

Remembering Harvard

by Edward S. Shapiro

Martin Peretz's account in his recent autobiography *The Controversialist: Arguments with Everyone, Left, Right and Center* of his years at Harvard stimulated me to reflect on my own years there.¹ Peretz arrived in Cambridge in 1959, one year before I began my graduate studies. He had graduated from Brandeis, a secular Jewish institution, and I from Georgetown, a Roman Catholic university run by Jesuits, and we both arrived at Harvard with similar expectations. "Almost from the beginning," Peretz recalled, "I was a Harvard patriot. Harvard didn't need my patriotism, but I didn't care. I was taking a social leap into the domain of ruling Protestant America. . . . In America, where Protestantism was still the Establishment to aspire to, if you were any combination of intellectual, ambitious, and upwardly mobile, it was the place you wanted to be."²

I had similar feelings and was eager to take advantage of what Harvard offered. Paul Tillich, Christopher Dawson, and Raymond Aron, among others, taught at Harvard during the early 1960s, and I felt like a youngster living in a candy store. My biggest fear in 1960

was whether I really belonged and could measure up to Harvard's standards. I had not grown up in a family in which the life of the mind was considered important and have no memories of my parents ever opening a book or listening to serious music. I had not graduated from an Ivy League university, did not read or speak any language other than English, and knew little of music, art, literature, and science when compared to other Harvard graduate students. This feeling of inadequacy was accentuated when I encountered the budding Americanists who arrived with me in 1960. They proved to be a dazzling lot and would go on to publish significant books, receive numerous awards, and fill prestigious positions at New York University, the University of North Carolina, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Chicago, Brown University, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

For me, it was impossible to believe that the academic grass could possibly be greener than at Harvard, with its outstanding faculty, financial resources, unrivaled library holdings, quality of undergraduate and graduate students,

and global reputation, and I could never understand why any historian would refuse an offer from Harvard as Richard Hofstadter and others supposedly did on several occasions.

Even more puzzling to me was the defection of tenured Harvard historians to other universities. H. Stuart Hughes left Harvard in 1975 for the University of California, Simon Schama left in 1993 for Columbia, and Niall Ferguson left in 2016 for the Hoover Institution on the campus of Stanford. I did not realize that the position of Harvard's History Department in the academic pecking order had declined from what it had been in 1960 and that this was partially due to its dysfunctional culture.³

Morton and Phyllis Keller observed in their history of Harvard that the History Department in 1960 was a "jewel in Harvard's crown" and "widely thought to be at the pinnacle of its profession."⁴ Members of the department in the early 1960s included Richard Pipes (Russian and Soviet history); William L. Langer (modern European history); Franklin L. Ford (German history); Crane Brinton (French and intellectual history); and Robert L. Wolff (history of the Balkans). The department's eminence, however, stemmed from its Americanists, my field of interest.

I cannot recall any lament at that time among the Americanists regarding the absence of black or Hispanic colleagues amongst us, although there were two women. We had been chosen, we believed, on the basis of merit. Massachusetts was a pioneer along with New York

in post-World War II anti-discrimination legislation, and Harvard's admission form for graduate school instructed us not to include any information or photo which indicated the applicant's race, ethnicity, or religion. In addition, Harvard had been transformed during the presidencies of James B. Conant (1933–1953) and Nathan M. Pusey (1953–1971) into a more meritocratic institution.

Conant came into office determined to remedy the university's academic deficiencies and to create an elite institution in which intellectual excellence rather than social or economic status would determine the selection of students and faculty. The offer of tenure in 1949 and then promotion to full professor in 1954 of Oscar Handlin, a Jew from Brooklyn with a strong interest in immigration and ethnic history, reflected this emphasis on merit.⁵ J. Joseph Huthmacher, a Handlin graduate student, taught American history at Georgetown during the late 1950s, and he urged me to apply to Harvard. Without his encouragement and presumably a strong letter of recommendation, I never would have applied or been accepted.

Although Arthur M. Schlesinger and Samuel Eliot Morison had recently retired, the department in 1960 still contained a Who's Who of prominent American historians, many of whom had received a Pulitzer Prize and other prestigious awards. Handlin had won a Pulitzer in 1952 for *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People* and was the country's leading American social his-

torian. He mentored graduate students who would dominate the writing of American social and ethnic history in the latter half of the century. Frank B. Freidel, Jr., my mentor, was in the process of writing the definitive biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. was the country's leading liberal historian. He was the most prominent authority on the politics of the 1930s, having published three lengthy and well-received volumes in the 1950s, and had won a Pulitzer in 1946 for *The Age of Jackson*. Schlesinger, however, never taught at Harvard during my tenure. He was involved in the John F. Kennedy presidential campaign of 1960, and then joined the JFK administration and never returned to Harvard. In southern history there was Paul H. Buck who had won a Pulitzer in 1938 for *The Road to Reunion, 1865-1900* (1937). The diplomatic historian Ernest R. May came to Harvard in 1954, published in 1959 a prize-winning book on the origins of World War I, and would become arguably the leading historian of American foreign relations. Donald Fleming had joined the Harvard faculty in 1959. He was writing a multi-volume history of American science and taught an impressive two-semester course on American intellectual history. Fleming, along with the other Americanists, mentored students who would become major historians in their own right.

Harvard's Americanists were not restricted to the History Department. I attended the lectures in the two-semester survey of American literature taught

by Kenneth S. Lynn and Perry Miller. Miller was one of Harvard's luminaries. His biography of Jonathan Edwards and two lengthy books on New England Puritanism—*The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939) and *The New England Mind: from Colony to Province* (1953)—revolutionized the study of New England Puritanism, forcing historians to take the subject seriously and not simply as an object of derision. Miller was an atheist, but this did not prevent him from appreciating the grandeur of Puritan theology.

There were also Americanist courses in the departments of sociology, economics, government, religion, philosophy, and English and in the law and business schools which supplemented the offerings of the History Department. These helped make up for the lack of courses offered by the department on women, blacks, the military, religion, the Civil War, and the economy. The department's course offerings in American history were sparse when compared to the history departments at Yale and Columbia, but Harvard's academic resources were extensive and could satisfy virtually any curiosity. Those interested in East Asia history, for example, could attend the lectures of John King Fairbank in Chinese history and Edwin O. Reischauer in Japanese history offered by the Center for East Asia Research.

The Harvard historian who made the greatest impression on me was Bernard Bailyn. He was unquestionably during the latter half of the twentieth century the most important historian of colonial

America and the American Revolution. Bailyn was one of only four persons to win two Pulitzer Prizes in history, and he mentored dozens of students who would go on to become major colonial historians in their own right.⁶ For me he was the star of the department. I had never heard of Bailyn before arriving at Harvard, but this was promptly rectified after speaking to other graduate students. His lectures were insightful and his books provocative. I was amazed when, after his final lecture in his two-semester course on American colonial history, he left the classroom to applause from the students. I have never witnessed this before or since. Bailyn died in 2020, the last survivor of my Harvard professors, and his passing was of great symbolic importance to me since he represented an approach to history which unfortunately has gone out of fashion. Bailyn believed that historians could arrive at an understanding of the past, although perhaps not all of the past, provided that one approached it without preconceptions and did not have any ideological axes to grind.

Neither I nor, to the best of my memory, were my fellow students concerned with making history “relevant,” nor did we seek to have our political loyalties influence how we saw the past. To write history as one voted, we believed, was not a virtue. We, of course, realized that there were progressive historians, conservative historians, radical historians, Roman Catholic and Protestant historians, and so forth, and that political, social, religious, ethnic, and racial

identities inevitably shaped one’s understanding of the past. But we viewed these as parochial obstacles which had to be overcome in our search to discover what had actually occurred in the past.

I fortunately left Harvard in 1963 just prior to the fevers which were soon to afflict the academy as a result of the emergence of the New Left. One manifestation of this was the publication in 1968 of *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, a collection of essays which encouraged a politicized leftist interpretation of American history. Several years later I attempted to edit a response which I had appropriately titled *Towards a True Past*, but this never got off the ground.⁷

One can only wonder what my teachers at Harvard in the early 1960s would make of the current teaching of American history in the university. Donald Fleming once told me that the *only* thing that mattered to the History Department was “intellectual distinction.” But in an era of agitation over sexual, class, and racial identities, was this single-minded focus on intellectual distinction still true? Oscar Handlin, Bailyn’s mentor, provided a clue to this question in his 1979 book *Truth in History*.⁸

The book’s title implied that the objective search for truth could no longer be taken for granted but had to be defended. “It simply never occurred to me to take account of ethnic, religious, or ideological factors in dealing with a student or a colleague or with any scholar and prospective scholar whom I could help,” Handlin recalled of his early years

at Harvard during the 1930s and 1940s. By 1968, however, historians were now being asked to think of themselves as “cut apart from one another in criteria of judgment and objectives by ideology or other sectarian factors. I was surprised . . . at the request that I recommend teachers not according to ability but according to race and political orientation.”⁹

Handlin’s angst regarding the state of the historical profession was perhaps due in part to the fact that the Harvard History Department was no longer the gold standard, particularly in American history, it had been in the 1950s and 1960s. A survey in 1995 in *US News & World Report* ranked it behind those of Princeton, Yale, University of California at Berkeley, Stanford, Chicago, and the University of Michigan, and this decline in status was already evident in the 1970s.¹⁰ Handlin’s distress was particularly noticeable in the first chapter of *Truth in History*, titled “A Discipline in Crisis.” When this chapter first appeared in print in 1971 there was a question mark at the end of its title. Its absence in 1979 reflected Handlin’s increasing gloom. Not only had the discipline of history “fallen far short of fulfilling the scientific aspirations of the 1930s” that truth could be discovered, Handlin emphasized, but “crooks, plagiarists, and fools” were subordinating the search for truth to prejudice, ideology, and ambition. It was inevitable that academic standards would erode at a time that appointments and promotions were being

based on “strategic or ideological considerations rather than on merit.”¹¹

Another factor in this decline of standards, Handlin asserted, was present-mindedness: the distortion of the past in order to conform to contemporary concerns. This, he claimed, was especially true in recent ethnic and Afro-American historiography in which the victimization of Indians, blacks, Hispanics, and immigrants supposedly explained everything. “The crowning injustice to people of the past who had suffered much,” Handlin wrote, “was to falsify their history to gratify the passions of their descendants. A practical claim sustained the impulse: the greater the victimization and services of the past, the greater the right to future reparations. But the stance had consequences damaging to scholarship.”¹²

Handlin’s strongest criticism was directed at Cold War revisionist historians who had played fast and loose with evidence and had inflicted “serious damage to scholarship.” The revisionist claim that the Cold War was primarily due to efforts to open up markets in Asia and Europe for American-made goods was “inherently absurd.”¹³ Handlin’s ire was particularly directed at William Appleman Williams, the author of *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959), *The Contours of American History* (1961) and *America Confronts a Revolutionary World, 1776-1976* (1976), and the guru of American Cold War revisionist historians. Williams’ books, Handlin wrote, were pure “fantasy,” “an elaborate hoax,” and “incoherent.” Handlin advised librarians

to place them in bookcases devoted to fiction. Handlin refused to back down in his criticisms of Williams despite the pleas of other historians, including John W. Higham and Warren F. Kimball, who believed them to be excessive and unprofessional.¹⁴

In his attack on the historical profession's response to Cold War revisionism, Handlin emphasized its "intellectual flabbiness," its reluctance to police itself by scrutinizing the credentials and qualifications of revisionist historians, and its willingness to give the benefit of the doubt to the most outlandish arguments. The publishing industry, he argued, was also at fault because its "flaccid acceptance of shoddy work" had resulted in the publication of books and essays by pseudo-scholars spreading dubious and sensationalist tales of supposed American sins rather than the printing of sober works by reputable and dispassionate scholars. The unwillingness of historians to expose Cold War revisionism for what it was, Handlin concluded, "gave it respectability, permitted it to edge into textbooks as an alternative interpretation, and stifled the capacity for criticism."¹⁵ Not surprisingly, leftist historians sharply condemned Handlin and his book.¹⁶

Handlin's antagonism toward Williams and other radical historians reflected his increasingly conservative outlook. He had supported the Vietnam War, had become increasingly skeptical of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society policies, and was dismayed by the critical stance toward America now taken by

many historians. The title of his 1981 book, *The Distortion of America*, which, among other things, attacked left-wing interpretations of American history, and of his 1995 essay "America and its Discontents" co-authored with his wife, are self-explanatory.¹⁷ Handlin died in 2011, but one can safely predict how he and the other Harvard historians of the 1960s would have responded to the respect now shown to the radical historian Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980) and to the *New York Times*'s 1619 Project.

Zinn's book was a runner-up for a National Book Award, has sold more than two million copies, and has been required reading in many secondary and college history courses. It has also been subjected to numerous devastating critiques by mainstream and left-of-center historians, including Handlin, Eric Foner (Columbia), Michael Kazin (Georgetown), and Michael Kammen (Cornell). The 1619 Project argued that American history really began in 1619 with the arrival of the first slaves into the Virginia colony and that slavery and racism has been the central theme of American history ever since. Nikole Hannah-Jones, who wrote the introductory essay to the project, won a Pulitzer Prize for Commentary. The Pulitzer Prize Board said her essay was "provocative" and praised it for placing slavery "at the center of America's Story" and for "prompting public conversation about the nation's founding and evolution."

The project was certainly provocative, but was it accurate? In fact, the 1619

Project was widely panned by many of the country's leading historians, including Victoria E. Bynum (Texas State), James M. McPherson (Princeton), James Oakes (City University of New York), Sean Wilentz (Princeton), and Gordon S. Wood (Brown). The National Association of Scholars urged the Pulitzer Prize Board to rescind Hannah-Jones' award because of the project's dubious scholarship. What can safely be said is that neither Zinn's book nor the 1619 Project would have been taken seriously at Harvard in the early 1960s. Their current celebrity status is not a hopeful sign.

Edward S. Shapiro is professor of history emeritus at Seton Hall University; edshapiro07052@yahoo.com. He is the author of *A Time for Healing: American Jewry since World War II* (1992) and *Crown Heights: Blacks, Jews, and the Brooklyn Riot of 1991* (2006). His latest book, *A Unique People in a Unique Land* (2022) was published by Academic Studies Press. He last appeared in AQ with "Paul Ehrlich's Doom and Gloom" (Summer 2023).

1. Martin Peretz, *The Controversialist: Arguments with Everyone, Left, Right and Center* (New York: Post Hill Press, 2023).
2. *Ibid.*, 41.
3. Morton Keller, Phyllis Keller, *Making Harvard Modern: The Rise of America's University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 387, 409.
4. *Ibid.*, 223-25.
5. *Ibid.*, 86.
6. Bailyn won for *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1968) and *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution* (1986).
7. For my own rejoinders to New Left history, see "Responsibility for the Cold War: A Bibliographic Review," *Intercollegiate Review*, 12 (winter, 1976-77), 113-20; "The Military Options to Hiroshima:

A Critical Examination of Gar Alperovitz's *Atomic Diplomacy*," *American Studies*, 23, no. 1: 60-72; "The Perjury of Alger Hiss: Icon of the Cold War," *Intercollegiate Review*, 16 (fall-winter, 1980): 41-51; "Revisionism RIP," *Intercollegiate Review*, 17 (fall-winter, 1981): 55-60; "The Rosenbergs and the Claims of History," *Intercollegiate Review*, 20 (winter, 1984): 3-17; "Radical Historians," *St. Croix Review*, 17 (August-September, 1984): 18-23; "Atomic Diplomacy: Chapter Two," *Intercollegiate Review*, 23 (spring, 1988): 27-35; and "An Interview with Ronald Radosh," *Continuity*, # 13 (spring-fall, 1989): 1-30.

8. Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).
9. *Ibid.*, 5-6.
10. Keller, Keller, *Making Harvard Modern*, 410.
11. *Ibid.*, 10, 20, 157.
12. *Ibid.*, 392-98.
13. Handlin, *Truth in History*, 150-52.
14. *Ibid.*, 161; Jonathan M. Wiener, "Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History," *Journal of American History*, 76 (September, 1989): 400.
15. Handlin, *Truth in History*, 149, 157, 160.
16. Not all criticisms of *Truth in History* came from leftist historians. See, for example, Stephen J. Whitfield's review in *American Jewish History*, 70 (December, 1980): 226-37.
17. Oscar Handlin, *The Distortion of America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981); Lilian Handlin and Oscar Handlin, "America and Its Discontents: A Great Society Legacy," *American Scholar*, 64 (winter, 1995): 15-37.