

PART ONE: IDEAS

CHAPTER I

GROOMED FOR HISTORY

“You could just picture him at his father’s knee, enunciating truths about populism.”¹

On May 29, 1917, in the Boston suburb of Brookline, Joseph and Rose Kennedy became the parents of a new son, John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Joe and Rose hoped that their eldest son, Joseph Jr., would grow up to be President. When Joe Jr. died during World War II, the Kennedys put their hopes in their second eldest, Jack.

On October 15, 1917, in Ohio, History Professor Arthur Meier Schlesinger and his wife Elizabeth Bancroft Schlesinger became the proud parents of Arthur Bancroft Schlesinger.

Among Arthur B. Schlesinger’s many accomplishments would be helping to immortalize John F. Kennedy.

Arthur Meier Schlesinger had been born in 1888 in Xenia, Ohio. Arthur Meier’s father, Nathan, was an enthusiastic Democrat and almost named his son Grover Cleveland Schlesinger.² A stout, reticent man, Nathan worked as a clerk in a clothing store, proprietor of a dry goods store, and a fire-insurance agent, but was never much of a success at business. His wife Marianne, an Austrian Catholic, was less intellectual and less openly affectionate and consequently exerted little influence on the children.³

An East Prussian Jew, Nathan practiced his agnosticism quietly.⁴ For a time, Arthur Meier was sent to the German Reformed Church with his cousins, but, as he later wrote, “Of the religious side of life I was largely an onlooker.” Uninterested in the ultimate meaning of life,” Arthur believed that the meaning of religion was to “strive to act on right impulses for decent and humane ends.”⁵ The questions of the existence of a supreme being or of an afterlife were unimportant to him. He wrote, “You live but once, and if you leave the world a little better off, or have sincerely tried to, that is enough.”⁶

To both Nathan and his son Arthur, the intellectual side of life was more exciting. The family bookcase held about 350 volumes, and Arthur had read 598 books by the age of 14. When Arthur M. Schlesinger reached college age, the family sent him to Ohio State.

¹ Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s friend Mary McCarthy, quoted in “The Combative Chronicler,” *Time*, (Dec.17, 1965), 56. Hereafter cited as “Combative Chronicler.”

² Arthur Meier Schlesinger Sr., (New York, 1963), 17. Arthur Meier Schlesinger was the son of Nathan Schlesinger, and the father of Arthur Bancroft Schlesinger. Arthur Bancroft Schlesinger later changed his name to Arthur Meier Schlesinger Jr. and is the subject of this thesis.

³ *ibid*, 9.

⁴ *ibid*, 12.

⁵ *ibid*, 194.

⁶ *ibid*, 194.

An academic star, he earned his PhD. in history from Columbia only two years after graduating from college.⁷

He married a distant relative of the historian George Bancroft, Elizabeth Bancroft, whom he loved for “her alert mind and her great zest for life.”⁸

After teaching history at Ohio State, chairing the department at Iowa, and turning down an offer from Columbia, Arthur M. Schlesinger settled at Harvard for three decades of teaching.⁹ A “capable rather than colorful” teacher, Schlesinger’s main contribution was to pioneer the study of social history.¹⁰ Among Schlesinger’s most well-known books were *The Birth of a Nation: A Portrait of the American People on the Eve of Their Independence*, *The Rise of the City*, *Political and Social Growth of the United States* and the textbook *New Viewpoints in American History*.¹¹ *Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution* broke new ground by analyzing the origins of the American revolution from an economic perspective. One of his most influential works was his 1939 essay “Tides of American Politics” which argued that American politics ran in discernable cycles between reform and repose. The essay, which predicted that the current liberal American period would last until 1948, helped President Roosevelt decide to run for a third term.¹²

Of involvement in political life, the elder Schlesinger would later write, “My participation, which was no more than that of a concerned citizen, obviously never had a determining influence.”¹³ At Ohio State, he had decided against participating in the “International Society” and the “Society and Politics Club” because of their low interest in practical action.¹⁴ After the war, he attended a meeting in Chicago of liberals who were disillusioned with the repressive course of events in America. The “Committee of 48” planned to build a new political party. Schlesinger declined to join because the party had no well-known national leaders, but he did make some speeches for the group.¹⁵ The murder trial of the anarchist immigrants Sacco and Vanzetti troubled Schlesinger’s liberal conscience. When Schlesinger’s friend Pat Jackson asked if dropping out of school for a year to devote full time to the case would be a good idea, Schlesinger reassured him, “I only *teach* social history, but you will be helping to make it.”¹⁶

On the day, the execution was scheduled, Schlesinger’s friend John Dos Passos wanted to dress up like Paul Revere and go through Boston shouting, “Save Sacco and Vanzetti!” Schlesinger dissuaded him.¹⁷

⁷ *ibid*, 45.

⁸ *ibid*, 30.

⁹ *ibid*, 78.

¹⁰ “Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., Historian, Dies at 77,” *New York Times* (Oct.31, 1965), 86.

¹¹ Thinking themselves tricked into entering World War I, some American citizens tried to have Schlesinger’s textbook banned because one sentence of the book could be misconstrued to mean Schlesinger supported the British side in the Revolutionary War. *In Retrospect*, 104.

¹² Schlesinger Sr., *In Retrospect*, 108. Schlesinger Sr. also believed that social and artistic cycles paralleled the political one. *ibid*, 199.

¹³ *ibid*, 154.

¹⁴ *ibid*, 27.

¹⁵ *ibid*, 59-60.

¹⁶ *ibid*, 130

¹⁷ *ibid*, 132.

Among Schlesinger's many political friends were Felix Frankfurter and Louis Brandeis. Frankfurter hand-delivered a Schlesinger letter to President Roosevelt in 1935 that expressed concern that Roosevelt was not communicating his intentions to the nation clearly enough. Roosevelt replied that his sense of 'public psychology' persuaded him not to appeal forcefully to the public at all times.¹⁸

Schlesinger Sr. reminisced that Brandeis' qualities included "humility, moral majesty, faith in the common folk, deep human passion, and constancy of purpose- in short the quality of having made the world better for having lived in it."¹⁹

Along with the rest of the mainstream political community, Schlesinger favored the two patriotic wars of the time. Buying war bonds beyond his financial means, he enthusiastically supported American participation in World War One.²⁰ During the Second World War, Schlesinger wrote articles for *The New Republic* "drawing on great moments in America's past to illuminate the present situation," while his wife Elizabeth sold war bonds and served as a hostess at Boston's only integrated U.S.O.²¹

When Arthur Bancroft Schlesinger was five years old, Arthur M. Schlesinger's second son, Thomas Bancroft, was born in 1922.²² The Schlesingers used "common sense" in raising their children, who were given an allowance in return for doing household chores. The atmosphere at home was, of course, intellectual. When Elizabeth rebuked young Arthur (then aged 11 or 12) for interrupting a dinner table discussion, he retorted, "Mother, how can you I be quiet if you insist on making statements that are not factually accurate?"²³ One acquaintance of the family said of young Arthur, "At sixteen he knew everything and had no hesitancy in telling you."²⁴

The Schlesingers sent the children to a Unitarian Church for a while, but allowed them to drop out.²⁵ "I grew up with a pervading sense of the irrelevance of organized religion," Arthur Bancroft would later remember.²⁶ Education was a more central concern. The children were sent to public schools out of "democratic faith."

Because the quality of public education in Cambridge was poor Arthur M. and Elizabeth tried to work through the League of Women Voters to improve the situation, but with the children of most influential people in private schools, the Schlesingers made little headway.²⁷

One day, when Arthur B. Schlesinger returned home from high school "and said that our teacher had told us that people in Albania were called Albinos because they had

¹⁸ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days* (New York, 1965), 661.

¹⁹ Schlesinger Sr., *In Retrospect*, 126.

²⁰ *ibid*, 58.

²¹ *ibid*, 142.

²² Thomas graduated from Brown, volunteered for service in the Second World War, and today works as a historian at the Historical Williamsburg project.

²³ "Controversial Historian of the Age of Kennedy," *New York Times*, (Nov.11, 1965), Book Section, 133.

²⁴ Victor Lasky, *J.F.K.: The Man and the Myth* (New York, 1963), 302. Patience with those with whom he disagrees is apparently not one of Arthur Schlesinger's virtues. But I, at least, found him genial and friendly.

²⁵ Schlesinger Sr., *In Retrospect*, 80.

²⁶ "Prophet for a Secular Age," *The New Leader* (Jan.24, 1972), 11.

²⁷ Schlesinger Sr., *In Retrospect*, 80-81.

white hair and red eyes,” Arthur Sr. gave up on public schools and sent his son to Exeter.²⁸

The atmosphere at Exeter was quite different from Cambridge public schools. He recalls, “I practically flunked out of Exeter my first term, having gotten all A’s up that point- a further commentary on the quality of public education in Cambridge, Massachusetts. So there was a great importance to me in having to work hard for the first time in my life. The teaching was excellent. After a couple years at Exeter, college was a breeze.”

Two years younger than his classmates, bookish Arthur did not quite fit in with the more athletic atmosphere at Exeter.²⁹ One classmate recalls, “He wasn’t one of the boys.” William Salstonall, another classmate, remembered, “He lived alongside people we were studying”; when discussing the death of Socrates, Arthur became so upset he sputtered.³⁰

Perhaps Schlesinger exaggerates how difficult Exeter was; after all, he graduated at age fifteen.³¹ Schlesinger Sr. felt that his son should take some time off before entering college, so the Schlesinger family embarked on an around-the-world trip. At the passport office, young Arthur asked that his middle name be changed to Meier, so that he could be Arthur Schlesinger Jr.³² Departing in September 1933, the family went by rail from Montreal to Vancouver, and took the luxury liner *Empress of Japan* to the Far East. After visiting China, Saigon, Angkor, Malay, Rangoon, and India, and meeting with local intellectuals along the way, Schlesinger Sr. came away with a strong dislike for colonialism. The family proceeded to Egypt, Greece, France, and finally England. In London Arthur Schlesinger Sr. delivered the Commonwealth Fund lectures on American History at University College.³³ Twenty-five years later, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. would lecture at the same program.³⁴ After visiting Hitler’s Germany, the family returned to America.

What was the influence of Arthur Sr. on his son? Arthur Jr. explains:

I think it was a very good relationship. I have no doubt that the intellectual framework within which I operate was derived from him... I have a good deal more polemical temperament than he had. One of his great qualities as a father was a deep and undeviating respect for the identity and purpose of his sons. This meant that even when I did things which I am sure disappointed him (e.g. not returning to Harvard after the White House), I always felt I had his basic understanding and support.... I suppose my upbringing inclined me--no doubt conditioned me--toward becoming a historian. Also, my father, in a quiet way, had always been something of a political activist; and no doubt this legitimized my own excursions into politics. However (and this may well have

²⁸ Interview with Arthur Schlesinger Jr., New York, Jan. 14, 1982.

²⁹ Interview 1/14/82.

³⁰ Time, “Combative Chronicler,” 56.

³¹ *ibid*, 56.

³² Schlesinger Sr., *In Retrospect*, 157.

³³ Marcus Cunliffe, “Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.,” *Pastmasters* Marcus Cunliffe and Robin Winks eds. (New York, 1968), 347.

³⁴ Schlesinger Sr., *In Retrospect*, 157-158

been an inheritance--and one I prize--from my mother), I was always less detached and judicious than my father, more eager for commitment and combat. I think this from time to time disconcerted him, but, as I noted earlier, he always backed me in everything, no matter how misguided he may privately have thought my activities to beI am sure that his skepticism about extreme views played an important role in keeping me out of political nonsense in my youth. I was, for example, always an anti-communist, even in the thirties; not that my father was a crusading anti-communist, as I became for a season in the forties and fifties, but that his faith in reasoned democracy and his dislike of absolutisms inoculate me at an early point against apocalyptic politics.³⁵

Arthur Jr. enrolled at Harvard College. After his freshman year, he lived for three years in Adams House, the dormitory with which his father was associated.³⁶ Arthur knew his classmate Joseph Kennedy Jr. slightly, and Joe's younger brother Jack only by sight in the yard.³⁷ of his Harvard teachers, Arthur Jr. remembers that:

I gained from Sam Morison a tremendous sense of the role of *style* both in writing history and in being an historian. I gained from Fred Mark a tremendous sense of what meticulous, scrupulous, passionate scholarship was all about. Perry Miller was my tutor in my second and fourth years; he helped develop my interest in intellectual history and taught me highly useful techniques of clarity, astringency and indictment.³⁸ Bernard De Voto, from whom I took a course in English composition and who later became a very close friend, helped redress my eastern/urban orientation, taught me about the west (particularly in a trip we took together on the Sante Fe trail in the summer of 1940...), made me understand the complexity of the frontier and the importance of things like conservation and also encouraged my interest to polemics and participation. I must also mention F.O. Matthiessen, my tutor in my junior year. Though we were later separated by sharp political differences (for a time after the war he stopped speaking to me because of my anti-communism), he was a superb teacher, and I learned a great deal from him, especially about modern poetry, and more generally out the relationships between literature and society.³⁹

Focusing his studies on history and literature, Schlesinger aimed Summa Cum Laude. A former graduate student of Schlesinger Sr.'s, Professor Paul Buck gave young Arthur a grueling oral final.⁴⁰ Arthur went home, afraid he had failed. Concerned, Schlesinger Sr. called Buck. Buck reassured him: Arthur Jr. had given a "better exam than we usually get from PhD students."⁴¹

But the high point of Schlesinger's work at Harvard was his honors thesis, *A Pilgrim's Progress- Orestes Brownson*. Arthur Sr. had suggested the topic; Brownson

³⁵ Letter to Marcus Cunliffe, July 9, 1968.

³⁶ Schlesinger Sr., *In Retrospect*, 88.

³⁷ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *A Pilgrim's Progress- Orestes Brownson* (1960, Boston), x

³⁸ Miller taught the history of the Puritans, and used the story of Cotton Mather's life to illustrate the point that too-faithful adherence to a creed could lead to corruption. Robert Middlekauf, *Pastmasters*, Marcus Cunliffe ed., 172.

³⁹ Letter to Cunliffe July 9, 1968. Arthur Jr. audited his father's famous course in American Social History.

⁴⁰ Cunliffe, *Pastmasters*, 348.

⁴¹ Time, "Combative Chronicler," 56.

was a Jacksonian intellectual, far more important in his own time than history remembers him to be.⁴²

At one time or another, Brownson had taken both sides of almost every major issue of the day, earning the nickname “Weathercock Brownson.”⁴³ His religious journey had taken him from Unitarianism to hard-line Catholicism, with a variety of stops in-between. Originally a Universalist social reformer, Brownson had despaired of earthly progress after the Whig victory in the election of 1840. Convinced that mankind was innately corrupt, he turned to mysticism.⁴⁴ Schlesinger handled his subject’s numerous changes of mind with a mature tolerance. Some of Schlesinger’s own political ideas showed through in parts of thesis, such as in the observation that Brownson’s most enduring ideas had been economic analyses of the growing impersonality of society.⁴⁵

Generously, Schlesinger called Brownson’s observations of American society the most profound of the day.⁴⁶ After graduation, Schlesinger spent some time turning his thesis into a book, and became a published author at the age of twenty-two. Two other early works of Schlesinger’s that were published included “The Problem of Richard Hildreth,” (a tolerant analysis of the conflicting ideas of George Bancroft’s Federalist counterpart, the historian Richard Hildreth), and “Can Willkie Save His Party,” (the first of many Schlesinger writings about the conflict between progressive and old-guard Republicans).⁴⁷

Graduating from Harvard in 1938, Schlesinger next spent a year at Peterborough College in Britain. He remembers it as:

A most fascinating year- partly the eeriness of being in England during that twilight year between Munich and war; partly the intellectual excitement of getting to know I.A. Richards, Postan and Ernest Barker; partly the immersion in another, slightly discrepant, culture; partly the stimulus of a worldliness which has entertained me ever since but which has somewhat removed me from my profession.⁴⁸

Returning to America, Schlesinger put aside his childhood ambition to be drama critic and settled into a career in History.⁴⁹ He won appointment to the Harvard Society of Fellows, a program that allowed him to concentrate on research, with no teaching obligations. He considers it

primarily of importance in giving me an opportunity to avoid the Ph.D. mill and work uninterruptedly on *The Age of Jackson*. Also, in seeing L.J. Henderson and A. Lawrence Lowell Monday after Monday for two years, I

⁴² Schlesinger, *A Pilgrim’s Progress*, ix.

⁴³ *ibid*, 228.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, 137.

⁴⁵ *ibid*, 288.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 294.

⁴⁷ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “The Problem of Richard Hildreth, *New England Quarterly* (June 1940) , 223-245. “Can Willkie Save His Party?” *The Nation*, (Dec.6, 1941).

⁴⁸ Letter to Cunliffe.

⁴⁹ Lasky, *J.F.K.*, 301.

had my first sustained exposure to a formidable conservatism; and I learned a great deal from this. I would say they powerfully reinforced the antiutopianism I inherited from my father.⁵⁰

On August 10, 1940, Schlesinger married Marian Cannon, the daughter of Harvard physiologist Walter Cannon. In the fall of 1941, he delivered a series of lectures at the Lowell Institute in Boston on Jacksonian Democracy. Although Schlesinger had been planning to write a biography of his ancestor George Bancroft, work on the lectures spurred him to attempt a reinterpretation of the intellectual history of the entire Jacksonian period.

But questions of historical analysis and obligations of married life had to be put aside for a moment, for Nazism threatened destroy Western Civilization. Arthur Schlesinger Sr. and his two sons favored American intervention from early in the war. Arthur Jr. joined the Office of War Information in June 1942.⁵¹ He recalls:

I was originally in the Office of War Information, and then in the Spring of 1943 there was an internal fight which seemed momentous then, and less momentous in recollection, but a number of us resigned, because we thought advertisers and businessmen were taking over the domestic branch of the O.W.I. By then having been rejected by the Navy on security grounds, I joined O.S.S.⁵²

The Navy denied Schlesinger a commission because he did not meet “overall requirements.” He was thought dangerous because he had favored American intervention quite early in the war, as a member of the Harvard Defense Group, and because his father was considered a possible Communist for having signed a petition favoring the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War.⁵³ Arthur Jr., now an O.S.S. member, “worked there in Washington waiting to go overseas several months, editing an weekly intelligence report which was (had) very restricted circulation and brought together the best intelligence and specific articles on various questions.” From his desk at the Research and Analysis Branch, Schlesinger began to suspect that reports coming back from Maurice Halperin, the chief of the Latin American section, showed a Communist bias. Schlesinger reported the problem to a superior, who refused to act. After the war, Halperin fled behind the Iron Curtain.⁵⁴

Schlesinger’s story continues:

and then in 1944 I went to London,⁵⁵ and continued editing a similar bulletin for O.S.S. in the European theater, and then I went to Paris. By that time I was getting involved in the secret intelligence side, and there was this Joint Secret Intelligence Research and Analysis (Research and analysis dealt with overt material, secret intelligence with covert material) Reports Board, of

⁵⁰ Letter to Cunliffe.

⁵¹ Schlesinger Sr., *In Retrospect*, 141.

⁵² Interview 1/14/82. O.S.S. stood for Office of Strategic Services.

⁵³ Schlesinger Sr., *In Retrospect*, 141.

⁵⁴ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 162-163.

⁵⁵ During the time of the V-1 and V-2 attacks.

which I was deputy chief, and then went on to Germany, in the same capacity”.⁵⁶

Schlesinger evaluated the effect of his war-time experience on his world view: “The trouble is that American historians spend too much time writing about events which the whole nature of their lives prevent them from understanding. Their life is defined by Universities, libraries, seminars ... In my case, I gained more insight into history from being in the war and working for the government than I did from my academic training.”⁵⁷

Returning to the United States, Schlesinger resumed his Historical studies and began teaching. Although his teaching career was hardly the focus of his public life, it did occupy a great deal of his energy until he went to Washington with President Kennedy in 1961. At age 29, possessing a Pulitzer Prize but no advanced degrees, he was given tenure at Harvard. Reviews of his teaching career are mixed.

One fellow professor observed, “Arthur liked everything about Harvard except the students. And most of the faculty.”⁵⁸ According to a Time magazine biography, he was not a dynamic lecturer, and most of his fellow professors considered him an “uppity kid.”⁵⁹ Irwin Ross wrote

Each September he would take up his academic duties with groans of despair, hating the routine, yearning to escape his exile. But he stayed on, becoming an ornament to the Harvard faculty, an abundant intellectual resource for the liberal movement, and a leading social attraction for Cambridge.⁶⁰

But at least one former student remembers Schlesinger’s year-long course on the Intellectual History of the United States as “one of the most popular classes at Harvard,” and considers Schlesinger “one of the best teachers I ever ran into.”⁶¹ According to that student, Schlesinger’s course brought out the point that

Despite the belief that intellectuals were downgraded, and maybe they were popularly, the dominant intellectual thought of the time was usually the dominant political philosophy and operative mode of the time... There was always a thread in American intellectualism not only of pragmatism but liberalism.⁶²

The course focused on America’s pragmatic intellectuals, especially William James, who distinguished “tough-minded” empiricists from “tender-minded” utopians.

Did Schlesinger present Conservatism as being on the same intellectual plane as liberalism?

⁵⁶ Interview, 1/14/82.

⁵⁷ “An Interview with Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *New York Times*, (Mar.10, 1946), *Review of Books*, 3.

⁵⁸ Controversial Historian of the Age of Kennedy,” *New York Times* (Nov.11, 1965) *Review of Books* 134.

⁵⁹ Time, “Combative Chronicler,” 59.

⁶⁰ Lasky, *J.F.K.*, 302.

⁶¹ Interview with Colorado Attorney General J.D. MacFarlane, April 7, 1982, Denver.

⁶² *ibid.*

No, but you would have to qualify that with his definitions of what constitutes liberalism and conservatism. His definition was more the Edward Burkian kind of conservatism, which had a social objective, and was really aimed at bettering things as opposed to changing things. In a way he would turn it around and say that what we today call liberal thought historically could be looked on as the true conservatism in America, because it was the so-called liberals who always came along with the conservative values to *preserve* American society.⁶³

Although “extremely interested in teaching,” Schlesinger ran into problems with departmental colleagues, and with Harvard President Nathan Pusey.⁶⁴ As Harvard Professor Galbraith pointed out, Schlesinger, having grown up in Harvard, identified strongly with the University, and therefore felt more strongly about University issues than most professors.⁶⁵ A religious, conservative man, Pusey was a source of consternation to Schlesinger and many other faculty members. Schlesinger spoke of his disagreements with Pusey:

I think in general I felt that Pusey was not very interested in preserving the intellectual quality of the faculty. Certainly I didn't think he was a very good President of Harvard... There was some question as far as honorary degrees. They were rarely given to people of serious achievement, more often given to Republican politicians. We⁶⁶ wrote an article in the *Harvard Alumni Review* showing how politically weighted the honorary degrees were ... I felt he was a rather more religious man than my taste, rather less interested in the intellectual quality of the University.⁶⁷

One particular issue symbolized the liberal faculty's hostility to Pusey: the declaration that Harvard's Memorial Chapel would hold only Christian services. On April 17, 1958, Schlesinger, John Kenneth Galbraith, Perry Miller, and other faculty members presented a petition to Pusey demanding that Memorial Chapel hold non-Christian nuptial and funeral services.⁶⁸ Although Pusey relented on the chapel issue, he remained determined to affix Harvard with his religious stamp.

Partly because of disagreements with Pusey, but mostly because of temperament, Schlesinger aimed his career at the world beyond Harvard. In the 1940's and 1950's he wrote on America's two great periods of reform, and on the role of the great leader and the intellectual in the reform process.

This is a chapter from David B. Kopel, *The Highbrow in American Politics: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and the Role of the Intellectual in Politics*. Honors Thesis in History, Brown University, May 1982. Awarded Highest Honors, and the National Geographic

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Interview, Cambridge, Dec. 8, 1981.

⁶⁶ “We” refers to Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Harvard Economics Professor John Kenneth Galbraith.

⁶⁷ Interview 3/29/82.

⁶⁸ Leonard and Mark Silk, *The American Establishment* (New York, 1980), 46-47.

Society Prize for best History thesis. Other chapters are available on-line at <http://www.davekopel.org/schlesinger/main.htm>.