

CHAPTER IV

LIBERALISM IN RETREAT

Arthur Schlesinger's friend from O.S.I. days, the playwright Robert Sherwood, introduced Professor Schlesinger to Governor Averell Harriman. When Harriman went to Europe to set up the Economic Co-operation Administration, the organization to carry out the Marshall Plan, he took Schlesinger along as a Special Assistant.¹ Schlesinger recalls:

That was a fascinating time; Harriman is a fascinating man- a man of great wisdom and experience, extremely effective in government. And it was a pleasure working with him, watching him at work, and also because I was a Special Assistant and when he made trips to various Marshall Plan capitols in order to set up the U.S. Marshall Plan mission and so on, he took me along. I met a lot of people and saw a lot of Europe.... Post-war Europe was a perplexing sight. Both the O.S.S. experience and Marshall Plan experience confirmed the mistrust I had long had for Communists. We saw a lot of people coming from Eastern Europe- this was just the time when the Stalinization of Eastern Europe was being pushed through...the systematic destruction of the Democratic Socialists and of the free trade movement was something that concerned us all a great deal.²

Sharing a similar worldview that favored patrician liberal reform, Harriman and Schlesinger became political allies. Harriman sometimes had Schlesinger called down to Washington to help on President Truman's foreign aid messages to Congress.³

In the Kennedy administration, Harriman and Schlesinger would work together against the State Department's inflexible anticommunism. But although Harriman, a presidential hopeful in 1952, and held all the correct liberal positions (as did Kentucky Senator Estes Kefauver), intellectuals were attracted to another candidate Governor Adlai Stevenson of Illinois. Explained Schlesinger,

I think Stevenson, having been a successful Governor of Illinois for four years was more in the tradition (of American politics). (While Harriman's main experience was) in foreign affairs. I think Stevenson was a lot more electable... And there was something very appealing about Stevenson's style. Kefauver I think was not appreciated by a lot of Eastern liberals; he was a very good man. But both Stevenson and Harriman had sort of the Ivy League Roosevelt manner, at a time...in 1952, when FDR himself had only been dead for seven years, and Stevenson and Harriman were closer to that than Kefauver.⁴

With public dissatisfaction with Truman growing, liberal leaders began to search for an alternative to the incumbent. While writing an article on Communism for *Life* in 1947,

¹ Telephone Interview 4/23/82.

² Interview.

³ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 539.

⁴ Interview, 4/23/82.

Schlesinger had met Adlai Stevenson at Eleanor Roosevelt's house and followed Stevenson's career with interest thereafter.⁵ Schlesinger mentioned Stevenson to ADA Executive Secretary Jim Loeb and suggested that Loeb contact George Ball to find out more about Stevenson.⁶ Bernard DeVoto and Schlesinger gave Harvard economics Professor Seymour Harris a high recommendation of Stevenson; Harris would later serve as an important advisor to the Governor.⁷ As liberal enthusiasm for Stevenson snow-balled, Schlesinger, along with Loeb and DeVoto joined in the "Draft Stevenson" efforts.⁸

The Truman problem, though, remained. Schlesinger wrote to Stevenson and explained the situation: Truman would not withdraw unless it became apparent that Stevenson would win. Only if Stevenson became a national candidate would it become apparent that he would win. Stevenson could only become a national candidate after Truman's withdrawal. But with the help of Bail, Rauh, and Loeb, Schlesinger suggested, Stevenson could "break the circles."⁹ In March 1952, Stevenson met with Schlesinger in Cambridge. When Schlesinger passed along the playwright Robert Sherwood's plea that Stevenson run, Stevenson seemed impressed. At the hairdresser's, Marian Schlesinger had heard both a wealthy customer and the hairdresser state that they were for Stevenson; therefore, declared Arthur, Stevenson "could count on support in all classes."¹⁰

On March 29th, President Truman made life easier for the Democrats by announcing at the Jefferson-Jackson dinner that he would not seek re-nomination. But Stevenson still seemed unsure. At a draft-Stevenson meeting, Schlesinger told Harriman that if Stevenson did not run, liberals would support Harriman instead.¹¹ The Sunday after Truman's withdrawal, Stevenson made a highly successful appearance on the "Meet the Press." At a dinner that evening with Stevenson, George Ball, and Walter Lippmann, Schlesinger suggested that Stevenson strongly favor repeal of Taft-Hartley, and expansion of the Civil Rights division of the Justice Department, but Stevenson demurred. Trying to convince Stevenson to run, Schlesinger predicted that Stevenson could beat the strongest potential Republican nominee, Dwight Eisenhower. A few days later, at George Ball's urging, Schlesinger and DeVoto wrote the draft of what they hoped would be the speech launching Stevenson's candidacy.¹² But on April 16th, Stevenson ruled out a draft. Regretting but respecting Stevenson's decision, Schlesinger went to work for Harriman.¹³ Schlesinger's main contributions of the Harriman effort were writing speeches and organizing support in Massachusetts.¹⁴

Schlesinger saw Stevenson next at the Democratic Convention on July when Schlesinger approached Stevenson to ask Illinois to support Harriman. Stevenson was

⁵ John Bartlow Martin, *Adlai Steveson of Illinois* (Garden City, 1977), 263.

⁶ *ibid*, 521.

⁷ *ibid*, 533.

⁸ *ibid*, 533

⁹ *ibid*, 536.

¹⁰ *ibid*, 539.

¹¹ *ibid*, 549.

¹² *ibid*, 553.

¹³ *ibid*, 566.

¹⁴ Interview 4/23/82.

lukewarm, and Schlesinger suspected the Illinois Governor wanted the nomination for himself.¹⁵ When Estes Kefauver, the strongest liberal of all the candidates, concluded that he was being edged out by the bosses, he made a last ditch television appeal to the voters. Schlesinger and Loeb made an unsuccessful late-night trip to Stevenson's home to attempt to arrange a meeting between Stevenson and Harriman. Stevenson was asleep and his aides refused to wake him. Schlesinger returned to the hotel and fell asleep at 6:30. Three hours later, Stevenson's aide Pill Blair called to arrange a breakfast meeting off the contenders. Whatever the results of the meeting, Schlesinger was able to persuade Harriman to swing his delegates to Stevenson, and thereby put give Stevenson the nomination.¹⁶

Taking a leave of absence from Harvard, Schlesinger joined the Elks, Stevenson's speech-writing staff, whose members lived and worked at the Elks lodge near the Governor's mansion in Springfield, Illinois.¹⁷ Stevenson liked to be considered the author of his own speeches, so the Elks writers were dubbed "researchers." Working with Schlesinger as the principal "researchers" were Willard Wirtz, Rob Tufts, and Dave Bell. Of the group, Bell and Schlesinger were the most politically experienced. As the summer wore on many others also joined the Elks.¹⁸ For the most part, Stevenson had little contact with the Elks. Schlesinger was the only one who could occasionally get past campaign manager Carl McGowan for a one-on-one meeting.¹⁹

Schlesinger served as a conduit for speeches and ideas from his many intellectual and political friends. At Schlesinger's behest, John Kenneth Galbraith, former Director of the office of Price Administration during the Second World War, and currently an economics professor at Harvard, joined the Elks. Central to Galbraith and Schlesinger's purpose was impressing on Stevenson the importance of the Keynesian revolution.²⁰ When Galbraith arrived in the Springfield, Schlesinger told him to remain in a hotel for a few days, because newspapers had just begun to pick up a story that Stevenson was controlled by the "radical" ADA.²¹ Schlesinger was an outstanding speech-writer. John Bartlow Martin described him:

Schlesinger was thirty-four, with a high forehead and getting bald, alert eyes and liquid face, glasses, a gay and funny man, articulate, sometimes acid, gregarious, with a quick intelligence and broad knowledge...He carried on an astonishing correspondence and telephonic dialogue. He could, seemingly, simultaneously hold a telephone conversation, write a speech, read source materials, and talk to somebody across the desk. He wrote rapidly and well. He wrote basic drafts on

¹⁵ *ibid*, 589.

¹⁶ *Current Biography 1979* (New York, 1979), 330.

¹⁷ Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 292.

¹⁸ Among them was John Bartlow Martin, the future author of the two volume biography of Stevenson *Adlai Stevenson of Illinois* and *Adlai Stevenson and the World*. Schlesinger praised Martin's books as "one of the great American biographies of our time." from the jacket of *Stevenson and the World*. See Appendix for Schlesinger as book reviewer.

¹⁹ Martin, *Stevenson of Illinois*, 635.

²⁰ Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 296.

²¹ *ibid*, 289.

major speeches, did heavy rewrite on other peoples' drafts, and, from his friends across the country, obtained dozens of drafts.²²

Or, as Galbraith wrote, "Alone among all I've observed in this craft he could remove his coat, address his typewriter, and without resort to reference books, documents, or pause for thought produce an entire speech in one sitting." Not only that, he quickly learned how to mimic Stevenson's own style.²³

The tremendous respect the Elks felt for Stevenson spurred them to hard work; most took only two or three evenings off all that Fall. Schlesinger, Wirtz, and Martin wrote the most partisan of the speeches. According to Martin, Schlesinger had found the acceptance speech too tame, and, "considered it his duty to make Stevenson's speeches 'simple and militant' not 'complex and philosophic.'" Stevenson usually objected to the partisan speeches when he saw them, enjoyed giving them, and regretted them the morning after.²⁴

Throughout, Stevenson resisted Schlesinger's urging to take a more partisan line. He refused to debate Eisenhower, and only after strenuous urging from Schlesinger and McGowan did Stevenson make an immediate reply to Nixon's charge that Stevenson had used political contributions for personal purposes.²⁵ In the end, the Elks admitted the validity of Stevenson's complaints that the writers were too tied to exposition of facts, and did not pay enough attention to oratory.²⁶

A more serious conflict was the staff's attempt to maneuver Stevenson to the left. With Stevenson's consent, Schlesinger rewrote and moderated many of Bob Tuft's harsh foreign policy speeches.²⁷ But on many other issues, Schlesinger and his fellow liberals found themselves at odds with Stevenson. Vice-presidential candidate and Alabama Senator John Sparkman was one source of debate. Schlesinger got along well with him personally, but was troubled by Sparkman's remarks on racial issues. Stevenson ignored Schlesinger's suggestion that Sparkman focus on foreign policy.²⁸ Among the factors contributing to Stevenson's poor performance on television was Stevenson's awkward ad-libbing around parts of speeches he found too liberal.²⁹ Stevenson had his doubts about Schlesinger's political acumen; Stevenson placed an "x" next to a remark in a letter from friend Agnes Meyer that called Schlesinger (and Archibald MacLiesh) "babes in the

²² Martin, *Stevenson of Illinois*, 631. Among those on the other end of Schlesinger's telephone that year was Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. As Schlesinger explained, "Joe Kennedy was initially very enthusiastic about Stevenson, but he didn't know anyone in the Stevenson entourage, except that he knew I was a friend of Jack's, so he used to call me during the campaign--long monologues over the telephone of advice, very genial." Interview 1/14/82.

²³ Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 292.

²⁴ Martin, *Stevenson of Illinois*, 637.

²⁵ *ibid*, 699, 707.

²⁶ Galbraith, *A Life in our Times*, 294-295.

²⁷ Martin, *Stevenson of Illinois*, 297.

²⁸ Galbraith, *A Life in our Times*, 290. At Kenneth Galbraith's ambassadorial confirmation hearing nine years later, Senator Sparkman would active the prospective Ambassador if he was an "egghead socialist." John Kenneth Galbraith, *Ambassador's Journal* (Boston, 1969), 45.

²⁹ Martin, *Stevenson of Illinois*, 637. David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (New York, 1979), 333-335.

woods politically speaking.”³⁰ Conversely, Schlesinger had had some initial misgivings about working for Stevenson. He recalls:

(Stevenson) was always excellent on civil liberties, very strong against McCarthy and so on. (On) civil rights, he was, in the 50’s, quite cold and unresponsive and disappointing, rather conservative. He really was a much more conservative man than Kennedy. He was also an older man, and an older generation. Every man’s a prisoner of his own experience, and he grew up in another time.³¹

At the time, Schlesinger considered Stevenson the most conservative Democratic nominee since John W. Davis.³²

While Adlai Stevenson aimed his campaign at intelligent, moderate Independents, the writers told Stevenson to concentrate more on the traditional Democratic constituencies, and less on the independent Republicans. As Schlesinger explained to him, “It depends on who you think your audience is, the people, in Lake Forest or the people who are going to work for you.”³³ Worried that Irish Catholics were wavering, Schlesinger suggested “a full-dress anti-Communist speeches.”³⁴

Although Stevenson was willing to make the required anti-Communist signals, he hesitated to follow Schlesinger’s advice to court organized labor. Stevenson thought that Truman was in trouble because of the public’s perception of his dependence on big labor, but Schlesinger and the others saw the election as a struggle with the business community for the control of the nation. When Schlesinger predicted that failure to unequivocally favor repeal of Taft-Hartley might cause the loss of the AFL-CIO endorsement, Stevenson replied, “It seems to me much more important to tell them what I really think than to deceive them to get their endorsement.”³⁵ Of Stevenson’s predilection for telling audiences, especially labor audiences, what they did not want to hear, Schlesinger thought, “It was a brilliant device to establish Stevenson’s identity. As a permanent device it was an error.”³⁶

As the campaign wore on, Stevenson did become more partisan. In September he finally came out for repeal of Taft-Hartley.³⁷ Stevenson used Jim Rowe’s suggestion, passed through Schlesinger, to label the Republicans as the “two-headed elephant” and thereby identify Eisenhower with the Taft wing of the party.³⁸ Schlesinger’s description of the Republican Old Guard as men “who have to be dragged, screaming and kicking into the 20th century” made its way into Stevenson’s speeches.³⁹

³⁰ *ibid*, 191.

³¹ Interview, 1/14/82.

³² Martin, *Stevenson of Illinois*, 638. But Schlesinger’s father had voted for Davis, over the progressive independent Rob LaFollette. Schlesinger Sr., *In Retrospect*, 73

³³ Martin, *Stevenson of Illinois*, 643.

³⁴ *ibid*, 681.

³⁵ *ibid*, 677.

³⁶ *ibid*, 640.

³⁷ *ibid*, 691.

³⁸ *ibid*, 676.

³⁹ Lasky, *J.F.K.*, 304.

While Stevenson was trying to identify Eisenhower with the extremist wing of the Republicans, Republicans began to spread the word that Stevenson was controlled by the far left elements of the Democrats. Henry Luce's pro-Eisenhower *Time* called Schlesinger Stevenson's "head speechwriter" and "an apologist for Acheson."⁴⁰ As rumors of the liberals' influence on Stevenson spread, Stevenson denied in a letter to friend that III was a puppet in the hands of Wyatt and a young writer Schlesinger."⁴¹

Senator Mundt, describing the Stevenson football team, had Arthur Schlesinger play "anything on the left side of the line."⁴² Illinois Republican Everett Dirksen labeled Schlesinger and the ADA a threat to liberty.⁴³ A more serious attack was the charge by Senators Case and Mundt that Schlesinger belonged to Civil Rights Congress, a Communist front group.⁴⁴ Schlesinger replied that he had resigned before the group's first meeting, that his name was not on the Attorney General's report on the group, and that he as a "militant anti-Communist" had been attacked in the *Daily Worker*.⁴⁵ Fearful that he was damaging the campaign, Schlesinger offered to resign; Stevenson asked him to stay.

On an October 27th television broadcast, Senator McCarthy "exposed" subversive influences in the Stevenson camp and accused Schlesinger, "Richard" DeVoto, and "Alger" Stevenson of Communist tendencies.⁴⁶

Just before the election, Schlesinger telephoned Marian, who predicted that Stevenson would win the election, but would lose Massachusetts. When Schlesinger ran into a friend from New York, who predicted that Stevenson would win, but would lose New York, Schlesinger began to suspect that it was over. Hoping for the best, he bet in the staff pool that Stevenson would win 350 electoral votes.⁴⁷ On election night, the young liberals gathered at Schlesinger's home to listen to the election returns, as they had done in 1948.⁴⁸ Galbraith reminisced, "It would be hard for the young to understand not only our surprise but our shock at the outcome. For twenty years liberal Democrats had won; Harry Truman had shown in 1948 that whatever the portents, they would still do so. It had become the natural order of things. At Arthur Schlesinger's house on election night in 1952, we learned that the natural order had come to an end."⁴⁹

After the election, the stunned liberals began to regroup. Schlesinger wrote an analysis of the campaign. Rejoicing in how Stevenson had refused to sell himself to curry favor, Schlesinger proclaimed that "his campaign achieved everything except victory."⁵⁰ The New and Fair Deals, Schlesinger wrote, were victims of their own success. Ethnic groups were now in the mainstream of American life. The "lace-curtain" generation of immigrants was trying to prove its assimilation by voting Republican. But Schlesinger did

⁴⁰ "Who's Adlai?" *Time* (Oct. 27, 1952), 31. Secretary of State Acheson, of course, was the well-known Dean of what Richard Nixon termed "Acheson's college of Cowardly Communist Containment."

⁴¹ Martin, *Stevenson of Illinois*, 646.

⁴² *New York Times* (Oct. 16, 1952), 24.

⁴³ Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal*, 494.

⁴⁴ *New York Times*, (Oct. 2, 19-92), 25:1; and (Oct.5, 1952), 65:1.

⁴⁵ Letter, *New York Times*. (Oct. 11, 1952), 18:7.

⁴⁶ Galbraith, *A Life in our Times*, 298.

⁴⁷ Martin, *Stevenson of Illinois*, 753-755;

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 278.

⁴⁹ Galbraith, *A Life in our Times*, 303.

⁵⁰ A sentimental statement from a pragmatist.

see signs of hope: Stevenson's vote total was far above Truman's.⁵¹ In cities like Philadelphia, where reform Democrats were in control, the party did substantially better than in 1948.⁵²

And whatever the results of the campaign, Schlesinger was pleased to see how Stevenson had moved beyond the cliches of left and right. The New Deal was no longer the issue, just as Wilson's New Freedom was no longer the issue in 1932. The time was coming for a different type of reform. "Only as progressivism expresses the possibilities for the future--and not as it revives the memories of the past--that it can once again recover its central place in American life."⁵³

Despite public perception to the contrary, Stevenson's advisors had known all along that he was no intellectual. Galbraith doubts whether Stevenson read a serious book after being elected Governor.⁵⁴

Schlesinger explained:

No one in politics is a creative thinker, but some incite creativity in those around them. Even FDR was not an original thinker, although he had a questing mind, probably more so than Stevenson had. He chose liberals for political friends because he liked them and could learn from them. He questioned the cliches and made people around him take a fresh look at things. So he was the cause of creativity in others. Kennedy was the same. No one in politics is an intellectual. But Stevenson and Kennedy enjoyed intellectuality. Politicians live in the world of power. Kennedy and Roosevelt relished power. Stevenson understood the world of power better than he conceded. He enjoyed it; it was his world, but somehow the thought of exercising it made him feel guilty.... The creative politician is one who picks up fresh ideas and acts as a broker of ideas. They are alert to ideas, they incite them, even though they have to abandon cherished ideals of their own.⁵⁵

He also explained the difference between Roosevelt and Stevenson. While intellectuals had always admired Roosevelt, they had felt a sense of distance, too. But the intellectuals (perhaps wishfully) saw Stevenson as one of their own. "The intellectuals desired Stevenson's victory, not to attain public objectives or even to affect public policy, but to affirm an interior sense of admiration and of belief."⁵⁶ But Stevenson and the intellectuals had been repudiated last November.

Sick of "Communism, corruption, and Korea," and tired of a permanent state of crisis, America had turned against the Democrats and their liberal thinkers. Schlesinger would write, "No intellectual phenomenon has been more surprising in recent years than

⁵¹ Although Truman had lost votes to Wallace and Thurmond.

⁵² Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Which Road for Democrats?" *The Reporter* (Jan.20, 1953), 31-34.

⁵³ *ibid*, 34.

⁵⁴ Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 288.

⁵⁵ Martin, *Stevenson of Illinois*, 643-644.

⁵⁶ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Highbrow in American Politics," *Partisan Review* (Mar.-Apr. 1953), reprinted in Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Politics of Hope* (Boston, 1963), 219-229.

the revival of conservatism as a respectable political philosophy...fashionable intellectual circles now disdain liberalism as naive, ritualistic, sentimental, shallow.”⁵⁷

Schlesinger and the other liberal intellectuals realized that Eisenhower’s election had signaled a dangerous new beginning. Soon after Eisenhower’s inauguration, he wrote an article detailing the drift of American society, and laid down his thoughts concerning “anti-intellectualism, the anti-Semitism of the business community.” He noted how quickly the word “egghead” originally neutral in meaning- had become an epithet. The mood of the country was frightening, as the nation was losing even its ability to laugh at itself. Now was not the time for the intellectual to retreat: “Much as the highbrow in his present mood may dislike politics, he cannot escape or reject it. We hear that the intellectual is entering into a new phase of contemplation and withdrawal. But, if he decides to flee it all and become a Yogi, he will have no one else to blame if Senator McCarthy becomes the Commissar.”⁵⁸

Having succeeded in 1952 by waving what Schlesinger called, “the red shirt,” extremist Republicans, led by Joseph McCarthy, aimed to stifle liberal dissent.⁵⁹ In 1953, Senator McCarthy told a friend of plans to attack liberal professors, but not ones as politically astute -as Schlesinger and Galbraith.⁶⁰ Although Schlesinger disliked liberal use of the word “McCarthyism” because it intensified the Irish Catholic community’s feeling of persecution, he urged his Senator, John Kennedy, to speak out against McCarthy’s tactics.⁶¹ But Kennedy replied, “Hell, half my voters in Massachusetts look on McCarthy as a hero.”⁶²

The liberal cycle had run its course, and the pendulum had swung back to conservatism. If McCarthy did not succeed in wiping out free thought, the Eisenhower consensus smothered American life with a mediocre “middle of the road” passivity. And for the rest of the decade, Schlesinger and the liberals would only be able to protest.

⁵⁷ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “The Politics of Nostalgia,” *The Reporter* (June 16, 1955), reprinted in *The Politics of Hope*, 73.

⁵⁸ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “The Highbrow in American Politics.”

⁵⁹ Martin, *Adlai Stevenson and the World*, 92-93.

⁶⁰ Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 58. The mainstream Republican establishment in Washington thought no more of Schlesinger than did McCarthy. President Eisenhower’s Ambassador to the Court of St. James, an honorary trustee Oxford College, vetoed the college’s offer of a one-year visiting professorship to Schlesinger, and refused to sign the minutes until Schlesinger’s name was deleted. “Getting Even with George III,” *The Reporter*, (July 20, 1954), 2. Back in the states, Eisenhower refused to reappoint Schlesinger Sr. to the Historic Publications Commission. Schlesinger Sr., *In Retrospect*, 154. Arthur’s brother Tom was dismissed from his job editing a public relations bulletin for the State Department. *ibid*, 191.

⁶¹ Herbert Parmet, *Jack: The Struggles of John F. Kennedy* (New York), 303.

⁶² Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings* (New York, 1980), 36.

This is a chapter from David B. Kopel, *The Highbrow in American Politics: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and the Role of the Intellectual in Politics*. Honors Thesis in History, Brown University, May 1982. Awarded Highest Honors, and the National Geographic Society Prize for best History thesis. Other chapters are available on-line at <http://www.davekopel.org/schlesinger/main.htm>.