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Foreword Review

Veritas: Harvard College and the American Experience

Andrew Schlesinger
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“I am having a hideous time here. I feel like Saint Sebastian, stuck full of arrows that people are firing at me,” wrote Abbott Lawrence Lowell, president of Harvard, in 1923 when including black students in freshman dormitories was an issue. His words may comfort Lawrence Summers, under attack for having suggested exploring the possibility that women’s lesser representation in the sciences might reflect some genetic factor.

Adversarial factions have been constants in Harvard’s history, and this author has written a splendid, never-flagging book in which conflict, often damaging to the institution, is the central theme. Religion, governance, finance, leadership, foreign wars, color, and sex have all at various times rocked the campus. The author (a grandson in the Schlesinger dynasty of historians and himself a prize-winning writer) presents specific conflicts and their resolutions, weaving a scintillating account rich in personal portraits and well grounded in Harvard’s historical life and climate.

Though the school was founded to educate clergymen, its promoters “dreading to leave an illiterate Ministery to the Churches,” Schlesinger notes that in 1755, with scientists’ denial that the Lisbon Earthquake exemplified a “scourge in the hand of the Almighty,” the stranglehold of “morbid Calvinism” over Harvard was weakened and the college increasingly transcended its narrow seminary mission.

The Revolutionary War propelled Harvard onto the national stage. Faculty and students overwhelmingly supported the Patriot cause; the college was closed and used as a barracks, which proved costly. However, the college gained George Washington’s gratitude and John Adams’ vital support. Since then, Harvard graduates have consistently helped shape the nation’s policies; five presidents have been Harvard men.

In great matters like slavery, the Civil War, foreign wars, racial integration, nondiscrimination, and expansion of educational opportunity, Harvard has most often spoken and acted for reason and progress. However, Schlesinger indicates that Harvard’s record has not been entirely unsullied; public pronouncements against racial discrimination and anti-Semitism were not always backed by prompt corrective action. More recently, Harvard’s endless need for funding has led to alliances with and research for the federal government (like the ROTC presence on campus and consulting for the Department of Defense) that have been hotly opposed within the institution.

Schlesinger is a master of the fast-forward style, with context concisely established, players introduced, and action unrolled, major events presented through key players. His treatment of the hands-on manager and practical reformer President Josiah Quincy’s presidency (1829—45) is exemplary. After a student lit a fire that almost destroyed a campus building, Quincy thundered, “The doctrine that colleges are cities of refuge—that here crimes may be committed as a matter of sport, or as evidences of spirit—is shameful in principle and ruinous in morality.” He insisted that campus malefactors be turned over to police, and brought about improvements in accommodations and food (which in the college’s early days gave rise to the “Bad Butter” and “Rotten Cabbage” rebellions), perhaps hoping for a better-behaved student body.

Schlesinger clearly demonstrates the shaping force of lengthy presidencies, and records the transformation of

Harvard under the distinctly different Charles W. Eliot (1869—1909), Abbott Lawrence Lowell (1920—32), James Conant (1933—53); and Nathan Pusey (1953—71). These four fascinating mini-histories, spanning a century, are essential reading for any student of leadership and administration in the university, where any president risks near martyrdom. Particularly striking is the contrast between the modernizing Eliot, who recruited Henry Adams and William James but blocked the admission of women ("The world knows next to nothing of the mental capacities of the female sex"), and the moralizing Pusey, faced with the rise of SDS, Timothy Leary's experimentation with LSD, and student opposition to the ROTC, at times in near-riot conditions. Lowell the aristocratic humanist and Conant the pragmatic scientist also were at opposite poles on the character-temperament spectrum.

Readers learn of Harvard's income and disbursements together with the addition of departments and professorial chairs and the growth of faculty salaries. These elements Schlesinger balances with looks at student life and pursuits, including alcohol, drugs, sex, and sport. He notes the experience of Harvard's first Native-American and African-American students, and the occasionally fraught town and gown relationship. Throughout the book Schlesinger's deft use of apposite quotation and telling vignette enhance his remarkably rich and well-illustrated narrative. It is hard to imagine a better treatment of Harvard's ever-growing role.

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