

Introduction of Arthur Schlesinger, jr.
Second Annual Frank M. Coffin Lecture on Law and Public Service
by U.S. Senior Circuit Judge Frank M. Coffin
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This occasion would seem to cry for the invocation of what I call Rayburn's Law. When I served in the Congress, Speaker Rayburn operated on the principle that the more distinguished the visitor who came to address a Joint Session, the less of an introduction should be given. Hence a President was launched by the simple words, "It is my high honor and deep privilege to introduce . . ." But Speaker Rayburn still insisted on some introduction, no matter how illustrious the guest. When Harry Truman appeared for the first time as President before a chamber filled with his old colleagues, he received a great ovation and immediately began to speak. Whereupon in a stage whisper that, as one observer put it, could be heard all the way to Bonham, Texas, the Speaker growled, "Wait a minute, Harry, until I introduce you."

So, Arthur, wait a minute.

I begin with a personal note. It is entirely appropriate that this lecture should bring our speaker to Portland and that I introduce him. For it was a Portlander who brought us together nearly forty years ago, the late Elizabeth Donahue, daughter of Helen Donahue, postmistress, friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, and owner of the Lafayette Hotel. Libby and Arthur had worked valiantly for Adlai Stevenson in his 1956 quest for the presidency. After I had been elected to Congress in the same year, she became my legislative assistant. For the rest of her life she would visit Arthur and tell him about me and return to our home to regale us about Arthur. We didn't need a postman. She performed the same role as mediator of friendship for me and for last year's lecturer in absentia, Joe Rauh. So I have a feeling Libby would highly approve these proceedings.

When we first asked Professor Schlesinger to consider giving this lecture, his perceptive comment was, "But I'm a historian, not a lawyer." My rejoinder is that it is most fitting that early on in this series we should hear from such a person as the occupant of the Albert Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities of the City University of New York. Particularly this occupant. For the theme of law and public service is in its essence a broad concept. It reaches beyond law for the law's sake to the uses of law for the larger good. Lawyers practice their profession within the societal framework that surrounds them and the extent of their contributions to that larger world will depend in no small part upon their grasp of where society has come from, where it is now, and where it is heading. At its noblest the law is a humane profession and its study within the generous precincts of the humanities.

I do not propose to give a complete or balanced curriculum vitae of our speaker. Were I to do justice to the academic and governmental positions held, the history and biography awards received, the two dozen books written, the op-ed pieces fired off by this teacher, historian, biographer, essayist, polemicist, and presidential advisor, there would be no time left. What I do want to do is to say briefly why we await his thoughts eagerly. In other words, his special qualifications to address this audience tonight.

To begin, I refer to a comment by a British historian, Sir Geoffrey Elton, who is bothered by the assumption of some of his fellows that work of real intellectual quality cannot coexist with clear and non-technical expression. His judgment: "History, even serious history, is interesting, and the historian who makes it dull deserves the pillory." Our speaker to my knowledge has never written a dull sentence.

This does not mean that he is glib or superficial. His very early The Age of Jackson, written in his late twenties, his monumental series on The Age of Roosevelt, and the position accorded him by American historians as President of the Society of American Historians attest to his scholarly writings of our past.

Beyond looking at the past, Arthur Schlesinger has always been thoroughly immersed in the present. One need only list such works as The Vital Center, The Politics of Hope, A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House, The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy, The Crisis of Confidence: Ideas, Power and Violence in America, The Imperial Presidency, and The Cycles of American History. Indeed one might say that over the past five decades no one has more faithfully recorded the temperature of the times.

But our speaker has gone farther. He has not shrunk from looking at the future, even though, until the future happens, predicting it necessarily involves controversy. Professor Schlesinger has somehow been able to use controversy constructively, testing and perfecting his ideas. In August of 1966, Arthur wrote to me from The Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, just one month before leaving for the City University of New York. Even at that fairly early time he was concerned about Vietnam, where, to use his words, "I fear that the course on which we have evidently embarked of widening the war is filled with wholly gratuitous peril -- and won't win the war either."

Tonight, similarly, following on the heels of his latest book, The Disuniting of America, he looks ahead as he leads us into a contemporary field of discussion and action, part of an ongoing inquiry into what kind of a nation we have been, are, and should be.

Finally, most relevant to the spirit that brings us together is the passion and commitment our speaker has brought to all phases of his life and work. A year ago his seventy-fifth birthday was the occasion for a gathering of friends who honored him by helping raise funds for both the Roosevelt and the Kennedy Libraries. He responded in part by saying:

What have I learned in these turbulent years? Not much, certainly not enough; but at least, I hope, a certain serenity produced by the cooling perspectives of history, along with a recognition of the need to mingle commitment with skepticism and crusading with jokes -- and yet never to let irony sever the nerve of action.

Ladies and gentlemen, Arthur Schlesinger.