipline, and particularly to the study of the history of American foreign relations, as a way to gather evidence and argument that would reveal the historical errors (and dishonesty) of the Johnson administration. Speaking truth to power seemed profoundly useful—and of course I was certain that my version of things was simply the truth. I was "in" history, and I was happy to be there.

But eventually I found this kind of advocacy to be troubling. How could I be certain that my own judgments and selections of evidence from the factual record were not as distorted as those I meant to criticize and correct? The methodology I had learned as a graduate student combined with my natural distrust of disputation to erode my confidence in my role as an activist historian. It wasn't that I now thought the war to have been any less of a blunder—I certainly did not. It was that I felt I couldn't have enough confidence in my conclusions if I employed them in debates involving policy and politics. I wanted to remove myself from the on-going march of events. I wanted to be "out" of history.

What I think I was trying to accomplish, on a personal level, was the same goal pursued by the grand theorists I discussed a while ago. I wanted to use history—in my case scholarly work divorced from the corrupting influence of purpose—as a way of escaping from the process of history. This separation afforded my teaching and writing, much of which continued to focus on the Vietnam War and related issues in American foreign relations, a claim to the kind of fairness that historians sometimes call objectivity. This term could not really be accurate, of course, because all history is subjective, based as it is on the perspective and world view of the historian. But I thought I could find a kind of freedom from the forces that made history

seem untrustworthy—that made me doubt the value and validity of my own discipline—through scholarship unburdened by participation in the historical process. For many years this worked, at least for me. I believed I was a better historian for remaining outside of history.

Lately, however, I have been finding this distance too difficult to maintain. The on-going war in Iraq has reawakened my sense of outrage at the misuse of history in the pursuit of power. Not only did the Bush administration willfully mis-state and misinterpret the evidence regarding Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction, but it fabricated a connection between Iraqi officials and the followers of Osama bin Laden as well. Worse, it invented a justification for initiating a pre-emptive war, a practice that is rightfully outlawed by the UN Charter and condemned by international law. Over centuries, the historical record is littered with the self-serving excuses of those who employed military force to gain control over the destinies of others—we call them, in plain language, aggressors. Which of their many justifications do we take seriously today? That they were doing the work of their gods? That they were spreading civilization? That they were only defending themselves? Every war is a war of self-defense—only the very powerful and the most dishonest can claim the right to defend themselves in advance.

But surely, we tell ourselves, we (and our leaders) are not that kind of people. *Our* motives are sound. *Our* causes are just. *Our* consciences are clear. As a historian, I have learned to doubt all such claims; others have made them before us, and all too often they were wrong. At Wounded Knee, for example. Or Hiroshima. Or in the Gulf of Tonkin. We might well take the view that the causes that in the past have driven humans to desperate acts of courage and violence were all shown by subsequent events—by history—to have been based on error and prejudice. And although we sometimes feel history as the tug of necessity, our problem is not that we are slaves to events—our problem is that we are free. Free to commit the crimes of Auden's "Archaeology," and free to pretend, even to ourselves, that we have no choice but to commit them.

In the Spring of 2003, as the Bush administration prepared to invade Iraq, I was teaching a course on the Vietnam War at the university's campus in Sioux Falls. Several of my students were members of the National Guard or Reserves, and by mid-semester a third of the class had been forced to withdraw because their units were being deployed. The irony of this situation struck me with particular force. In the midst of learning about one mistaken and misguided war, they were taken off to fight in yet another. If the particulars of the two wars were different—they seem less different to

me every day as we sink more deeply into a desert quagmire—the administrations that decided to fight them were similar in their distortions of historical fact and argument. I was reminded of Marx's remark about history repeating itself, and saw how he was wrong. The events of history may indeed occur twice, as Marx said, the first time as tragedy, and the second time as—tragedy again. There is nothing farcical about the death and destruction that we have brought on ourselves and others in Iraq.

These days my history is more engaged, and I am more engaged in history. I am consulting on historical questions for the United Nations, which, however imperfect it may be, remains our best hope in a troubled world. And I am teaching a course about peace, less constrained than in the past by scholarly objectivity. I do not speak to my students of peace through strength. Or peace through vigilance. Or, in the perverted, Orwellian language of our time, peace through war. Even when followed sincerely, all of these paths to peace have led to violence instead. There is no way to peace, as Mahondas Gandhi told us. Peace *is* the way.

In *All the King's Men*, Robert Penn Warren's grand meditation on history, the narrator is Jack Burden, a man tortured by the responsibility of historical truth. He was once, Burden tells us, a "student of history," a Ph. D. candidate at a major southern university. Although fascinated by research into the past, he eventually turned his back on history, dropping out of the university and leaving his notes and a half-finished dissertation on the desk of his graduate student's apartment. What caused Burden to flee was the loss of his idealism, brought on by his discovery that history—and the people who inhabit it—are not as good or as noble as he once believed.

"That was the end of my first journey into the enchantments of the past, my first job of historical research.," Burden tells us. "It was, as I have indicated, not a success. But my second job was a sensational success. It was the 'Case of the Upright Judge' and I had every reason to congratulate myself on a job well done. It was a perfect research job, marred in its technical perfection by only one thing: it meant something."

The Case of the Upright Judge involves Judge Irwin, whose reputation for absolute integrity served as the true north on what was left of Jack Burden's moral compass. After his first, failed, attempt at historical study, Burden had found work as a journalist and then as a political aide, defining truth as whatever turned out to be useful. When his boss, who regarded Judge Irwin as a political enemy, wanted information for use against the judge, Burden was certain that there was nothing damaging to be found. He was wrong. As a young man faced with financial difficulties, the judge had taken what amounted to a bribe. After trying hard not to believe what his

research had uncovered, Burden confronted Judge Irwin, offering to keep the matter hidden if the judge would throw his political support behind his candidate. Irwin's reply came a few hours later, when Burden learned that the judge had committed suicide.

The problem with history, as Jack Burden discovered, is that it means something. The historian has no choice but to accept the consequences of what he or she knows; attempting to avoid the consequences only concedes the field to those who confuse truth with expediency. Historians may always doubt whether what they know can rightfully be called the truth, but that does not release us from the responsibility of acting on that knowledge. Or of continuing to question its truthfulness. We must, as Robert Penn Warren lets Jack Burden tell us in the last sentence of *All the King's Men*, "go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of time."

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