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Lecture 2: No Exit- the Contemporary Search for Historical Reality

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Ross Peterson

No exit: The contemporary search for historical reality.

LAST LECTURE
MARCH 11, 1977  8:00pm
BUSINESS BUILDING AUDITORIUM
Utah State University
I am more than a little reluctant to rise here this evening. Always at times such as this I feel that the better part of wisdom would call for me to break and run. But it is too late for that, and as the Russian proverb puts it: "If the claw is caught, the bird is lost." I am reminded constantly of Uncle Solomon's comment about his nephew, Heinrich Heine: "If the poor boy had only learned to do something useful with his hands, he would not have had to spend his life scribbling and talking." In this, as in other things, I feel somewhat related to the gifted and tragic German poet.

One reason for my hesitancy is that we are separated by physiological and emotional age. It is possible that I could serve a university for thirty more years, yet I feel that I am moving away from the young with the speed of light. You are the bright coins from the mintage of man. I am a busted valentine. As the song goes, you are the other side of "The Green Door," and I can hear the sound of music, tinkling glass, and the laughter. But I cannot join you and must rake the lawn and await the undertaker. There is a Kazakh folk song that speaks to me:

Your beard and moustache have gone gray,
The veins in your body
Have all filled with water.
How can you think of chasing young girls?

It is difficult to say anything of consequence to you. One of the prerogatives of adults is to lecture those younger than they. And Heaven knows, you are admonished, advised, and encouraged beyond endurance. Those who talk to you inevitably follow the pattern of speaking on and on and on in the hope that ultimately they will say something of merit. So you are told to face the future, to cherish the past, to keep your eye on the mark, and your heart pure. Here we see again the truth of the old adage that the empty barrel sounds the loudest.
I also realize that it will make little difference what I say. No matter what you hear, read, or see, most of you within a few years will drift into the stale security of conventional existence. You will accept ready-made ideas and slogans, become conventional in outlook, and adopt in automatic language and automatic responses. Most will justify Vladimir Nabokov's anguished cry: "Are there any people left who do not read cheap magazines and are not the victims of political, economic, and historical howlers."

George Orwell wrote that "after the age of 30 most people abandon any attempt to become individuals. They live the rest of their lives smothered by drudgery." Or, as the Russian poet Mayakovsky wrote in that last sad note composed before his suicide: "Your boat of love will crash on the rocks of everyday life."

But there may be some of you who will escape. These will be what Stendhal called "the happy few." Some of you may, as Mark Twain put it, see the elephant.

At any rate, I shall attempt to abide by my knowledge that one of the responsibilities of a person as he rapidly approaches senility is gradually to lapse into silence. Nothing is more frightening than a garrulous old man. Brevity is the elixir of life. Who has time for an epic? An epigram must do.

This evening I have divided my presentation into two sections. To begin I would like to discuss some of the dilemmas facing the person who writes or teaches contemporary American history. This is allegedly my field of specialization. Secondly, hopefully I can find myself while I search for contemporary historical reality. The final discussion will be somewhat autobiographical as I point out the few things in post World War II history that have had the greatest impact upon me.
The jaw-breaking title of this presentation indicates, I hope, the nature of a problem that historians face in our day. Put simply, our inability to define the reality of the present threatens our understanding of the past and makes historical judgment an exercise in erratic and irresponsible guesswork. It is beyond question, I think, that historians as a whole are unsure of what is contemporary historical reality. As a result we are adrift whenever we are forced to determine what is historically important. Out of a multitude of facts we have few standards of judgment that will allow us to differentiate between the significant and the trivial. And because we are uncertain about present historical reality, we are helpless in our attempts to speculate about the historical future.

What has been called the crisis of the 20th century has had a destructive effect upon historical thinking. The failure of the great historical interpretations has made most historians apprehensive about any attempt to use history to define the human situation. Oswald Spengler's analysis was too terrifying to be acceptable. Marxism has shown itself to be only another form of Germanic God-seeking, and 19th-century liberalism was so closely connected to a now-discredited concept of automatic progress and so failed at crucial points that it is no longer a meaningful interpretation.

And amid the ruins of older historical interpretations, nothing new rose. Much history narrow studies, forms of antiquarian collecting, studies combining, in an amazing fashion, utter cynicism with romantic naivete. In too many cases historical study is a negation so comprehensive as to leave no possibility but nihilism and no moral principle but detachment.

This has been a truly amazing development. We have a fantastic harvest of knowledgeable facts and a scarcity of ideas as to what this knowledge means. We are drowning in monographic studies on every conceivable subject,
and we are dying of thirst from the absence of anything telling us what the meaning of the smallest fact may be.

I think that it is true that today we have better trained historians than ever before. They work hard, they are conscientious and truthful, and more than their predecessors, they are free of allegiance to any religious, national, or racial hoax. Yet it cannot be said that most of us think historically in any meaningful sense. We have no humanistic or tragic sense of history, and thus no real intellectual bedrock upon which to rest. We have become indiscriminate collectors, and for us one fact equals another fact equals zero. Thus we lose the historical grasp of historical things. Adolph Hitler was a bad German; Thomas Mann was a good one. Therefore, who can generalize about the experience of the Germans during the past fifty years?

History is the search for meaning in the human experience, not a simple description of the experience itself. It is the intellectual activity that gives coherence to experiences that would otherwise be incoherent and formless. The basic historical task is still to answer the question of whether or not the notion of man makes any sense. That is why history has more relevance in a technological age than ever before. Technology and the media revolution can create a dreary sameness that leads to meaningless existence of drudgery and boredom. Little mental effort is required as the machinery does its expensive work. History allows us to broaden our scope by an examination of the past and its continued reliance. Technology and its depersonalization aspects mean that the citizenry needs a broad general education. Although their vocation may not require humanistic endeavors, we need to appreciate the worth of each human mind and heart and soul. The individual must remain central to the historian's efforts. William
Faulkner, when accepting the Nobel Price for Literature in 1950, said, "It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure; that when the last dingdong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure; he will prevail. He is immortal not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding himself of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, and pillars to help him endure and prevail." The failure of historians to question the spectacle of individual life is to condemn ourselves and our world to nothingness. We become, as Beckett's character in his novel Watt who "had turned little by little a disturbance into words, he had made a pillow of old words, for an old tired head."

During World War II Paul Valery wrote: "We are fighting absurdity." That fight continues. But historians must fight absurdity and not surrender to it, and it is the surrender that is more common. Too many historians have shown by their studies that they have accepted despair as the answer to the contemporary world. They have allowed themselves to be overawed by the multiplicity of facts and have declared that there is no answer to the larger historical questions. They have accepted their failure, and if one may paraphrase Carl Sandburg, there is some rough justice in the fact that a hearse horse snickers when the historian's coffin goes by.
As common as the absurdist historians are those who become healthy, well-mannered, honest philistines, who find themselves happy in the company of cheap journalists, vulgar entrepreneurs, and advertising executives. Such people run the risk of becoming buffoons. Now buffonnerly is not merely a matter of gestures; it is a philosophy of life and the highest form of contempt for human intelligence. These are those who, as Clemenceau said of General Boulanger, have the souls of second lieutenants, who perform for pay and the gasps of the amazed boobery.

All this is very discouraging, for the opportunities for history to play a major part in the outlook of our civilization, and in fact to contribute to the focus of our society, are greater than ever before. The modern world is the first that has been freed from religious historicism. History is free for the first time to make direct contact with man's experience, unencumbered by that terrifying God-seeking that has dogged man's historical past. History has the opportunity to present the secular answer to the question of the catechism: "Why are we on earth?" The answer is not to run a machine. It can be of major assistance in providing the forms through which men recognize reality and organize their experience.

Now at last we are in a period when Kant's argument that order is a characteristic of the human mind is beyond question. There is only one place where the human adventure makes any sense: That is inside the creative historian's mind. It is only there that we can gain what Ezra Pound, that brilliant, mad man, called "The contemporary grasp of contemporary things." It is only there that one can understand Faust's words: "Only he deserves freedom and life who conquers them every day."

The opportunities for history are staggering. The field of battle has been largely left to us. Our friends the philosophers are out nitpicking
in the mulberries; the sociologists and political scientists can get lost in the maze of self-created categories; and the scientists have never quite made it out of the barren plain of specialized description. History has been largely left alone to present the strange intimacies and intimate estrangements that make up the human adventure. The historian alone is in the position to keep his eyes on both the ant hill and the clock's dial. It is he alone who can, perhaps, understand what the German poet Gottfried Benn meant when he wrote:

The floods, the flames, the questions—
Till the ashes tell you one day:
Life is the building of bridges
Over rivers that seep away.

Have historians taken advantage of these opportunities? I hardly think so. The task has been left to others, while we historians have searched for the secrets of history—which is a very different thing from the search for the meaning of history. It should be a matter of some concern to historians and political scientists that it was Albert Camus who made the most dramatic and influential analysis of modern man's historical anguish, that it was George Orwell who made the most searching expose of the inhuman power of modern political instrumentalities, and that it was Franz Kafka who saw most clearly the wild historical savagery that lay beneath the deceptively calm surface of our lives. There is probably more meaningful discussion of the destiny of Western man in Andre Malraux's The Walnut Trees of Altenburg than in any history book, as there is more of the glory, the shame, the fire, the destruction and the historical import of the Russian Revolution in Boris Tasternak's Doctor Zhivago than in all the monographs on contemporary Russia that burden our shelves. Yet none of these were professional historians or political scientists.
But then, perhaps, we need not assume that this situation will continue. We need not accept the truth of the Russian proverb where the beetle exclaims: "Great wonders there are in a sieve. So many holes and no way out."

There is more and more dissatisfaction with a non-moral history, with an indifferent political science. More and more there is a certain shame among historians at a recent charge: "During the past 50 years Western historians have repeatedly ducked every moral issue that has been thrown at their heads--poverty, fascism, communism, war, automation, and so on." There is a call for something beyond the mere collecting of facts that lead to more facts that lead to still more facts. As a noted authority has remarked: "A man who lacks imagination and personal commitment can be a competent physicist; he cannot be an even mediocre historian."

There is also a realization that history is ultimately a history of the present projected back into the past. There is a realization that the tremendous number of facts from the past are nothing; our present-day conception of them is everything. This has always been true. But many of those with nothing to bring to the facts have felt safe with the argument that somehow, in some strange way, the facts alone could stand by themselves and thus mysteriously carry some meaning.

The historical dialogue about the meaning of what we see and know must begin. It can be short, and it can be ambiguous. But it must begin if we are to find an exit from our present historical difficulties. Now, let me discuss the key developments in modern history that have helped me in my search for historical reality.

In analyzing contemporary history it is well to paraphrase the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson who said "There is properly no history; only autobiography." In selecting material to discuss, I admit to a preference for
autobiography and admit that most can and should disagree with what I believe is significant about the recent past. There are three ideas that have served as valuable guides while preparing this study. One of these was expressed beautifully by Friedrich Schlegel who stated: "The historian is a prophet in reverse." At times, it is easy to be critical of the past and readily supply the answers that were somehow difficult for the real actors to find. The second idea that illuminates the difficulty faced by the historian of contemporary events was expressed by Abraham Lincoln when he wrote to Congress in 1862, "Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history." In current terms, Americans cannot escape what they are and how they reached that station. How the nation and its people evolved to their present status is central to an understanding of contemporary America. The third concept is found in an idea expressed by Adlai E. Stevenson: "A wise man does not try to hurry history." All of the evidence is not recorded, all of the papers are not collected and available, and a living participant cannot escape his own array of prejudice and bias. Consequently, there may be errors of opinion and mistakes of judgement, but in teaching or writing contemporary history please remember the words of Polybius written over two centuries ago: "For there are many mistakes made by writers out of ignorance, and which any man finds difficult to avoid. But if we knowingly write what is false...what difference is there between us and hack writers." Cicero wrote that "History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time...and brings us tidings of antiquity." The subject of autobiographical importance to me are Watergate, the Cold War and Vietnam, Civil disorder, Communication and the environment. The initial tidings of antiquity to which we return were uttered only thirty-one months ago. I was always taught to distrust and despise a certain politician.
It was a warm August, 1974 Washington D. C. evening. As the second hand on the director's watch moved toward the twelve, all of the television cameras focused on the man seated behind the desk in the Oval Office of the White House. Dressed in a blue suit, and tie with the ever present American flag in the lapel, and Richard M. Nixon was prepared to do what he had promised never to do--quit. According to the beleagured, tired man whose taped ramblings had shocked many of his countrymen, he was resigning because of an erosion of Congressional support. There was no hint of wrongdoing, even though twelve days earlier the House Judiciary Committee had approved the first of two articles of impeachment. For the first time in 185 years of constitutional history, an American President had resigned the most prestigious elective office in the world.

This traumatic and dramatic event culminated a fantastic era of American history. The third quarter of the twentieth century was one of dynamic change and social revolution, yet it was a period of which memories may not be historically pleasant. Indeed, the self-destruction of Richard Nixon is indicative of a trend that was enveloping the modern presidency. Nixon's predecessor, Lyndon Johnson, also was destroyed by forces unleashed over which he lost control. Nixon's old nemesis, the handsome, debonair John F. Kennedy, was physically destroyed because of the intensity of the hatred he inspired. It was a strange period and one that will continue to undergo detailed scrutiny by scholars of all persuasions and computers of all models. It is our age, our lifetime, our history.

Perhaps the fall of Richard Nixon is symbolic of one of the greater ironies of the period. Nixon's resignation may be the last gasp of a generation raised with a Cold War mentality. It is ironic that Richard Nixon would be the American president to visit Communist China and the one to pursue detente
with the Soviet Union. If we look at 1950 closely, we find this same man running for the United States Senate smearing his opponent, Helen G. Douglas, as a "pink lady" and communist sympathizer. Nixon also blamed the loss of China and the Korean War on the State Department with its eastern liberal coloration. 1950 was also the year of Joseph McCarthy's infamous beginning that ultimately paralyzed two presidents, intimidated the Senate, and spread fear and mistrust across the land.

However, this Red Scare and fear of Communist aggression did not die with McCarthy. The United States was involved in a Cold War and the government adopted measures to prevent further Communist success abroad as well as at home. In Korea, United Nations' troops were used, but in most cases trained ideologica1 spies were sent out to prevent any leftist success. The seeds of Richard Nixon's ultimate destiny were sown in the minds of the Central Intelligence Agency and FBI types who could view every world and national situation in absolutes; Enemy of friend; good or bad; for or against; and the end justifies the means. The Howard Hunts and Gordon Liddys were trained in this atmosphere, and when they found men high in government who thought similarly, the nation was endangered. This was especially true as these trained agents used their talents domestically. The Ellsberg, Watergate, Chilean Embassy, and Brookings Institute were only tips of a gigantic iceberg that is now in the process of being explored. Domestic surveillance and illegal wiretaps on elected Americans, foreign diplomats, and mouthy ineffective young radicals, was used extensively. Assassination plots on leaders of other nations were hatched. A president who was willing to use the CIA, the FBI, and the IRS to accomplish his political goals and personal vendettas had overstepped his constitutional authority. In the United States, political opponents or professional football quarterbacks who
model panty hose are not enemies listed for future revenge. However, the Cold War agencies had changed some of the rules.

For two decades the U.S. tried to contain Communism by diplomacy and subversion. From Truman to Nixon, this was a basic feature of foreign policy. For a young man growing up, it meant "will I get drafted." When NATO, SEATO, or CENTO could not be applied to a given situation, the CIA could. Through infiltration and direct arms support, they were successful in helping disgruntled citizens, some of them Americans with a large economic stake, overthrow constitutionally elected governments in Iran in 1951 and Guatemala in 1954 and apparently Chile in 1974.

What is fantastically unique is that during the Cold War rarely did the super powers confront each other directly. The Soviet Union had repeated problems within its sphere of influence, and when they tried to expand their influence into Africa or Latin America, they had problems as well. Of course, they dirtied their hands in Hungary, East Germany, Poland, and especially Czechoslovakia. The United States and the Soviet Union finally had a showdown in Cuba over the missiles. However, usually in the probing and countering, the Americans found themselves playing unsuccessful games in Africa or the Middle East, but in Latin America and Asia, United States Cold War policy did not fare well. Truman had his Korea; Eisenhower his Cuba and U-2; Kennedy his Bay of Pigs, and Laos; Johnson his Dominican Republic; Nixon his Cambodia; and all of them had their Vietnam.

No single Cold War containment policy and eventual real war scarred the body politic of the United States like Vietnam. All of the tragedies, stupidities, and Cold War assumptions were destroyed in the hills and valleys and rice paddies of IndoChina. Although some historians claim the monolithic Cold War between the USSR and US ended with the Cuban Missile crisis, its
ultimate legacy was Vietnam. For twenty-eight years American presidents and their military and intelligence advisers failed to understand the inevitable and to some, the obvious. Nationalism is a force that America, once a revolutionary nation, should have understood, but policy makers were still too busy chasing external communists to cope with reality.

Fifty thousand Americans died and two nations, South Vietnam and Cambodia, were in part devastated before Richard Nixon did the thing that he had promised never to do in Vietnam--withdraw. It was called peace with honor, but everyone knew what had happened. Nixon and his advisers had the intestinal fortitude that his four predecessors lacked. The troops pulled out, as many POW's as could be negotiated for were released, the military and economic support was cut off and the pro-American Cambodian and South Vietnamese governments were no more. Americans sighed, offered a fettered asylum to a few refugees, and turned the television to "All in the Family" or more probably "Happy Days."

Even before Richard Nixon defused the Vietnam war, its consequences had already helped tear domestic society asunder. From the late 1950's on there was an undercurrent of civil protest and potential violence, but by 1965, protests, demonstrations, and riots were commonplace. Even some moratorium in Texas. Many American students and black Americans involved themselves in acts of civil disobedience throughout the decade of the 1960's. By the end of the period Chicanos and native Americans were also involved in the demand for human rights. Campuses, urban ghettos, vineyards, and reservations became federal points for unrest that led to death, rioting, looting, and destruction. The media provided massive coverage and all of these civil disturbances were realities.
Ever since the pronouncement of the Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka in 1954, it was only a matter of time before blacks asserted themselves in their demand for total equality. After centuries of beatings, slavery, lynchings, and segregation, American blacks decided to create a place for themselves in society. Prior to the ghetto riots in Brooklyn, Watts, Newark, Detroit, Cleveland, and numerous other cities, peaceful practitioners of non-violence throughout the nation were treated brutally when they mobilized and demanded equality. The police dogs of Bull Conner and the nightriders of the Ku Klux Klan violently tried to protect their decaying archaic social structure. Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, James Chaney, and Martin Luther King, Jr., along with many others, activists and bystanders, were killed. However, by organizing, marching, and standing together, black Americans saw Civil Rights and Voting Rights Bills passed by overwhelmingly white legislative bodies. Blacks were voting, electing, and participating more than at any time in the twentieth century. At the same time, most white Americans still feared the militancy associated with the names of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, or Huey Newton. White middle-class American students lacked the grievances of ghetto blacks, migrant workers, or reservation Indians. Society had been good to them. Education had become the greatest American business and universities mushroomed as many talented students read and thought and questioned. Obviously, a variety of answers were found, but for many the answer was not Vietnam, the draft, depersonalized campuses, and international capitalism. Very idealistic, and somewhat naive, the students wanted America to become a beacon of complete freedom and total social justice. Nearly every college campus was hit by some form of protest and draft-card and flag burnings became commonplace. These young radicals intensified their opposition and became determined to disrupt the American system.
There is no doubt that the black and student protests achieved some of their goals, including an end to the war, but a strange form of anarchy won out. Every day more news of meaningless terrorism and self-destruction was reported. Explosions obliterated university buildings, banks, ROTC facilities, and public structures. On occasion, even the bomb manufacturers destroyed themselves. When the Vietnam war ended, the rationalization for violence ceased to exist, yet Mark Rudd, Abbie Hoffman, Bernadette Dohr, and a weird concoction called the Symbianese Liberation Army pursued a course of continued urban guerilla violence.

There is another revolution, among many, that took place in the past twenty-five years that also deserves mention. Communication has become such a finite science that few Americans understand the computer technology that enables a country to see, feel, and hear history. Transportation is an excellent example. A web of four lane Interstate highways were originally funded under Eisenhower for defense and communication purposes. The mobile nation of automobile drivers criss-cross the nation at an unbelievable rate, over a trillion miles per year. With over ninety million cars and twenty million trucks, there is a motor vehicle for nearly one out of every two Americans. The society of four wheeled vehicles consumed over one hundred billion gallons of gasoline last year. The car has paved the way for a society based on instant needs. We are constantly reminded of how many hamburgers McDonald's has sold and the city streets are cluttered with drive-in gas stations, grocery stores, laundries, and so many cheap eating places that it is amazing that gastronomical disaster has not incapacitated the entire society.

Perhaps a more significant aspect of the communication revolution is the dramatic impact of television on contemporary society. Because of live coverage, satellites, and mobile cameras, the events of every day are brought
into millions of homes via television. Satellite coverage of Vietnam made that war a reality not an abstract occurrence. In part because of this exposure, Nixon could not survive corruption where someone like Grant had. Millions watched Sam Ervin, Peter Rodino, their committees, and the witnesses. This mammoth web of antennas, cables, waves, and transistors offer great opportunities, but also cause considerable problems. Violence can beget violence, and try as commentators did, the happy news just does not make the big story. Would Sarah Moore have tried to assassinate President Ford if Squeaky Fromme had not received such national notoriety? It is a thin line and we walk it lightly.

Television has also brought a revolution in lifestyle to middle America. My own desire was to have a long-term flurtation with baseball, especially regarding professional athletics, entertainment, and advertisement. It is almost frightening to realize that on a given Sunday afternoon in January, approximately one out of every two Americans is doing precisely the same thing--slumped in an easy chair watching the NFL Super Bowl. It is a rare weekend from September to January when at least four NFL games are not available to the armchair quarterbacks of the nation. The NFL has expanded from ten to twenty-eight teams and the annual attendance has leaped from two to in excess of eleven million. O. J. Simpson, Roger Staubach, and Mean Joe Greene not only invade your living room each Sunday, but your child might wear Miami Dolphin pajamas, sleep in NFL sheets, wear a Los Angeles Ram jacket, and a Denver Bronco stockingcap. For one-third of every year, professional football is a central feature of American culture. Nothing illustrates this better than to be reminded that Richard Nixon, a second stringer at Whittier College, as President, felt free and apparently had the time to call Don Shula of Miami or George Allen of Washington, two successful experts, to suggest that they use a certain play in a crucial game.
With the rising popularity of spectator sports and with the lush television contracts, athletes have decided that the gladiators who perform for the owners, fans, and the nation, need a greater piece of the action. Inflated salaries have risen to unexpected heights, even for some athletes of marginal or unproved talent. At age 41, was my hero, Hank Aaron, worth $250,000 a year to hit .232, 12 home runs, and drive in 60 runs for Milwaukee? Was a nineteen year old high school boy, Moses Malone, worth 2.2 million to the Utah Stars? Is a sloop shouldered gimpy-kneed quarterback, Joe Namath, worth nearly a half million a year? And is one five-set tennis match worth $100,000 to the winner, Jimmy Conners, a spoiled boy who does not need $100,000. The ultimate ridiculousness was reached when the entire nation was hustled by Bobby Riggs and Billie Jean King to the tune of a few hundred thousand dollars.

It is a lush and inflated society, with strange priorities in which such excesses exist, but it is a reality. I, too, cheer when Johnny Miller wins $40,000 for four days golfing on his home course in California. Television has created these new cultural and folk heroes. They are able to perform live and millions succeed or fail vicariously with their chosen player or team.

These fantastic changes in communication and lifestyle are only selective examples. A nation has to evolve and change and move. We may not like the direction of drift, but most Americans can patiently ride the tide.

Another area of significance is the new environmental concern. My own Idaho experience intensified this concern. Our habitat is basically self-made but, tragically, we are destroying it as we destroy most things we touch. Perhaps we are not meant to survive as a species, for certainly we are making our environment less and less livable. We are polluting the landscape as well as the air and water, not just with the effluence of society and its technology,
but with architectural sewage as well. Greatest danger to Western landscape's
cornerstone not necessarily the miner or the farmer, or the timberman, but probably
the real estate developer.

Most of us, I believe, ignore our habitat because of its familiarity
and because the routine of life occupies our attention so completely. We
don't look, at either the bad or the good, because we don't consider the
elements special; they haven't been pointed out to us, they are not something
we go to see. Not being concerned with our surroundings, we are apt to
overlook the fact that the familiar, indigenous architecture of our neighbor-
hoods and main streets often presents a surprising variety of forms and styles
frequently both beautiful and ingenious. Though most would not be considered
national or historic monuments in the usual sense of the phrase, some of the
finest examples of our building art can be found in this anonymous architecture.
They are usually not the creations of the great architects, nor always the
products of formal architectural training, but of the resourcefulness of the
American people whose native genius has frequently been expressed in the
individuality of their building. Often these structures are far more re-
presentative of America than are the Mount Vernons or reconstructed Williamsburgs.
Sadly, however, we usually tear down, mutilate, or let these beautiful buildings
deteriorate beyond repair before we realize their value.

In contrast with the ingenuity of which Americans have proven themselves
so capable in the past, the engineering and building art of today seems almost
devoid of inspiration and individuality. With a very few exceptions, contem-
porary construction presents an abysmal appearance and outlook for the future.
One finds it hard to believe that the human being has been considered in
these designs. The slip-shod, mass-produced, get-it-up-and-paid-for-as-quickly-
as-possible look is everywhere, along with the neat, antispetic, secure,
totally uninteresting and deadening architecture of the suburbs. But just as we usually do not look at the good in our habitat, somehow we do not seem to notice the horror which threatens to engulf us. This horror is the very dullness and mundaneness which we are creating and which cannot help but deaden the spirit - and, in the end, our very ability to react to it.

Or, perhaps, it does not occur to most people that they can object. It seems that most of us would prefer to remain a part of the "Silent Majority," which apparently does not see a need for change. I believe that our general acquiescence to this mediocrity is a symptom of a much graver condition: a basic indifference to our whole environment.

In case this presentation has sounded negative, please be reminded of the achievements and the challenges of the United States since World War II. It is to the nation's credit that it could peacefully survive the resignations of its two top officials in a single year. To be sure, Spiro Agnew and Richard Nixon had violated their trust, but the nation meandered on. Other frontiers beckoned.

During the 1950's, dreaded polio was conquered as a crippling disease and organ transplants saved and prolonged life; however, in excess of 300,000 Americans succumb to cancer each year. Over ninety-nine percent of the population over fourteen is deemed literate, yet one million people are not able to competently read and write. Education is as significant as the automobile and television to contemporary society. Eighty percent of the potential high school graduates actually attain their goal. Since World War II the impact of education on minorities has been terrific, but over half of the dropouts still come from a minority background. The universities of the land are contributing to a very educated citizenry. The disease, ecological, and energy frontiers beckon and a dedicated educated nation, with proper priorities, can find solutions.
In conclusion, my search for historical reality has brought me full circle. The respect I have for the contemporary nation I study is genuine. Maybe Thomas Jefferson said it better when he wrote to John Adams: "And even should the cloud of barbarism and despotism again obscure the science and libraries of Europe, this country remains to preserve and restore light and liberty to them." Or at another time, "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion." I have faith and confidence that informed students and teachers can fulfill that destiny. As I, too, see the hand on the clock move toward the twelve, I am reminded of Jefferson's advice to the debating society named in his honor: "Speeches measured by the hour, die by the hour." Thank you.