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—David M. Potter,
Saturday Review

Out of Our Past

THE FORCES
THAT SHAPED
MODERN AMERICA

CARL V. DEGLER



COLOPHON BOOKS



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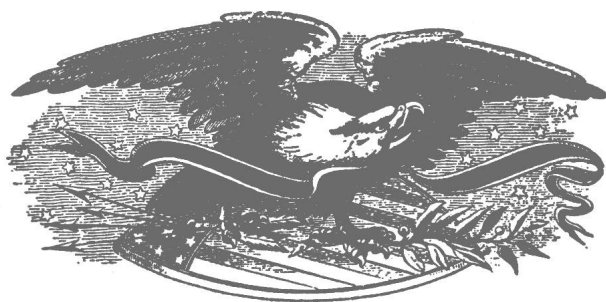
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*The Forces That Shaped
Modern America*



CARL N. DEGLER



HARPER COLOPHON BOOKS

Harper & Row, Publishers

New York and Evanston



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For information address Harper & Row, Publishers, Incorporated,
49 East 33rd Street, New York 16, N. Y.

First HARPER COLOPHON edition published 1962 by
Harper & Row, Publishers, Incorporated,
New York and Evanston

With this book the author pays tribute to Vassar College
on the occasion of its centennial.

Library of Congress catalog card number: 58-8824

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*“Nor for the past alone—for
meanings to the future.”*

WALT WHITMAN

To Catherine, who endlessly read it, and to Paul
and Suzanne, who endlessly heard about it.

Preface

WHEN the historian sits down to write about the past, there are always several approaches open to him. The one most commonly taken might be called descriptive history, in which the story of what happened in the past is told as accurately and minutely as research, literary style, and the space available will permit. Insofar as it is possible, the events of the past are presented as they took place; small effort is made to distinguish between those events which have relevance to the present and those which have little. The primary purpose is to recreate the past as nearly as possible, not to draw morals or to uncover guides for the present.

That is not the approach taken here. To put it simply, this book seeks an answer to the question "How did Americans get to be the way they are in the middle of the twentieth century?" In other words, the multitudinous events of the American past are here seen through the lens of the present. Admittedly, much of the material usually included in the story of America is missing in such an approach. Readers should be warned that they will find nothing here on the Presidential administrations between 1868 and 1901, no mention of the American Indians or the settlement of the seventeenth-century colonies; the War of 1812 is touched upon only in a footnote.

History viewed through the eyes of the present is understandably different from history written from the standpoint of the past. Persons and events which in other treatments might remain unnoticed or unappreciated now spring into focus. Therefore, in this book events and developments usually ignored or subordinated in standard accounts of American history now move to the center of the stage. For example, the history of the Negro in America figures prominently in three chapters, the rise and influence of the city dominate two, and the beginnings of American nationality in the colonial period come in for extended discussion.

All written history, no matter how slow its pace or numerous its pages, is a selection from the infinite number of facts in the past. A history of a whole nation in one volume, like this, is of necessity even more selective. Therefore, in addition to confining myself to those aspects of the past which bear on the present, I have also limited myself to the history of Americans as a people. There is little in this book about great men or individual genius, except where such men embody the values and aspirations of the whole people. The work and thought of many American thinkers, artists, scientists, and statesmen are therefore ignored, not because they are unimportant, but because to have included them would have made this something other than a history of the shaping of the American people.

In current historical writing it is fashionable to look to economic and social forces for the explanation of the movement and direction of history. Certainly this approach is more sophisticated than attributing the course of history to the actions of a few great men. But at the same time it seems to ignore a force in history which this book seeks to emphasize—the role of ideas. And by ideas I mean the beliefs, assumptions, and values of the people rather than the great ideas of thinkers which form the basis of formal intellectual history. Because, for example, Americans cherished ideas like freedom, equality, and Christian justice, they acted to realize them; in doing so, they changed the course of their history.

Karl Marx and other writers of the nineteenth century made a luminous contribution to the understanding of human history when they were able to show that men's ideas bore a close relation to the socioeconomic context in which they flourished; that, for example, the poetry of a pastoral people is filled with pastoral imagery, that an industrial society extols free labor. But this insight is often betrayed by the careless conclusions drawn from it. It is one thing to see connections between ideas and the economy and quite another to assume that all ideas must necessarily be but pale reflections of economic interests and the mode of production. One cardinal assumption in this book is that ideas have a life of their own, regardless of their origin. And by "a life of their own" I mean that men defend or oppose ideas for reasons not always related to their immediate self-interest, or to the socioeconomic character of their society.

The truth of this, it seems to me, arises out of the nature of man

himself. Admittedly, men are animals and, in common with other beasts, have powerful drives toward food, self-preservation, and sex, none of which can be easily denied or sublimated. On these indubitable facts rests the materialist conception of history. But man is more than an animal. He surrounds himself with ritual, ideal, and prejudice to such an extent that the essentials of life, like food-gathering, sexual satisfaction, and the urge to know the universe, are unnecessarily hedged about with obstacles to immediate gratification. No other animal is guilty of such illogicality. No other animal, for example, exposes himself to death in defense of vague, indefinable conceptions like national honor or the nature of God. Ideas are live forces in human history; often they are more powerful than the elemental drives. On an individual basis and in psycho-analytical language, this is to say that the superego can and does override the id.

Sometimes ideals derived from one social context are still vital in another. An example of this is the Progressive period, when Americans attempted to retain the ideology of Jefferson in the face of economic and social forces which ran counter to it. The ideology was not overwhelmed, however; for though economic and social pressure are potent, ideals are tenacious.

This toughness of men's ideals is part and parcel of the human condition. By nature man is moral; on all levels of culture and through all recorded time, men have labeled things as good or evil. And so long as men divide their world into good and bad, they will strive to make the world and themselves conform to their ideal of the good. Of course, they do not and will not always succeed. For, as this book tries to show, though Americans at times successfully imposed their ideals on the society, at other times they permitted the social relations they evolved to dictate what was morally good and bad. But wherever men have striven to realize their moral visions, they have demonstrated that ideas, as well as economic forces, can change the direction of history.

Recently, in *The Power Elite*, C. Wright Mills, the sociologist and critic of modern American society, called historians "the celebrants of the present." Perhaps this book places me in what Mr. Mills obviously intended to be an uncomfortable and unenviable category. By the standards of those who believe that criticism is synonymous with denigration, this book will indeed seem to celebrate the American past as well as the present. To those who are frustrated by and

discontented with the state of American culture, the criticisms of that culture contained in this book will appear tepid and mild. In reply I can only say that this is not an arraignment of American society, but neither is it a panegyric. At the outset I freely admit that I am somewhat awed by the 350-year history of the American people. For even when one has discounted all the blessings bestowed upon Americans by their fortunate separation from the turmoil and destruction of Europe's wars and by the bounty of nature in the soil, the achievement of Americans is still worthy of being ranked with that of any people.

This is true, it seems to me, whether one measures that achievement in the scales of material wealth or in the balance of spiritual values. Noble ideals like equality, opportunity, and democratic government are as American as big, flashy automobiles or indoor plumbing. Moreover, the ideal of a wide distribution of wealth that America has long represented and come closer to achieving than any other people in the history of the world is something more than dollar-chasing; it is truly one of the great humanitarian visions of mankind. One basic assumption of this book is that one can stress the positive achievements of America without descending into the swamp of sycophancy or the desert of chauvinism. Only the reader can judge whether this purpose is gained.

Another assumption upon which this book rests is that Americans are different from other people, that their culture is unique. Undoubtedly, in the long perspective of world history, the United States is but one of several variants of western European civilization. But within the framework of that civilization, I believe, the Americans are distinct and even unique. From time to time within these pages these similarities and differences are a part of our story, for in them can be discerned the outline of the American national character. Indeed, this book might well be called "An Exploration into the Origins of the American Character." The word "exploration" is important. For, considering the magnitude of the subject, this venture cannot be a definitive chart of American social topography; it can be only exploratory. It is in that spirit that it is offered.

More than most books, this one is indebted to many people. In this instance, they are not so much librarians and friends, though they too figured in its making, but the scores of writers on American society, past and present, who have quarried the material which alone has made it possible to write a broad-swinging venture like this.

Today it is no longer possible to write an interpretation of American history directly from the sources; the documentation is too vast for one or even a dozen men to encompass in a lifetime. Hence, the great bulk of the material I have used in writing this book was first dug out of the sources by a myriad of scholars. Occasionally I have done some of the digging myself in order to try to get answers to questions which I thought vital to my story but which I could not find in the published literature. But it would be untrue to the facts if I left the impression that this book is a work of original research.

The Critical Bibliographical Essay at the end of the book attempts to discharge partially my overwhelming indebtedness to my fellow workers in the field of American culture. Needless to say, none of these writers is responsible for what I have written in this book since I have not always agreed with their individual interpretations, nor have I always used their facts as they did. For that reason the weaknesses and mistakes which inevitably must be found in this book are all due to me; the valuable things are largely the result of the work of those many scholars from whom I have shamelessly borrowed.

In common with all authors, I am deeply indebted in a variety of ways to a number of people who helped me write this book. Mildred Campbell, John Dydo, Clyde Griffen, and Charles C. Griffin of the Vassar faculty read several of the chapters and graciously gave me the benefit of their knowledge and criticism. Needless to say, they are in no way responsible for what here appears, though they often saved me from errors of fact and interpretation. John Appleton and Evan Thomas of Harper's gave me not only the benefit of their substantial editorial skills but, even more precious to any writer, that indispensable commodity—encouragement.

Though individuals are usually thanked in this place, an institution—Vassar College—also richly deserves mention. Though a small college, Vassar has given more than lip service to the ideal of encouraging scholarship and writing by its faculty. For a whole year, while I worked on this book, I was supported by a Vassar Faculty Fellowship in the style to which I was accustomed. No greater faith can a college display in its faculty.

I am also indebted to the several scores of students with whom, over the years, I discussed these ideas in History 265. With their criticisms and insights they helped me to hammer out the substance of this book. I should also like to thank Miss Sandra Suits for her

careful checking of the Bibliography and Mrs. J. R. Churchill for her conscientious and accurate typing of the manuscript.

As is traditional, my wife, Catherine Grady Degler, appears last, but not least. Although she did none of the typing for which wives are usually commended, her assistance was of the kind none but a wife dare offer. Because she was impatient with vagueness, scornful of pomposity, and ruthless with verbiage, I am greatly indebted to her ; and so will the reader be.

Poughkeepsie, New York

C. N. D.

OUT OF
OUR PAST

*The Forces That Shaped
Modern America*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Orange, New Jersey, Carl N. Degler served in the Army in World War II, graduated from Upsala College, received his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees at Columbia. He has taught at Hunter College, New York University, New York's City College, and Adelphi. With his wife and two children, he lives in Poughkeepsie, where he is now Professor of History at Vassar.

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