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William E. Leuchtenburg: The Professional as Public Historian

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Abstract

This essay examines the career of William E. Leuchtenburg, one of the most important US historians since 1945. It is the fullest published account of this major historian and makes extensive use of his correspondence with mentors, colleagues and students, including Henry Steele Commager, Richard Hofstadter, Howard Zinn, Christoper Lasch, and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. It argues that generational differences do not explain the ease with which Leuchtenburg's moved in what he called 'the public realm'. More important, I suggest, is the character of post-war American liberalism and its relationship to the institutional setting of the modern university.

Keywords: Historians; Public history; Professionalization; Liberalism; New Left; Universities.

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This study examines the professional and public scholarship of the celebrated US political historian William E. Leuchtenburg (1922-2025). It is the first substantial piece of research to draw on the personal correspondence of this major figure in American intellectual life. The author of fifteen books, Leuchtenburg is perhaps best known for his *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940*, which won the 1964 Bancroft prize and established him as the world's leading authority on the New Deal. But in addition to his formidable scholarly output, Leuchtenburg, who spent the first part of his career at Columbia University in New York City, and the second at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, made numerous contributions to American public life. Among many other roles and accomplishments, for example, he became one of only two people to have served as president of the Society of American Historians (1978-1981), the Organization of American Historians (1985-86), and the American Historical Association (1991).[1]

In addition to giving an account of the varied public activities of an internationally-significant writer, teacher, administrator, and scholar, this research investigates a figure who became an historian in public, to borrow Ian Tyrrell's phrase, long before public history itself emerged in its present form, that is, as a discrete subfield with its own dedicated journals and professional associations.[2] For, by the time *The Public Historian* first appeared in 1978, followed a year later by the founding of the National Council on Public History, Leuchtenburg, who completed his undergraduate studies at Cornell in 1943 and his doctorate at Columbia in 1951, had long grown accustomed to working with government bodies, schools, historical societies, media organisations, and heritage groups. His approach to such work, as we shall see, was informed by models of historical scholarship which did not distinguish between public and non-public history. His career, I argue here, illuminates the capaciousness, malleability, and permeability of public history in all its variety. It does so, perhaps, in ways we can learn from now, even as we acknowledge the unique confluence of conditions—historical, cultural, and institutional—that shaped his extraordinary career.

For much of his professional life, Leuchtenburg grappled intensely with the relationship between public history and other forms of scholarship. Indeed he made this relationship the subject of his 1991 presidential address to the American Historical Association, "The Historian and the Public Realm."[3] I have "been engrossed in the public realm for half a century," he said on that august occasion.[4] Setting out his views that day, he expressed ambivalence about intervening in public life in his capacity as a professional historian, as opposed to that of a private citizen, but insisted, nevertheless, that while they had every right not to seek contact with the public, "history professors do not have to remain immured behind campus walls."[5] Sure enough, from the 1940s to the 2020s, he combined political activity and public engagement in myriad forms with the production of impeccable scholarship and highly visible professional leadership. By studying that mix of activities, I suggest, we can learn not just about shifting conceptions of what it means to practise public history, but also about competing visions of academic freedom, conflicting ideas about the political uses of the past, and the proper role and functions of the university in a liberal democracy.

1 Politics, professionalization, and public history

Leuchtenburg became an historian at mid-century, amid a transformative era for American universities. This timing is important for understanding his approach to public history. During the Second World War, the federal government injected billions of dollars into universities making what previously had been a loose agglomeration of scattered institutions into something closer to a coherent system. Awash with government money, universities expanded, professionalized, and—haltingly—

1. William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1963). The only other person to have led the SAH, OAH and AHA is Eric Foner.

2. Ian Tyrrell, *Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890-1970* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

3. William E. Leuchtenburg, "The Historian and the Public Realm," *The American Historical Review*, 97, no. 1 (1992): 1–18.

4. Ibid., 5.

5. Ibid., 13.

democratized. The 1944 GI Bill opened the system to many returning veterans. Venerable Ivy League institutions such as Cornell and Columbia underwent rapid modernisation. Young men (and a smaller number of young women)—a new cadre of humanities professionals—flooded onto college campuses, eager to train the next generation of leaders in politics, business, the professions, and the arts.[6] Leuchtenburg, a coming force in the field of American history, joined the throng.

The Columbia history department, however, resisted the pressure to change. In many important respects, it remained, at mid-century, a reactionary, closed environment, somewhat resembling a gentleman's club. A "whiff" of antisemitism lingered through the 1950s, Leuchtenburg recalled.[7] In the previous generation, senior colleagues Carleton Hayes and William Westermann had repeatedly obstructed the appointment of Jews.[8] Hollis R. Lynch and Nathan Huggins, the first Black historians to gain tenure, arrived on Morningside Heights as late as 1969 and 1970 respectively.[9] And women, too, were shut out. Leuchtenburg's colleague David Donald, remembered "an undercurrent of hostility toward women," which was perhaps an understatement given that the university did not appoint its first tenured woman historian, Nina Garsoïan, an expert on Byzantine history, until 1969.[10] Across his career, Leuchtenburg championed many gifted women, including Lizabeth Cohen, Paula Fass, Glenda Gilmore, Cindy Hahamovitch, Jacqueline Dowd Hall, Laura Kalman, and Linda Kerber, but he spent the formative years of his professional life moving in a largely homosocial world, his career boosted by male mentors who mixed academic writing with their busy lives as public men.

In this environment, Leuchtenburg discovered that his devotion to Clio and his desire to engage in politics did not necessarily conflict. In 1946, for example, he took a break from graduate study to campaign for liberal candidates in the midterm elections; he then spent the winter working for a civil rights organisation under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph. His dissertation advisor, Henry Steele Commager, gladly accommodated him. Two decades later, in the spring of 1965—now a tenured professor with a national profile— he marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Montgomery, Alabama. A photograph taken by the actor Dennis Hopper shows Leuchtenburg holding the US flag, a helicopter buzzing high in the sky over his left shoulder, standing alongside fellow historians John Hope Franklin, Arthur Mann, and John Higham, the latter holding aloft a tattered cardboard sign, attached to the point of an unopened umbrella, emblazoned with the words "U.S. HISTORIANS."[11] In September of the same year, he spent 90 minutes at the White House with President Lyndon Johnson discussing the Great Society and prospects for domestic political reform. The experience shattered his faith in Johnson whose "boorishness" and "loutish manner" stunned him.[12]

The pace and regularity of Leuchtenburg's public activity barely slackened in the late twentieth century. In the mid-1970s, for instance, he joined lawsuits against Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, aiming to keep the Watergate tapes and telephone transcripts in the public domain; he also helped C. Vann Woodward assemble a report, commissioned for the impeachment inquiry investigating Nixon,

6. Kathleen J. Frydl, *The G.I. Bill* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Roger L. Geiger, *Research and Relevant Knowledge: American Research Universities since World War II* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993); David A. Hollinger, ed., *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion Since World War II* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Christopher P. Loss, *Between Citizens and the State: The Politics of American Higher Education in the 20th Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education,* 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

7. William Palmer, *From Gentleman's Club to Professional Body: The Evolution of the History Department in the United States, 1940-1980* (Charleston, S.C.: Book Surge, 2008), 232.

8. Ibid., 228.

9. "Department of History, 1969," accessed 24 September 2024, https://history.columbia.edu/timeline_slider_post/1969/

10. Palmer, *Gentleman's Club*, 233; "Department of History, 1967," accessed 24 September 2024, https://history.columbia.edu/timeline_slider_post/1967/

11. Jack Betts, "A Man of High Office," *Carolina Alumni Review*, 13 January 2017, accessed 7 September 2024, https://alumni.unc.edu/news/a-man-of-high-office/; William E. Leuchtenburg, "The Montgomery March," *American Heritage*, 40, 8 (1989), accessed 7 September 2024, https://www.americanheritage.com/montgomery-march/

12. William E. Leuchtenburg, "A Visit with LBJ," accessed 7 September 2024, *American Heritage*, 41, 4 (1990), https://www.americanheritage.com/visit-lbj/

on the history of presidential charges of misconduct.[13] In 1987, alongside friends John Hope Franklin and Walter Dellinger, with whom he taught a constitutional law course at Duke University, he testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee, opposing Ronald Reagan's nomination of Robert Bork to the US Supreme Court.[14] In 1993 and 1997, by now a seasoned television performer, he provided commentary on Bill Clinton's inaugural addresses.[15] In 2016, he gave a Facebook interview on that year's presidential contest: "There has never been a candidate," he said of Donald Trump, "who has abused so many segments of the population and then moved on to a position of power."[16] Few historians, it is true, interact with the state at such an exalted level, but that does not mean such activity falls outside the remit of public history, a field necessarily concerned with citizenship and embroiled, inescapably, with the relationship between historical expertise, democratic citizenship, and public power.

It is an arresting fact that Leuchtenburg accumulated this impressive record of public activity in a period when anxiety about academic historians' separation from the public mounted. In the 1980s and 1990s especially, prominent historians worried that professionalization had consigned their discipline to fragmentation, isolation, and irrelevance.[17] Public historians joined the chorus. Patricia Mooney-Melvin, for example, speaking in 1995 as president of the National Council of Public History, pondered "the apparent gulf between historians and the public outside of an academic setting."[18] She insisted that historians' obeisance to narrow and outdated definitions of "what it means to be a professional historian," had paved the way for the subject's "own marginality within American society."[19] She urged historians to "remember that they are citizens as well as scholars and that they possess some responsibility to the larger civic community."[20] Those responsibilities would remain unfulfilled, however, she warned, if "the definition of the professional historian we inherited" did not change.[21]

Obviously, Leuchtenburg's professional life does not fit this pattern. In September 1994, a few months before Mooney-Melvin spoke, PBS screened documentary filmmaker Ken Burns's 18.5-hour series, *Baseball*, for which Leuchtenburg, who by then had worked with Burns for more than a decade, served as an historical consultant.[22] Over a four-year period, he checked Geoffrey Ward's scripts, fed information to Burns's team, and helped them locate historical material.[23] The series reached more

13. Leuchtenburg, "The Historian and the Public Realm," 6. For reflections on historians' role in writing the impeachment inquiry report, see James M. Banner, Jr., "Historians and the Impeachment Inquiry: A Brief History and Prospectus," *Reviews in American History*, 4 (June 1976): 139–149. For the report itself see C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Responses of the Presidents to Charges of Misconduct* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing Company, 1974).

14. Leuchtenburg was still employed by UNC but taught constitutional law at Duke with Franklin and Dellinger. Leuchtenburg's testimony can be viewed here in full: "Bork Nomination, Day 8, Part 2", C-SPAN, 23 September 1987, accessed 7 September 2024, https://www.c-span.org/video/?10172-1/bork-nomination-day-8-part-2/

15. William E. Leuchtenburg, *The American President: From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), vi.

16. "Q&A with William Leuchtenburg," *Carolina Alumni Review*, 13 January 2017, accessed 7 September 2024, https://alumni.unc.edu/news/qa-with-william-leuchtenburg/

17. For the history of these fears see Tyrrell, *Historians in Public*, 11–40. For these concerns in the 1980s and 1990s, see C. Vann Woodward, "A Short History of American History," in C. Vann Woodward, *The Future of the Past* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 316–321; Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History*, 73, no. 1 (1986): 120–136; Richard Wightman Fox, "Public Culture and the Problem of Synthesis," *Journal of American History*, 74, no. 1 (1987): 113–116; Theodore Hamerow, "The Bureaucratization of History," *American Historical Review*, 94, no. 1 (1989); Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, "Democracy in the Ivory Tower? Toward the Restoration of an Intellectual Community," in Elizabeth Fox Genovese and Lasch-Quinn, eds., *Reconstructing History: The Emergence of a New Historical Society* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999).

18. Patricia Mooney-Melvin, "Professional Historians and 'Destiny's Gate'," *The Public Historian*, 17, no. 3 (1995): 9–24. https://doi.org/10.2307/3378750 For the National Council of Public History's early history, see Barbara J. Howe, "Reflections on an Idea: NCPH's First Decade," *The Public Historian*, 11, No. 3 (1989): 69–85.

19. Mooney-Melvin, "Professional Historians," 9, 10.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 23.

22. Lynn Novick to William E. Leuchtenburg, 7 August 1990, Folder: Burns, Ken, Box 3, WEL Papers.

23. Lynn Novick to WEL, 7 August 1990, WEL to Ken Burns, 21 October 1991, WEL to Ken Burns, 24 February 1992, Ken Burns to WEL, 26 Aug 1992, Folder: Burns, Ken, Box 3, WEL Papers.

than 45 million viewers, won two Emmy awards, and became the most popular series in PBS history.[24] Leuchtenburg also worked on *The Civil War,* which attracted 39 million viewers in the first week of its showing alone, and on at least seven other Burns films.[25] These documentaries—from *Huey Long* in 1986 to *Country Music* in 2019—have not always pleased historians as much as the general public, but their popular success is undeniable.[26]

Mooney-Melvin advanced a powerful critique of narrow, rigid and inflexible conceptions of professional history.[27] Her message resonated with fears, pervasive in the mid-1990s, about loss of community, declining trust, and collapsing social capital.[28] But its argument cannot explain how an historian such as Leuchtenburg, trained at mid-century, and devoted to a highly professionalized approach to the historian's craft, participated in twentieth century public life to a degree most public historians, now and in the past, can only dream of. In many ways, Leuchtenburg embodied the "inherited" professionalism that Mooney-Melvin's speech targeted. Throughout his career, he taught and practised an approach to history characterized by exhaustive archival work, argument from primary sources, and controlled scholarly detachment.[29] And yet, as his enduring partnership with Ken Burns suggests, no one can doubt the power and reach of his public historical work. How can we explain this paradox?

2 The Progressive inheritance: moral politics and the usable past

In part, the answer lies in following Mooney-Melvin's own prescription that historians should pay less attention to late-nineteenth and early twentieth century origins and focus more on the timing and context of later phases of professionalization. When Leuchtenburg arrived at Cornell and Columbia in the 1940s, for example, two leading historians, Carl Becker and Charles Beard, had already shaped intellectual life at those institutions—and in the broader national culture—in ways that naturalized the idea that history served an urgent social function. On both campuses, a sense of history's immediate relevance to "the people" was in the very air that students breathed. For Cornell's Becker, famously, "everyman" was "his own historian."[30] All history, he believed, no matter who wrote it or when it was written, met contemporary needs.[31] In this radically democratic formulation—highly amenable to many twenty-first-century public historians—all of us make history, all of the time. And for Columbia's Beard, using the past for contemporary political ends was wholly legitimate. More than any other historian, Richard Hofstadter observed, Beard "made himself foremost … in the search for a usable past."[32]

In the immediate post-war decades, Leuchtenburg worked closely with historians associated with the consensus school, Hofstadter and Henry Steele Commager chief among them; but it was the Pro-

24. "Ken Burns," accessed 5 September 2024, https://www.emmys.com/bios/ken-burns; Burns and Leuchtenburg have worked together since 1985, when they collaborated on *Huey Long*.

25. Peter Tonguette, "With *The Civil War*, Ken Burns Reinvented the Television Documentary and Captivated Millions of Americans," *Humanities*, 36, no. 5 (2015), accessed 5 September 2024, https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2015/septemberoctober/feature/the-civil-war-ken-burns-reinvented-the-television-history-d

26. For critical perspectives on *The Civil War*, see Robert Toplin, ed. *Ken Burns's* The Civil War*: Historians Respond* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996). For *Vietnam*, see Michael S. Foley, "There is no single lie in war (films): Ken Burns, Lynn Novick, and the Vietnam War," *The Sixties*, 11, no. 1 (2018): 93–104.

27. Mooney-Melvin, "Professional Historians," 9–24.

28. Robert D. Putnam's classic statement of these anxieties, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital" appeared in essay form in January of 1995. Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy*, 6, no. 1 (1995): 65–78, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.1995.0002.

29. Ibid., 10. On the origins and development of the US historical profession see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Robert B. Townsend, *History's Babel: Scholarship, Professionalization, and the Historical Enterprise in the United States, 1880-1940* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

30. Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *The American Historical Review*, 37, no. 2 (1932): 221–36. https://doi.org/10.2307/1838208.

31. Ibid.

32. Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1968), 345.

gressive historians who first captivated him.[33] Their formative influence profoundly shaped his attitude toward public history. He adored both Charles and Mary Beard's *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927) and Vernon Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927-30), whose work he first encountered as a teenager.[34] These "masterpieces," as he later called them, offered colourful, dramatic, morally-infused narratives in which the authors' political convictions frequently bubbled to the surface.[35] The Beards were ardent reformers, politically active in Britain as well as in the United States.[36] In the sparkling prose of *Main Currents*, his only major work, Parrington's hostility to conformity, his democratic sensibility, and his debt to "the Populist-Progressive tradition," shone through.[37] Influenced by these figures, Leuchtenburg imbibed in his youth and early adulthood the notion that great history might serve public ends.

The tension between a politics of principles and possibilities on the one hand, and a more pragmatic, less values-driven politics of limits and constraints on the other is a prominent theme in Leuchtenburg's writing, and it gives us clues about his appreciation of history's public dimensions.[38] This theme appears, for example, in the introduction to his first book, *Flood Control Politics*, a study in microcosm of "political configurations and moral attitudes."[39] It features, too, in his correspondence. When, in 1961, Richard Hofstadter shared a draft preface on "Populism and Progressivism," Leuchtenburg, who was writing *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, questioned the idea that historians should adopt a view of politics devoid of ethics. "I think there is more to be said for 'absolutist' morals than you indicate," he wrote, "probably because I'm working with the New Dealers."[40] He continued:

> I wonder if there is not something 'usable' for us today in the insistence of the Progressives that politics was an aspect of morals, something the New Dealers ignored to our harm. It is true that there is a tie between McCarthyism and Populist-Progressivism; it is also true though that there is a tie between McCarthyism and the cynicism of the New Deal, between anti-McCarthyism and the 'principled' stand of the Progressives.[41]

3 Columbia, the creation of new publics, and the university as "sanctuary"

If the Progressive historians showed young Leuchtenburg the potential and pitfalls of public activity, the intellectual environment at Columbia University contributed just as much, if not more, to his sense of how professional and public identities might fuse or intertwine. Columbia's two senior Americanists at mid-century, Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager, never doubted that historians should endeavour to shape a nation's public life. When he moved to Columbia full-time in 1931, Nevins had written eight books while producing articles, editorials, and reviews for several newspapers.[42] Commager supplemented his professorial salary by writing for the *Atlantic*, the *Herald Tribune*, the *New*

33. Leuchtenburg, *The American President*, xiii.

34. Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, 3 vols. (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927-30); Leuchtenburg, *The American President*, xiii.

35. Leuchtenburg, *The American President*, xiii.

36. On the Beards's partnership, progressive reform, and *The Rise of American Civilization* see Eric Rauchway, *The Refuge of Affections: Family and American Reform Politics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001), 61–90, 179–88.

37. Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, 355.

38. On "limits," for one example among many, see William E. Leuchtenburg, "The Jubilee in the Bicentennial Era: A Sense of Limits," in William E. Leuchtenburg, Anthony Quinton, George W. Ball and David Owen, *Britain and the United States: Four Views to Mark the Silver Jubilee* (London: Heinemann, 1979).

39. William E. Leuchtenburg, *Flood Control Politics: The Connecticut River Valley Problem, 1927-1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 1.

40. WEL to Richard Hofstadter, undated 1961 or 1962, Folder: Hofstadter, Richard, Box 9, WEL Papers.

41. Ibid.

42. Gerald L. Fetner, *Immersed in Great Affairs: Allan Nevins and the Heroic Age of American History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 25–44; Neil Jumonville, *Henry Steele Commager: Midcentury Liberalism and the History of the Present* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 21–22.

York Times Magazine, the *Saturday Review*, and other publications.[43] He also wrote a column for middle and high school students.[44] In their journalism and popular writing, Nevins and Commager showed to the next generation of historians, Leuchtenburg included, not only how to reach a wide audience but also how to create a public.

For the liberal Leuchtenburg, Commager, a less conservative figure than Nevins, provided an inspiring model of how to operate in public. From the 1940s to the 1960s, his life more nearly resembled that of a nineteenth-century itinerant preacher than of a modern university professor as he maintained a hectic schedule of public talks, lectures, and appearances.[45] A defender of civil liberties, critic of McCarthyism, champion of dissent, and protester against the Vietnam War, his beguiling blend of scholarship, journalism, and public performance enraptured radicals as well as liberals. Howard Zinn, whose doctoral work on New York City congressman and mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, Leuchtenburg supervised in the late 1950s, worshipped him.[46] Leuchtenburg's admiration for Commager is crystal clear in their correspondence. In a touching letter, written towards the end of Commager's life, Leuchtenburg thanked his mentor for easing his path into the profession:

> I am not sure that I have ever said strongly enough of what critical importance it was to me, at a time when I was uncertain whether or not to pursue a career in history or in politics, to be a student in your brilliant colloquium; to be further encouraged by being taken on as your research assistant; to have you sponsor my dissertation; to be recommended by you to Crane Brinton at Harvard; to have you call me in Cambridge so short a time after I'd arrived there with the astonishing offer to succeed Allan Nevins at Columbia, and to be asked by you, at so young an age, to write a volume in the New American Nation Series. That is a great deal for one man to owe to another.[47]

Curiously, Zinn and Leuchtenburg saw completely different things in Commager, drawing diametrically opposite lessons from his example. Zinn, for his part, believed, to quote the title of his autobiography, that *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*.[48] He had no patience for the cloistered scholar, set apart from the world and devoted to historical objectivity. He could not have been less torn between his obligations as an historian and his responsibilities as a political activist. University professors, he believed, should take a stand. Leuchtenburg, in contrast, observed with ambivalence how Commager's life oscillated between scholarly production and the public sphere. Unlike Zinn, he cleaved to the idea that to "politicize" the university is to place it in jeopardy. "Those who insist that history is worthwhile only when it offers solutions to current problems," he said, "reveal a hostility to the very nature of the historical enterprise."[49]

These perspectives clashed spectacularly in the late 1960s when students, including some of Leuchtenburg's own, protested Columbia's ties to the military-industrial complex during the Vietnam war, challenged plans to extend the campus into working-class areas of neighbouring Harlem, occupied buildings, and, for a time, brought the business of the university to a halt.[50] Zinn, steeped in the civil rights and peace movements, joined students on campuses across the nation, making himself a visible champion of their cause. Leuchtenburg, meanwhile, defended the idea of the university as a neutral, nonpolitical space, worked on Columbia's Faculty Executive Committee during the 1968 upheaval, and sought to deescalate the crisis on the university leadership's terms. A year later, he joined Charles Frankel, Richard Hofstadter, Fritz Stern, Lionel Trilling and other Columbia

43. Jumonville, *Henry Steele Commager*, 57.

44. Ibid.

45. On Commager see Jumonville, *Henry Steele Commager*.

46. Howard Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002), 121.

47. Leuchtenburg to Commager, 26 May 1985, Folder: Commager, Henry S., Box 5, WEL Papers.

48. Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral*.

49. Leuchtenburg, "The Historian and the Public Realm," 7.

50. For an account of Columbia 1968 written by a Leuchtenburg student engaged in the uprising see Mark D. Naison, *White Boy: A Memoir* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), 80–117.

faculty in co-signing a covering letter placed in the *New York Times* addressed "To Colleagues and Friends of the Academic Community."[51] The letter promised governance reform and commended university leaders. Beneath it appeared a statement endorsed by hundreds more faculty entitled "The University as a Sanctuary of Academic Freedom."[52] "Current attempts to disrupt or prevent the holding of classes," it stated, "are fundamentally inimical to university life."[53]

The federal government's massive Cold War era investment in campus-based military research, conducted in campus laboratories and research institutes throughout the United States, did not shake Leuchtenburg's faith in the idea of the university as a "sanctuary" in which people with differing views might gather, exchange views, debate, and engage in intelligent civil discourse even in the most trying times. Amid the tumult of 1968, he embraced a conception of academic freedom consistent with his mode of liberal politics, working with likeminded faculty to limit the impact of student protest. This did not mean that he supported the Johnson administration's conduct of the war in Vietnam. On the contrary, he thought it disastrous, a tragic waste, and a grave miscalculation. When, in the summer of 1966, Johnson aide Joseph Califano asked him to write a memorandum on where the Great Society should go next, he refused, stating that following Johnson's "despicable" Omaha speech it was pointless.[54] "Because of Vietnam," he explained, "the President has already sabotaged his own programs. The mask is off," he wrote, "it is Johnson who is to blame. So count me out."[55] Here Leuchtenburg demonstrated that his willingness to serve the state was contingent on his moral convictions, and sense of personal honour, as well as on his nuanced views about how far, and in what ways, historians should cooperate with governments, policymakers, and politicians.

4 Liberalism, the New Left, and generational politics

Teaching at Columbia in the immediate post-war decades, Leuchtenburg encountered students whose understanding of the historian's public responsibilities differed markedly from his own. Some, such as Howard Zinn and Christopher Lasch, became national figures as historian-activists and public intellectuals. As they forged their careers in activism and social criticism respectively, they largely rejected the highly professionalized model of history Leuchtenburg had taught them. But, even so, they acknowledged his role in helping them grasp what it meant to be an historian. Zinn thanked his teacher in the preface of his doctoral thesis and Leuchtenburg duly entered it for the AHA's Beveridge dissertation prize, for which it won an honourable mention.[56] He also introduced Zinn to Staughton Lynd, who in 1950 had taken one of his classes at Harvard.[57] Zinn and Lynd, radicals with a fugitive sense of history's subversive potential, became close friends. Zinn's book on LaGuardia, based on his dissertation, is the only conventional historical monograph he produced. After completing his professional training under Leuchtenburg and publishing its fruits, he branched out, ditched all pretence of historical objectivity, and wrote history designed to cultivate a radical public.[58]

Lasch, perhaps the most gifted of all his students, trained under Leuchtenburg from 1954 to 1959. He found this a "trying" stage of life: he hated New York City, even if it was there that he met and married Henry Steele Commager's daughter, Nell, a union that brought together the worlds of mid-century liberalism and of the burgeoning New Left.[59] Leuchtenburg and Lasch maintained a warm

51. "The University as a Sanctuary of Academic Freedom," *New York Times*, 29 May 1969, 18.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. WEL to Joseph Califano, 6 July 1966, Folder: Califano, Joseph Jr, Box 4, WEL Papers.

55. Ibid.

56. David D. Joyce, *Howard Zinn: A Radical American Vision* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), 48, 50.

57. Ibid., 49.

58. On Zinn's writing for a popular audience see Nick Witham, *Popularizing the Past: Historians, Publishers, and Readers in Postwar America* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2023), 104–132.

59. Michael Kammen, "Reflections: On Mentoring Apprentice Historians and Appreciating Mentors—Gleaned from the Memories of Others," *Reviews in American History*, 40, Issue 2 (June 2012): 341.

correspondence for two decades, exchanging family news, seeking and giving advice, commenting on drafts, and, in Lasch's case, asking for letters of recommendation. "I see that Dick [Hofstadter] has a quote on your dustjacket," Leuchtenburg wrote in April 1965, shortly after the publication of Lasch's *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type*.[60] "[H]e told me at a party at his house that your book is 'absolutely brilliant.' "[61]

Like Zinn, after leaving Columbia, Lasch departed from the model of historical professionalism Leuchtenburg exemplified. Zinn, the activist historian, wrote radical histories, plays, and poems, broadcasting his political views; Lasch, the moralist and social critic, probed the character of modern American life, laid bare its hypocrisies, and exposed the inadequacies of liberalism. But before Lasch could depart from professionalism he first had to learn it. When he began his graduate studies, he recalled, he lacked basic skills.[62] Leuchtenburg, "an enormously devoted teacher," taught him "the fundamentals."[63] He would "spend endless amounts of time with you," Lasch said, "very careful, and again would make extensive comments on your work, often in the beginning very unflattering ones that were hard for me to accept."[64] Lasch chafed against Columbia's "extreme professionalism."[65] It took 20 years, until the publication of *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977) and *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), for him to feel that he had truly "liberated himself from the professionalism I had learned at Columbia."[66] But, as he made plain in his late interviews, he was indebted to Leuchtenburg, the teacher who gave him his grounding.

In the mid-1970s, Lasch contrasted the intense commitment to Clio of historians who made their mark at mid-century, and remained utterly devoted to the discipline, with the more conflicted attitude of the next generation, who were caught, he believed, between history's siren song and their desire to participate in social activism.[67] Generational differences do not, however, explain why some historians, like Leuchtenburg, remain committed to professional historical scholarship while others, such as Zinn and Lasch, used their professional training as a platform from which to explore—in their more mature writing—other ways of doing history. Zinn is a case in point. He and his dissertation advisor followed very different career trajectories and adopted completely divergent positions on the proper relationship between history and public life, but they were born in the same year, 1922. In fact, Leuchtenburg, who like Zinn was raised in New York City, was a month younger than his student. Among historians, therefore, intragenerational differences can matter just as much as intergenerational conflicts.

5 The cloak of professionalism

The public lives of two historians much closer to Leuchtenburg politically than Zinn highlight the importance of those intragenerational differences: Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and John Hope Franklin. Leuchtenburg admired Schlesinger immensely, and for nearly 60 years they maintained a close friendship underpinned by the anti-communist liberalism that first brought them together, in 1948, as members of Americans for Democratic Action. They shared similar views, too, on how historians should conduct themselves in public life. In September 1990, when Leuchtenburg prepared his 1991 presidential address on "Historians and the Public Realm," he corresponded with Schlesinger, seeking

60. WEL to Lasch, 25 April 1965, D.250.1.18, Christopher Lasch Papers, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester.

61. Ibid.

62. Richard Wightman Fox, "An Interview with Christopher Lasch," *Intellectual History Newsletter*, 16 (1994), 7.

63. Ibid., 6.

64. Ibid., 7.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., 12.

67. Christopher Lasch, foreword to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition: And the Men who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), xiii.

his advice.[68] Schlesinger said that he completely agreed with Leuchtenburg's position on the "politicization" of the university and on the proper role of professional groups.[69] In the summer of 1992, after Schlesinger had written congratulating his friend on his presidential address, Leuchtenburg replied fulsomely: "There is no one from whom I learned so much in thinking through the theme than you. Your writings on this subject were invaluable to me, and your career a model."[70]

In truth, however, these friends did not conduct themselves as historians in the public realm in quite the same way. Leuchtenburg's professional style made him critical of Schlesinger's determination to use his historical writing to serve political ends. In 1958, reviewing *The Crisis of the Old Order*, the first volume of Schlesinger's *The Age of Roosevelt* trilogy, he wrote of his "sense of disappointment" that objectivity had been sacrificed at the altar of contemporary political needs.[71] By reducing history to a Manichean struggle between "good (liberal, Democratic) men" and "bad (conservative, Republican) men," Schlesinger, he wrote, gave readers "little sense of the men of the times as prisoners of historical forces or a particular historical situation."[72] The review illustrated two main features of Leuchtenburg's approach to history: his commitment to scholarly detachment and his interest in the idea of limits. No one could accuse Schlesinger of being detached, as an historian, from his political objectives.

Leuchtenburg and Schlesinger also differed significantly in their personal attitudes to power. Schlesinger chose to become something of a court historian, relishing the label, whereas Leuchtenburg, who had every opportunity to follow suit, did not. Schlesinger wrote for the present, served his favourites, and, on occasion, produced work closer to hagiography than to history.[73] Leuchtenburg charted a different course. A report of his White House meeting with Lyndon Johnson in 1965 illustrates the point. Johnson's assistant press secretary, Hayes Redmon, a former Leuchtenburg student, brokered the appointment. Years later, after Redmon died suddenly at the age of 42, his wife Coates Redmon wrote about that "heady" time in her husband's life.[74] "Hayes spoke of you often and with such deep personal respect," she told Leuchtenburg.[75] "He described you as a man of great dimension yet as one un-seduced by power."[76] Recalling Hayes's description of the White House conversation, she wrote: "He said 'Bill took notes so unobtrusively and listened with respect, asked intelligent questions—but when Johnson took off on the Kennedys, he just put down his pad and stared. I think it really disgusted him. And with good reason."[77]

Comparatively unseduced by power, Leuchtenburg undertook his public activities in a spirit closer to that of John Hope Franklin than of Arthur Schlesinger Jr. Since their first meeting in Montgomery, when they marched with Martin Luther King, and particularly from 1978, when they joined the first cohort of fellows at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina's Research Triangle, they formed a close bond, supporting one another in their writing projects, public endeavours, and family lives.[78] They also appeared together as historians in public. Joined by the Duke Law School professor Walter Dellinger, they testified before the senate judiciary committee as part of the ultimately successful effort to block the appointment of Robert Bork, whom Ronald Reagan had nominated to the Supreme

68. WEL to Schlesinger, 24 September 1990, Folder: Schlesinger, Arthur Jr., Box 17, WEL Papers.

69. Schlesinger Jr. to WEL, 23 October 1990, Folder: Schlesinger, Arthur Jr., Box 17, WEL Papers.

70. WEL to Schlesinger, 12 July 1992, Folder: Schlesinger, Arthur Jr., Box 17, WEL Papers.

71. William E. Leuchtenburg, Review of *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933*, by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Political Science Quarterly*, 73, no. 3 (1958): 461.

72. Ibid., 462.

73. Ibid.

74. Coates Redmon to WEL, 2 February 1974, Folder: Redmon, Hayes, Box 16, WEL Papers.

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

78. William E. Leuchtenburg, "John Hope Franklin," *Duke Law Journal*, 42 (1993): 1022-1027, accessed 10 September 2024, https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/dlj/vol42/iss5/3

Court.[79] The performance showcased their intellectual gifts and fluency under fire.[80] Franklin's moving account of the racial slights he suffered as a boy growing up in Jim Crow Oklahoma, and how they connected to Bork's publicly expressed legal views, constituted a masterclass, illustrating what historians in public can achieve when expertise and passion combine.[81]

Franklin and Leuchtenburg shared more than lasting friendship. Throughout their careers, they produced scrupulously researched history written in lucid prose. Both men, too, entered public life in the 1940s by merging serious scholarship with activism and advocacy. In 1949, when Franklin assisted Thurgood Marshall in the case of Lyman T. Johnson, a scholar and civil rights activist denied access to the University of Kentucky on grounds of race, Leuchtenburg was working for Americans for Democratic Action, striving to expand Truman's Fair Deal.[82] They maintained vigorous involvement in public affairs throughout their lives. For example, in January 2005, on his 90th birthday, which coincided with George W. Bush's second inaugural, Franklin, still full of fire, delivered a punchy "counter-inaugural" explaining, in the form of a fictional letter to a white man, the persistence of racial prejudice and its ongoing harms. A decade or so later, Leuchtenburg's trenchant assessment of Donald Trump's unfitness for presidential office appeared on Facebook in July 2016, two months shy of his 94th birthday.[83]

It is true that, as the nation's leading Black historian, Franklin faced a political environment more treacherous than did Leuchtenburg, the sandy-haired, ruddy-faced son of Irish and German American parents. In part, the persistence of racism explains Franklin's guarded approach to the public realm. As Robin D. G. Kelley explained, he deployed his skills as a professional historian strategically in ways that somewhat concealed his politics. "Cloaked in the protective armour of judicious prose," Kelley wrote, "was a surprisingly radical interpretation of American history."[84] For Leuchtenburg, too, professionalism cloaked political passions; unlike Franklin, however, he could dip in and out of public life as he pleased. Franklin, after all, had no option but to be an intellectual in public. Whenever and wherever he travelled, he took the struggle for racial justice with him: "His year at Cambridge," Kelley wrote, referring to his tenure as the Pitt Professor of American History in 1962–63, "might be seen as a transatlantic dimension of the black freedom movement."[85]

Leuchtenburg outlived his friends, Schlesinger and Franklin, by more than a decade. He published his last book, a study of the early presidency, at the age of 102 in 2024.[86] In some ways, his longevity made him an exceptional, perhaps even unrepresentative, figure. But it is precisely the extraordinary length and distinction of his career that makes it so helpful for mapping public history's antecedents, for highlighting roads not taken, and for alerting us to varieties of public historical scholarship which persisted through and beyond the latter part of the twentieth century, even as they diverged from the subfield's later professional norms. Beginning his career at mid-century, a generation before public history fully developed a professional apparatus of its own, Leuchtenburg never doubted that the pursuit of history might entail rich and varied involvement in public life. His exposure to the Progressive historians in the interwar years attuned him to history written in the service of the present, as an act of citizenship. It fostered his respect for a moral conception of politics, alerting him to the seductiveness of the usable past. Then, at Columbia—among public men—he encountered an environment wholly congenial to a view of history in which the professional and the public blended seamlessly, enriching

79. "Bork nomination: Day 8, Part 2," C-SPAN, accessed 10 September 2024, https://www.c-span.org/video/?10172-1/bork-nomination-day-8-part-2/

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid.

82. *Johnson v. Board of Trustees of University of Kentucky* (1949).

83. "John Hope Franklin, Scholar who Transformed African American History, Dies at 94," *Duke Today*, 25 March 2009, accessed 10 September 2024, https://today.duke.edu/2009/03/johnhopefranklin.html; "Q&A with William Leuchtenburg," *Carolina Alumni Review*.

84. Robin D. G. Kelley, "A Historian in the World," *Journal of African American History*, 94 no.3 (2009), 363.

85. Ibid., 367.

86. William E. Leuchtenburg, *Patriot Presidents: From George Washington to John Quincy Adams* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024).

one another in ways that spoke to a capacious sense of history's potential to enlarge the public realm and to promote democratic life.

As an exemplar of post-war academic professionalism, Leuchtenburg, a dedicated teacher and mentor, championed archival study, rigorous argumentation, scholarly detachment, and good writing. Meanwhile, he worked with a vast range of organizations from the Library of Congress, television networks, documentary filmmakers and radio stations to public commissions, museums, and state and local historical societies. He did so before, during, and long after public history's emergence as a discrete subfield. He trained generations of historians, including some, such as Howard Zinn and Christopher Lasch, who rejected the template of professional historical scholarship he embodied, even as they expressed gratitude for his instruction and guidance. Throughout, Leuchtenburg's devotion to a liberal conception of the university's role in a democratic society, which insisted that the campus should remain a neutral zone in which people of differing views, faiths, and traditions might study and learn together, determined his stance during the 1968 Columbia crisis, and in other moments when US higher education came under political pressure.

In its entirety, Leuchtenburg's career shows how one unusually influential historian forged a stellar career in which public and professional roles intermingled creatively across the span of three-quarters of a century. It shows, too, that even as public history developed its identity, making its own way in the world from the late 1970s onwards, alternative models for navigating the relationship between expertise, scholarship, citizenship, and public life endured within the profession, sometimes overlapping with, at other times standing apart from, or clashing with, public history more narrowly conceived.

Finally, Leuchtenburg's case highlights how the relationship between American liberalism and wider US politics and society shaped the historical profession, and the conduct of historians in public, after the Second World War. Generational differences among historians mattered, but as the comparison here with Howard Zinn demonstrated, scholars from the same generation could experience professionalization differently, depending on their life experience, cast of mind, or political disposition. Accordingly, they might draw radically opposing conclusions about the public obligations of scholars, the proper function of universities, and the political uses of the past. Likewise, historians with broadly similar politics, such as Leuchtenburg and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., made different choices when invited to use their skills in the service of state power.

With that in mind, Patricia Mooney-Melvin's recommendation that public historians pay closer attention to the timing and context of professionalization remains sound. Her advice carries a special piquancy today, of course, as US universities face attacks from across the political spectrum. It compels us to think harder about the relationship between the state and higher education, about the history and character of post-war American liberalism, and about the forms of knowledge that gain traction, and find expression, in complex, large-scale institutional settings, such as the modern university. In such settings, some modes or configurations of politics are more visible than others. Some, indeed, are so powerful they are barely visible at all. After all, the cloak of professionalism, which William E. Leuchtenburg wore with distinction in the heyday of the American university system, is a powerful garment. Now, however, it is losing its powers of enchantment such that no historian—public or otherwise—can plausibly claim to be immured behind campus walls, safe from politics, and apart from the world.