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A Twentieth Century Life Comes to an End — Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

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Historian [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.](#), one of the most influential interpreters of American history, died yesterday in New York City at age 89. His death, coming in the first decade of the twenty-first century, serves as a reminder of the tumultuous events of the century past. Few observers were in a better position to witness those events.

Schlesinger was a political liberal and he was nurtured within the nation's cultural elites. His father, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., was an influential historian in his own time. The son followed in his father's footsteps, and even adopted the father's concept of repetitive cycles in history.

Born in 1917, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. would have a front-row seat at the twentieth century. He traveled with his historian father through Asia and Europe prior to World War II and was then posted to London during the war. He graduated from Harvard College and eventually joined his father as a member of the Harvard history faculty.

Twice he won the Pulitzer Prize, and his works *The Age of Jackson* and *The Age of Roosevelt* [4 volumes] promoted his own view of history and political leadership. Put simply, Schlesinger prized activism and thought that great presidents were activists in theory and practice.

Schlesinger was a liberal who was closely associated with the Kennedy family. He worked for and with both John and Robert Kennedy and served as a special assistant in the Kennedy White House. After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Schlesinger wrote the influential work, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. He was an ardent critic of President Richard M. Nixon and is credited with coining the phrase, "the imperial presidency."



Schlesinger was also an ardent anti-communist and a founder of Americans for Democratic Action. His opposition to Stalin and Soviet communism serves as a reminder of the anti-communist liberalism that flourished after World War II. He was a close friend of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and shared much of Niebuhr's social analysis, if not his theology.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. was unquestionably a man of the political left, and his historical judgments and public involvements reflected those commitments. Still, his works are indispensable guides to American history. My favorite Schlesinger work is the first volume of *The Age of Roosevelt*, entitled "The Crisis of the Old Order." In that important book, Schlesinger sets the stage for the massive cultural and political transformations of the 1930s and 1940s by tracing how the old political order collapsed under the weight of events such as the Great Depression.

Consider the power of this paragraph from "The Crisis of the Old Order:"

And so the nation staggered into the second winter of the depression, and unemployment began to settle into a way of life. The weather was glorious much of the winter — clear, light air, brilliant sunlight, dry, frosty snow. But the cold was bitter in unheated tenements, in the flophouses smelling of sweat and Lysol, in the parks, in empty freight cars, along the windy waterfronts. With no money left for rent, unemployed men and their entire families began to build shacks where they could find unoccupied land. Along the railroad embankment, beside the garbage incinerator, in the city dumps, there

appeared towns of tarpaper and tin, old packing boxes and old car bodies. Some shanties were neat and scrubbed; cleanliness at least was free; but others were squalid beyond belief, with the smell of decay and surrender. Symbols of the New Era, these communities quickly received their sardonic name: they were called Hooverilles. And, indeed, it was in many cases the fortunate few who could find Hooverilles. The unfortunate spent their nights huddled together in doorways, in empty packing cases, in boxcars. [p. 171]

Schlesinger once explained that “history is to the nation rather as memory is the individual.” Even as we may argue with Schlesinger’s interpretations of that memory, we do well to take his contribution seriously.

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