THE FUTURE OF THE PAST

THIS ARTICLE is an edited version of the address given at the 131st annual meeting and history conference of the Minnesota Historical Society held at the Downtown Holiday Inn in Minneapolis on October 11, 1980. Speaking to a sizable audience at the noon luncheon, Harlan Cleveland, director of the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and professor of public affairs at the University of Minnesota, shared his thoughts on the promises of history, a subject to which he brings a wide background of scholarship, national and international affairs, and publishing. The most recent publications edited by him are Energy Futures of Developing Countries and Bioresources of Development: The Renewable Way of Life, both issued in 1980. His new book, The Management of Sustainable Growth, will be off the press this spring.

I FIND IT USEFUL to think of the past both as something to be preserved and as a source of energy for the future. Shortly before being asked to speak to you, I served as cochairman of an international conference in Colorado with the title "The Future of the Past." It had resulted from a perception by my favorite futurist John McHale (who died before this idea could bear fruit) that of all the rites of change in the modern world, ideas about the past and technologies for investigating the past seemed to him to be changing faster than anything else. The very word "past" is a rather static word in most people's vocabularies, and yet our notions about the past are the most dynamic thing about us.

I want to start with my friend McHale's perception: "Our period," he said, "is paradoxically both the age of museum, preserving and documenting the past on a more massive scale than ever before, and the age of expendability, where the artifacts of our own generation are probably more ephemeral and less deliberately designed for endurance than previously." Think, for example: How often did your grandmother use a paper plate? The first big danger that we identified in the Colorado meeting was that of judging past generations by the standards of our own time. This temporocentric tendency causes us to place what must in the long course of history seem to be an exaggerated emphasis upon our own period. We assume always, for example, that the crisis of our age is somehow more critical than the crises of other ages.

Mostly, therefore, we don't do what Florence is doing, which is probably just as well. Florence is a city that is essentially dying today for the sake of maintaining its historical assets. The incredible red tape of its preservation organization is preventing Florence from becoming what it might want to be right now and in the future. The current policy question about the city is: ought it be vacated and maintained as a museum, or should the Italians take the daring attitude of their ancestors, claim their own rights, and adapt Florence's history to their contemporary needs? The moment of truth, at least in Florence, is very rapidly approaching.

The recurrent theme at the discussions in Colorado last summer was that the future and the past exist only in our minds — that is to say, in our memories and in our now the director of the Division of Cultural Development for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Temporocentrism, as he defined it, is the unexamined and largely unconscious acceptance of one's own century, one's own era, one's own lifetime as the center of cultural significance, as the moment to which all other periods of historical time are related, the criterion by which they are judged. The analogy obviously is with ethnocentrism, which is thinking that everybody else's culture should be governed and judged by the standards that apply in your own.

Most of us are inclined to believe that the present is more important than the past and that the whole of historical time is significant only for what it means to us. This temporocentric tendency causes us to place what must in the long course of history seem to be an exaggerated emphasis upon our own period. We assume always, for example, that the crisis of our age is somehow more critical than the crises of other ages.

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1 The conference, held at Durango, Colorado, August 8-11, 1979, was cosponsored by the Center for Integrative Studies of the State University of New York-Buffalo; the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College; and the Program in International Affairs in the Aspen Institute of Princeton, New Jersey, in co-operation with the United States Commission for UNESCO. The proceedings were issued under the title The Future of the Past: Change and Cultural Transformation (Buffalo, N.Y., 1980).
2 McHale, quoted in Future of the Past, 58.
3 Ziolkowski, quoted in Future of the Past, 13.
imaginations. Of course, our memories can be very imaginative; they can be manipulated to serve any ends. And our imaginations are much influenced by our memories, which are always and necessarily selective. So the past is inherently corruptible. It is constructed with the cultural raw materials of the present. You can find in Scripture whatever you need in order to push whatever you are trying to push right now.

One of the scholars in our group called attention to the fact that there had been eight films about General George A. Custer in the last 40 years. In the earliest films, the general was depicted as a brave soldier fighting off the barbarians; in the 1950s he was depicted as an officer who had misread his instructions; and today, he is depicted as a buffoon. It was the same general, and he was doing more or less the same things, whatever they were, back then. But we have surrounded him with these changing interpretations, which parallel not his own career but rather the shifts in American values and attitudes toward the American Indian and the methods used to win the West.

In every political campaign you see appeals to authority and to history. The fact that the historical incidents selected for portrayal from the stump just happen to demonstrate what the political speaker is trying to demonstrate suggests again that history is corruptible. Guy S. Metraux, a Swiss scholar who was the editor of UNESCO's Cultural History of the World some years ago, put it this way: "It is very important to avoid hooks baited with morsels of the past."4 A lovely phrase.

HISTORY, then, is never without a point of view. When I was in the magazine business for one chunk of my life, young students from schools of journalism visited my office rather frequently. We were a very popular magazine [The Reporter] for young people to join — serious, exciting, with an investigative bent. There would always arrive a moment in the conversation when my young friends would ask, "But are you objective?" Finally, I had our printshop make a big sign which I put on the corkboard in back of my desk. It said something that perhaps could also be pasted up as the slogan for the

4Metraux's extemporaneous comment was recorded by the author at the 1979 conference.

Minnesota Historical Society: ALWAYS OBJECTIVE BUT NEVER IMPARTIAL.

The prime abuse of the past, at least for somebody in the social sciences and public affairs, is the misuse of extrapolation. The best of the futurists — not the best selling, but the best — are not those who predict things; they are those who construct alternative futures and then work back to what we are going to do tomorrow morning. Not the best, but the best selling, of the futurists are undoubtedly those who make predictions. They extrapolate in such a way that their expert predictions, carried far enough into the future, lead to the apocalypse. If you lead to the apocalypse, your book will sell.

The demographers, who underestimated the effects of world-wide economic development on population growth and in the United States overestimated the needs for school buildings and tickets of admission to higher education, are only the most obvious practitioners of that original statistical sin, which is to assume that what you know will not be stood on its head by what you don't know. At the opposite end of the spectrum from the specialized extrapolators are those leaders who have to try to look at the situation as a whole, the general managers, the legislators, the situation-as-a-whole people in every field, the members of what I have been calling the "get-it-all-together profession." These people know by instinct what the souls in Dante's Inferno learned to their sorrow: that while they can see very clearly what lies very far in the future, things blur as they get closer.

If you are wise, therefore, you learn to mistrust predictions, especially when they are so long-range that the predicted disaster will not occur until after the forecaster and, if his forecasts are true, even his readers are dead. Or if the forecaster is not dead, he can at least hope to be retired, preening himself on his long record of accuracy — like that ancient retiree from the research department of the British Foreign Office, who served from 1903 to 1950 and boasted thus at his retirement ceremony. "Year after year," he said, "the worriers and fretters would come to me with awful predictions of the outbreak of war. I denied it each time — and I was only wrong twice."

You will recall that Mark Twain was also hard on the extrapolators. "In the space of 176 years, the Lower Mis-
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Mark Twain, Life on the Mississippi, 208 (Boston, 1883).
6 Liu Shao's work was reprinted in 1966 by the Kraus Reprint Company of New York.
8 Metraux, quoted in Future of the Past, 41.

Mississippi has shortened itself 242 miles," he wrote. "That is an average of a trifle over one mile and a third per year. Any person can see that 742 years from now the Lower Mississippi will only be a mile and three quarters long. There is something fascinating about science," he went on. "One gets such wholesale returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact."5

So the bad news about the sins of extrapolation is that in most fields, in economics or military tactics or scientific discovery or industrial technology, the past is simply not a reliable guide to the future. Changes are too kaleidoscopic, too various, too complicated, too simultaneous — in a word, too human — to be arranged in linear logic from cause to effect.

But here is the good news. Those of us who preach and practice the arts of politics and administration (or as we now call them, "public affairs") do not have the same problem at all. We can have a pretty good idea of what is going to happen next because, in this business of human co-operation, the verities truly are something like eternal.

In America's most famous newspaper editorials, The Federalist papers, what Alexander Hamilton wrote about economic policy now seems quaint and archaic — the speculation of leaders of an underdeveloped country wondering, as so many underdeveloped countries still wonder, how to maintain their declared independence in an interdependent world. By contrast, what James Madison wrote on the nature of politics, on the countervailing of powers, on the fencing-in of factions, on the separation of functions, on the essence of governance is strikingly up to date. He was describing a society in which, by deliberate design, nobody would be in charge. It is a description worth rereading these days, now that we have to invent the institutions of governance for a nation and a world with nobody in charge.

Durable ideas about administration last much longer than 200 years. One of the best and the earliest book about personnel management is called The Study of Human Abilities. It was written in the third century A.D. by a Chinese public administrator who hired himself out to manage principalities for local princes in the Middle Kingdom — a Niccolo Machiavelli of his time. Its chapter on how to conduct an interview, especially the part about how you cannot recognize in others a quality you do not have yourself, can still be very helpful to all of us.6

Each of us has inherited an enormous body of wisdom about how to relate effectively to other people. When engineers invent a new gadget, you can't even find a name for it in the dictionary. But when you discover a workable way of bringing people together in organizations to make something happen, you are quite likely to find it lucidly described in Aristotle's Politics, Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, or the Bible.

Now that Mao Tse-tung is dead, the literary archaeologists will doubtless unearth evidence that his most penetrating thoughts were ghost writers' plagiarisms from China's rich thesaurus of inherited practical wisdom. Indeed, the central principle of management in a nobody-in-charge system was probably formulated 2,500 years ago by Lao-Tzu. "Ruling a big country," he said, "is like cooking a small fish" — that is, too much handling will spoil it.

Walter J. Ong, a great Jesuit thinker at St. Louis University, puts it this way: "Time is in us. The material in our own bodies is five to ten billion years old." The past, he says, is a massive fact in the sense of identity of every educated person today. A lively curiosity about that past has to be a primary qualification for leaders who would mold our future destiny.7

"Concern with the past is a characteristic of ages of major transition." So says Guy Metraux. "The Renaissance was such a time. So was the 15th century. In the 20th century we are caught between visions of the past which offer us security, and a future universe once more in process of rapid expansion. Specific problems have arisen because of scientific and technological developments that may be incompatible with the basic structures and forms of traditional thought and behavior. We need new visions of the past which will aid in incorporating into our consciousness the recent scientific revolutions."8
It is probably no accident that we are especially conscious of living in a time of transition just when the general public has discovered ecology, the science of mutual relations between organisms and their environment. The new vision is seen as something to do with integration, something to do with "getting it all together." The Mexican poet Octavio Paz pointed out that his people had always lived on the periphery of history, but that now, with the center or nucleus of world society disintegrated, everyone (including Europeans and North Americans) is a peripheral being. Paz said that we live on the margin because there is no longer any center. He added that "World history has become everyone's task, and our own labyrinth is the labyrinth of mankind." 9

THE WORLD VIEW of politicians, philosophers, and people of affairs seems, at least in modern times, to derive from the discovery and speculations of the scientists. It was only after Isaac Newton's physics that you got John Locke with his notion of the law of nature; Adam Smith with notions of automaticity and the "invisible hand" that would take care of things without their having to be managed; and James Madison with his notion that, although the big problem in his day, as in ours, was single-issue politics (what he called "factions" in The Federalist), somehow, by a kind of Newtonian automaticity the factions would all orbit around each other without colliding.

Then came Charles Darwin (The Origin of Species was published in 1859) with the idea of "struggle" as the organizing principle of society. That led ineluctably to the notion of "social Darwinism": if you were rich it must be because you were among the fittest, and if you were poor it must be because you were not among the fittest. That justified poverty, in the minds of the rich at least.

More recently came Albert Einstein, with his revolutionary notion that matter and energy are interchangeable and with his theory of relativity. None but a few colleagues could understand his mathematics, but everybody could fasten onto the word. And that led to a doctrine of "social relativity" in which everything is relative and even the eternal verities might well be proved wrong by further research — the student meanwhile suspending judgment on whatever he had learned in church or at his parents' knees. On a world scale, this notion of social relativity helped to justify the growing conviction in colonial parts of the world that traditional notions of social and racial and national superiority were not immutable, that maybe something could be done to change them.

Today, we live with the social fall-out of the life sciences. We are seeing the cracking of genetic codes, the inquiry into what goes on inside a cell, the spreading ecological lesson that everything really is related to everything else. At the same time, we have begun to unravel enormous and hideously complex puzzles that are part "hard science" and part social science — food, population, energy, resources, environment and their relationships to each other. Thus in the study of society, too, the ecological lesson is sinking in: everything is related to everything else. The key word, parallel to harmony, struggle, and relativity in the earlier cosmologies, is now interdependence.

Lewis Thomas' wonderful book, The Lives of a Cell, contains a luminous essay about the vibrations that cells give to each other. Thomas observed that in order to sustain life, each form of life uses one signal or another to announce its proximity to the others around it, "setting limits on encroachment or spreading welcome to potential symbionts." The earth itself, he says, might be thought of as an immense organism where "chemical signals might serve the function of global hormones, keeping balance and symmetry in the operation of various interrelated working parts, informing tissues in the vegetation of the Alps about the state of eels in the Sargasso Sea, by long, interminable relays of interconnected messages between all kinds of other creatures." 10

Our new-found consciousness of ecology sends a supporting message. Whether you look at the weather, the oceans, the ozone layer, the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the overcropping of our soil, or the overcutting of our forests, the message is all too clear. We had better respond together to nature's global hormones that give us signals of life or death — we interdepend or perish.

9 Paz, Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico, 170 (New York, 1961).
I THINK we do live at a very special moment in mankind's long ascent toward civilized behavior. It is the consequence of the enormous advances of science and technology and the spreading concern about their social consequences. All scientific discovery is morally ambiguous; we are coming to realize that its use for or its use against mankind is a matter for human beings in organized groups — that is, for social process not "invisible hands" — to decide.

It is clear enough now that a kindly God has placed in our brains the technical genius to meet the basic physical needs of everyone — in North America and Europe in our lifetime, and in the rest of the world in the lifetime of our children. Without a single new scientific discovery (and what a conservative assumption that is!) we can, if we will, defeat all the hunger and most of the disease which have been the law of much of humanity through the millennia of unremembered time.

At the same time, a God who seems to believe in self-help has placed in our brains the intellectual equipment and social skills necessary to co-operate on a very large scale, a scale grand and complex enough to put our full technical know-how to work in solving the whether and choosing the what and the why. That we are not yet helping ourselves as much as we could cannot be explained as a native incapacity to cope. The brain researchers seem to be agreed on one thing at least — that we are only using a very small part of whatever it is we have got in there.

At this moment in history, with that taste for irony which has always characterized the story of man, we seem to have used our technical and administrative skills to invent and perfect the power to end it all — or in the alternative, to make the human experiment endless. So during the years immediately ahead, we who are the citizens of the high technology world are going to have to get control of science and technology and aim them at human needs and human purposes — with less guidance from self-appointed priests and experts perhaps, and more obligation to think through far-reaching decisions for ourselves. None of us has to carry this ethical burden alone. The collective processes that are natural to complex systems are going to take care of that. But if nobody is fully in charge, then all of us are partly in charge, and for making the choices and taking the chances just ahead, each of us is going to have to be more dependent on his or her own personal moral gyroscope, his or her own ethical hunch, than ever before.

We prepare to make these choices and take these chances by exposing ourselves and others to history. Already we have been educated by an uncounted infinity of mutations, by half a million years of human evolution, by a dozen thousand years of history known and surmised, by a brief but brilliant period of systematic thought, through Chinese human relations, Greek logic, Indian philosophy, monotheistic ethics, and Western science. From all this teaching we learn that the choices are ours, that there is no shelter from the social fall-out of science, that we cannot duck the questions it raises, nor turn them aside, nor delegate them to our grandchildren, nor leave them unanswered.

The next and crucial learning, I think, is integrative thought, reflective practice, and the art of "getting it all together." That is what our students should learn in universities — partly, one hopes, by watching us (who presume to teach them) trying to think integratively ourselves. That, above all, it seems to me, is what ought to be "higher" about higher education.