

YOUR KINDLE NOTES FOR:

History as Mystery

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Last accessed on Wednesday February 2, 2022

48 Highlight(s) | 0 Note(s)

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> In the first century A.D. Josephus wrote his history of the Jewish uprising against Rome after playing a prominent political and military role in that struggle. And centuries before, there was Thucydides, a military leader who wrote a monumental history of the very Peloponnesian War in which he had participated. The nineteenth century gave us Guizot, Macaulay, Mommsen, Rotteck, and Thiers.4 It was Thiers who presided over the bloody suppression and mass executions of thousands of revolutionary Parisian Communards. To any list of historian-cum-political officeholders, or political officeholder-cum-historians, we could add Gibbon, Tocqueville, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, populist leader Tom Watson, and French socialist leader Jean Jaurès, who took time to write a history of the French Revolution.5 Later on, there were antifascist scholar-politicians like Herman Rauschning and Gaetano Salvemini. In our own day, alas, we must make do with Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Henry Kissinger, and Zbigniew Brzezinski.

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> Winston Churchill was supposed to have assured his Tory associates, “History will be kind to us, gentlemen, for I plan to write it.” With a concern that history be kind to them and with the additional inducement of munificent advances from their publishers, political leaders regularly produce self-serving memoirs whose contributions to historical truth are often parsimonious.

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> Radical historians have pointed out that almost all financiers and industrialists of the late nineteenth century launched themselves in business either with inherited wealth or access to large loans and

corrupt deals, or by profiteering during the Civil War, or in other ways acquiring funds and land from the government.53 The textbooks Anyon studied either avoid this subject or present a historically false view of how wealth was accumulated, crediting a financial mogul like Andrew Carnegie with having started on a weekly wage of only $1.20, from which he supposedly saved enough to invest and make a fortune.54 In fact, Carnegie earned that meager sum when he was thirteen years old, and saved not a penny of it. Over the years, benefiting from a network of fellow-immigrant Scots, he procured jobs as a telegraph operator, then manager and railroad superintendent. But all his hard work still left him a relatively poor man. Things changed only when his wealthy boss and mentor lent him a tidy sum to invest in some promising stocks. Thus did Carnegie launch his career as a financier, eventually becoming a multimillionaire. He never again worked hard in the usual sense, preferring to concentrate on frequent and luxurious vacations, world tours, and extended stays in his native Scotland.55 Although there were more than thirty thousand strikes between the Civil War and World War I, the textbooks Anyon studied give only brief and usually negative mention to labor struggles and labor unions. Some of the books claim inaccurately that radical leaders were feared and hated by the public.56 Workers are never treated as belonging to a social class with common interests that are contrary to those of owners.57 Anyon concludes that these textbooks serve more as promoters of the existing corporate order than as independent sources of information.

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The School as a Tool To say that schools fail to produce an informed, critically minded, democratic citizenry is to overlook the fact that schools were never intended for that purpose.65 Their mission is to turn out loyal subjects who do not challenge the existing corporate-dominated social order. That the school has pretty much fulfilled its system-sustaining role is no accident. The educational system is both a purveyor of the dominant political culture and a product of it.

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“Christianity,” writes Mattingly, “was a religion of peace, with the peace of God in its heart.”8 One would never know it from the way Christians attacked other Christians whose views deviated somewhat from their own. Over and above their clashes with pagan authorities, Christ

believers waged uncompromising fratricidal war, often over doctrinal esoterica that might seem oddly frivolous to modern readers. Christianity's early history "was more plagued by splits within the church than by threats from without," notes Joyce Salisbury.9 According to Edward Gibbon, the Christians inflicted far greater casualties on each other in the course of their internecine conflicts than ever was visited upon them by the infidels. This bloodletting continued well beyond the Reformation era. Relying on Grotius, Gibbon notes that the number of Christians executed by other Christians in a single province during the reign of Charles V far exceeded that of all the martyrs who perished at the hands of pagans throughout the entire Roman Empire in the space of three centuries.10

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Almost from Christianity's inception, charges of criminal misconduct were regularly hurled by one Christian sect against leaders of another. Paul himself putatively was a victim of such factional strife in Rome. Early in its existence, the church did its utmost to suppress Gnosticism, Marcionism, and Montanism, followed with campaigns against various other heretical offshoots. Strife between Christian sects in Rome was violent enough to necessitate intervention by the emperor and city prefect.11 In 317, in cities throughout northern Africa, riots between Donatist Christians and Catholic Christians cost numerous lives.12 There was a dimension of class struggle in some of these conflicts. Donatism found its strongest following among the lower orders, whose rejection of the church of Carthage was part of their hostility toward the rich. Donatist social rebels led what Joseph Vogt calls "undisciplined mobs" to "drive out Roman proprietors and compel hated slave-owners to perform servile tasks."13 Not until well into the fourth century, when the dominant sect was established as the empire's preferred religion, was Christianity's doctrinal orthodoxy firmly secured. It

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While kept vividly alive in the modern imagination by popular novels like Ben Hur and Hollywood films of Christians being thrown to the lions, persecution "remained an exceptional occasion," according to Michael Grant.16 Between Nero's cruel campaign in A.D. 64–68 and the limited one launched during the reign of Diocletian in A.D. 303–304, there were long periods of toleration, marred by sporadic incidents of

harassment and repression.17 Regarding the Diocletian “Great Persecution,” a leading Catholic historian, Monseigneur Duchesne, found only a score of proved cases of martyrdom in the entire empire.18 In the brief interlude of 361–363, after Christianity had become the established religion, a cautious and largely ineffectual pagan restoration was attempted by Emperor Julian (Julian the Apostate), a campaign “not pressed to the point of shedding blood,” notes one Catholic writer.19

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Origen, a church leader writing in the third century, candidly admits that those who had died for their faith were “few” and “easily numbered.”20 Despite his assertion that martyrdom was “the seed of the church,” even Gibbon judges the actual victims to be an “inconsiderable number.” He speculates that their ranks may have been misleadingly magnified by the custom of bestowing the title of martyr on all confessors of the faith.21 W. H. C. Frend remarks that only “hundreds not thousands” of Christians were ever martyred.22 And Rodney Stark concludes that “the Roman government seems to have cared very little about the ‘Christian menace.’ There was surprisingly little effort to persecute Christians. . . . [Persecutions] were infrequent and involved very few people. The early Christians may have faced some degree of social stigma but little actual repression.”23

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From the accounts we have, the arena crowds usually threw stones and heaped abuse upon the aspiring martyrs, offended by what the pagans perceived as their moral and spiritual arrogance. It was the pagan populace who demanded that Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, be thrown to the lions. “The impatient clamor of the multitude denounced the Christians as the enemies of gods and men.”24 And there is no evidence of a public outcry of any sort to stop the execution of Christians. Had there been, we would have heard of it through Christian sources. That some Christian clergy strongly opposed the enthusiasms of martyrs further suggests that martyrdom was not a bountiful source of recruitment.25

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> Stark explains that Christianity's early growth was due to (a) the communal social care that Christians provided for their brethren which allowed for a higher survival rate among Christians than pagans during epidemics (the evidence he gives for this is at best scanty); (b) the church's prohibition against the common practices of infanticide, abortion, and birth control, endowing Christians with a faster population growth; and (c) the high conversion rate of pagan husbands who were married to Christian women.29 Still, the early growth of Christianity could not have been all that dramatic. Early in the third century, Origen observed that the number of faithful was quite inconsiderable.

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> Extrapolating from what he knew about Antioch and Rome, Gibbon guesses that not more than 5 percent of the empire's population enlisted themselves under Christ's banner in the pre-Constantine era.30

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> One tireless critic was the third-century philosopher Porphyry, a neoplatonist theist and student of Plotinus. The surviving remnants of his fifteen-volume work, Against the Christians, contained many surprisingly modern-sounding arguments, and evoked critical responses from several generations of Christian writers, including church fathers like Jerome and Augustine.44 To their credit, Porphyry and other pagan philosophers gave no currency to widely circulated accusations that Christians practiced ritual murder, incest, cannabilism, and group sex.45 Instead, they concentrated on what was to them Christianity's highly improbable history and theology, posing such questions as: § Why would God select such a backwater as Galilee to send his son? And why such a laborious and haphazard method of propagating the faith across the entire world? § Why would an omnipotent, omniscient God need to descend to earth in human form to bring about a moral reformation? § Why would God so heartlessly deny an opportunity for salvation to the countless generations born before the advent of Jesus? Was it only then, after such a long period, that he remembered to judge the human race? § How does it happen that Christians take their origins from Judaism yet despise some of the very things that Jewish Scriptures teach? Why did God give contradictory laws to Moses and Jesus? § If the Gospels are eyewitness reports, why do they all give such widely

> conflicting accounts of Christ's suffering and crucifixion? § Why do the miraculous events described in the Gospels seem so fraught with deceit and trickery, as when the tiny placid lake of Galilee is described as a tumultuous sea that Jesus calms and walks upon? § Why did Peter (Acts 5.1–12) preside over the deaths of two devoted believers who handed over all their land and possessions to the Christ sect but committed the "sin" of keeping a little for themselves? § Why would Jesus reappear after his death only to an obscure few rather than to the multitude or to his enemies who never believed he was the Messiah? What evidence do we have that the dead can be resurrected?46

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> Emperor Constantine sought to silence Porphyry's voice by destroying his treatises. Later pro-Christian emperors also burned pagan critiques of Christianity. A century after Constantine, in 448, all surviving copies of Porphyry's work were condemned to the flames by church authorities. Other notable pagans whose anti-Christian polemics were torched include Celsus, Galen, Lucian, and Julian the Apostate.47 One of today's historians who looks favorably upon the early Christians, Stewart Perowne, makes no mention of how they relentlessly eradicated critical pagan literature.

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> Far from renouncing the values and institutions of antiquity, the early church embraced Roman notions of law and property, and offered no resistance to the emperor's autocratic rule or to the corruption and venality of the royal entourage, no opposition to aristocratic wealth and entitlement, no objection to the merciless tax machine and harsh criminal law, and no noticeable protest against poverty, slavery, female subjugation, and most other social abuses.51 "What is certain," remarks Aram Vartanian, "is that the Christianization of the Roman Empire did nothing to democratize or liberalize its laws.

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> In fact, long before Christ, during the Roman Republic and before that in ancient Athens and other Greek city-states, there existed pagan jurists and democratic leaders who expressed concern for the rights of citizens against privilege and arbitrary state power.54 Fox- Genovese

> notwithstanding, one is hard put to locate in the entire corpus of early Christian thought an advocacy of individual freedom against secular or ecclesiastical power. Such a concept is not to be found in Paul, Jerome, Ambrose, or Augustine. If anything, we repeatedly encounter a ready acceptance of autocratic secular power and an eagerness to enlist it to hunt down heretics, free thinkers, reformers, and other purveyors of heterodoxy.

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> In Europe, both before and after the Reformation, whether in Protestant or Catholic countries, the established ecclesiastics usually sided with the princes against the peasants, showing little sympathy for the democratic rights of commoners. Even as late as the French Revolution and the uprisings of 1848 which raised the banner of individual rights against monarchist rule throughout Europe, Catholic and Protestant churchmen sided overwhelmingly with the antidemocrats.55 Through the Middle Ages, the church hierarchy opposed workers guilds, and through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and even into much of the twentieth century, Catholic and Protestant churches were more likely to oppose than support labor unions.56

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> In sum, contrary to conventional belief, Christianity launched no great challenge against the dominant socio-economic order. The church raised no outcry against the inequitable social relations that bred poverty, slavery, and wars of conquest—as well as patriarchal domination, homophobia, cruelty to animals, and the like. Under the Christianized Roman Empire, taxation became still more oppressive, and the criminal law grew increasingly severe. Crucifixion was abolished but burning people alive at the stake became a favored mode of execution, a way of killing someone without technically violating the stricture against shedding blood.

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> early church fathers like Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome championed a church of the indigent and oppressed, of slaves and penniless peasants, they gave remarkably little evidence of it. Descended from an aristocratic Roman family, Ambrose (339–397) acquired a liberal

education, hobnobbed with Roman nobility, and served as consular of Liguria. At age thirty-four, before he had received the sacrament of baptism, Ambrose was transformed from governor to archbishop of Milan.94 Jerome maintained a literary correspondence with cultivated persons all over the world, and socialized with prosperous parishioners, one of his students being the wealthy Pammachius.95 Another of Jerome's close acquaintances was Paula, a Roman matron of considerable wealth and social standing who founded monasteries.96 While living in Rome from 382 to 385, Jerome "taught asceticism to a circle of wealthy women,"97 for whom the instruction must have been an uplifting divertimento.

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Drawing from this Inquisitional record, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie wrote a detailed study of peasant life in Montaillou. The picture that emerges is of a people whose interests ranged far beyond religion to include such things as property, farming, cooperative communal services, crafts, festivals, family relations, and love affairs.5 The peasants of 1318 were inclined to be loving toward their children, and wept more easily than we, both in happiness and sorrow. Nor were they particularly enthusiastic churchgoers, according to one of the religious dissidents. In his words: "Not half of [the priests'] parishioners go to hear them preach or understand anything of what they say."6 One

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The abbey's mills were large and expensive and represented a substantial capital investment and a source of considerable profit. The peasants' hand mills were small and cheap, consisting of two round millstones. It was, writes Faith, "a conflict over technology."18 It was even more a conflict over class relations, an encapsulation of embryonic capitalism, involving: § the concentration of the means of production in the hands of the few who could afford a large capital investment (the abbey's mills cost £100); § the need to valorize that investment and realize an ongoing profit; § the de-skilling of ordinary people, divesting them of their tools and domestic crafts, transforming them into dependent consumers of a monopoly service; § the use of armed force to impose an exploitative social relationship upon a resistant population. Rebellions against these conditions, and the brutal ways they were suppressed, seldom make it into our schoolbooks. Not

> surprisingly, writers who are in denial regarding the class oppression of their own day remain sedulously oblivious to class oppression long past.

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> Those of us who might welcome the notion of a nonsexist Christianity still should not downplay the misogynist strictures that clutter Scripture and other early church writings. The Old Testament, incorporated as part of the Christian Bible, reeks with fulminations against the idolatries and licentiousness that the Levite priests ascribed to the worshippers of the ancient female deity. In Jeremiah, Ezekial, Hosea, and elsewhere, devotion to the female godhead is equated with harlotry, infidelity, dissipation, and witchcraft.25 Jezebel, wife of a Hebrew king of Israel, comes down to us as the prototypic vixen, the treacherously evil female, although her real sin was to follow the ancient religion of Asherah, a female godhead.

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> For this, she was gruesomely murdered by one of Yahweh's approved agents.26

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> Under the Levite law only the husband could obtain a divorce, and this by simply writing a note, a bill of divorcement. A married woman, even a faithful one who had borne children, had no legal standing whatsoever and in most cases could be "put away" at will.28

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> Two centuries later, St. Ambrose, archbishop of Milan, declared, "It is just and right that woman accept as lord and master him whom she led to sin." And St. John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople, warned, "Among all savage beasts none is found so harmful as woman." St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo, wrote that "woman is incomplete without man," but man is complete unto himself for only he is made in God's image. The progenitor of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, Martin Luther, believed that "the regiment and dominion belong to the man as the head and master of the house." And Luther's

younger contemporary, John Calvin, maintained that political equality for women would be a “deviation from the original and proper order of nature.”32

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Women were not only inferior, they were carnally transgressive. Christian churchmen were long preoccupied with female concupiscence. They considered the female body to be perilously seductive, the source of lustful offenses for which the woman herself was at fault. The German inquisitors, Kraemer and Sprenger, described women as intellectually deficient, unable to grasp philosophy, burdened with weak memories, not inclined to self-discipline but ready to follow their impulses. A woman was an imperfect creature made from a bent rib, therefore always ready to deceive, more likely than a man to abjure her faith, more susceptible to inordinate affections and malicious passions, a shameless Jezebel given to lustful abominations, and more inclined to seek revenge through witchcraft or other means. All of which explains why so many more females than males were judged to be witches: they “cast wicked spells on countless men and animals” and they “consort with devils.”33

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The reality is something else. Once the church gained official status under Constantine, there followed what Luciano Canfora describes as “the melancholy experiences of the war waged by Christianity against the old culture and its sanctuaries: which meant, against the libraries. . . . The burning of books was part of the advent and imposition of Christianity.”65 Book burning began rather early as a Christian practice. As recorded in the New Testament, Christian converts in Ephesus responded to Paul’s preaching “and the name of the Lord Jesus” by destroying a large store of books valued at fifty thousand pieces of silver.66 After bestowing legitimate status upon Christianity, Constantine demanded the surrender of heretical works under penalty of death. In 435, Theodosius II and Valentian III consigned all heretical Nestorian books to the bonfire. And punishment was threatened for those who failed to deliver up Manichean writings for burning.67

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> Along with the closing of academies came the closing of minds. There was no limit to the enmity that leading churchmen felt toward secular arts and learning. The church fathers “despised all knowledge that was not useful to salvation,” along with every earthly and corporeal delight including the enjoyment of music, art, and literature.87 Early in the third century Tertullian related how in the next life he would laugh and exult when he beheld the proud monarchs, sage philosophers, deluded scholars, celebrated poets, tragedians, dancers, and others all groaning in the abyss and burning in the eternal flames.88 With equal vehemence, Augustine disdains the “so-called liberal arts” that occupied his earlier years when he was “the vile slave of vile affections.” Secular learning was worse than superfluous, it was pernicious. His studies in rhetoric, logic, music, geometry, and arithmetic had led him not to God but to his own “perdition.” But now, as a Christian, he felt he could spend a lifetime studying only the Scriptures yet not fully plumb their rich mysteries.89

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> Before we blame the barbarians for destroying classical civilization, we might question whether the terms “civilization” and “barbarian” convey an accurate impression of the respective cultural levels of contending forces in the fifth century. In the mind of the modern reader, “civilization” probably suggests a higher degree of social development and literacy than was actually enjoyed in fifth-century Christendom, and “barbarian” conjures up images of hairy brutes in animal skins. In fact, the northern peoples had a level of civil organization, folk culture, agriculture, and military technology that in many respects was the same or not much less advanced than what existed to the south. In the first century B.C., long before the sacking of Rome, Gaul was “more extensive in area, more populous, richer in resources and only slightly less advanced technologically than Italy.”90 Something of the same might be said of Germany. On various occasions during the early centuries of the Christian era, contingents of Germans and other northerners were allowed to settle within the empire and even join the Roman army. “Many

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> of these German officers were men of brilliant talents, fascinating address and noble bearing.”91 Another familiar but misleading image is

of Rome being sacked and the empire being overturned by a horde of marauding barbarians. In 410, the Visigoths, led by King Alaric, entered the city in an attempt to force the emperor to accept their demands for a homeland. Many Roman commoners—demoralized by the heavy taxes, corruption, and despotism of the late empire—were either indifferent to the invaders or actually welcomed them.92 Roman servants and slaves joined in the looting of wealthy residences and the killings that ensued. On orders from Alaric, the invaders did little damage to churches, public buildings, and the city in general.93 After six days, the Visigoths departed. They may have sacked Rome but they hardly brought down Roman civilization. Even with the subsequent takeover of Roman territory and the appearance of Germanic tribes along much of the Mediterranean shore, as Henri Pirenne notes, the northern tribes thought to settle themselves “in those happy regions where…

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The point to remember, however, is that much of the civic impoverishment was effected before these invasions, and must be credited to the narrowly spirited Christian orthodoxy that strove without stint for…

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While a Christianized western and central Europe slumped into the Dark Ages, there was no comparable devolution in the Byzantine Empire of southeast Europe, and there was an extraordinary intellectual burgeoning throughout much of the Arabic world.95 In sum, contrary to the conventional wisdom, we should spend less time blaming the barbarians and more time scrutinizing the role…

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In sum, contrary to popular notions, from early in its history Christianity supported secular and ecclesiastical autocracy, class oppression, slavery, sexism, and anti-Semitism. For centuries it had a severely regressive effect upon just about every area of learning. In addition, church officials tortured and executed tens of thousands of “witches,” and exterminated whole populations of heretics, infidels, and Jews.

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> One casualty of Wilhelm's repression was Bruno Bauer, who was deprived of his teaching post because of his unorthodox philosophical views, including his renowned critique of the Gospels and his denial of the historicity of Christ. Another victim was Arnold Ruge, who was exiled from university teaching after being refused a chair. Then there was Karl Marx, a close companion of both Bauer and Ruge. Though endowed with a doctoral degree and exceptional capabilities, Marx never even got his foot in the university door.12 In England, too, "the university intelligentsia, from the beginning, were coopted by the ruling class," serving as trainers of the domestic and colonial administrative cadre.13 Nevertheless, here and there could be found historians iconoclastic enough to have their careers brought to a sorry finish. There was the prominent case of Thorold Rogers, who labored from the 1860s to the 1880s to bring forth a monumental social and economic history, the abridged version of which served as a text for the socialist movement well into the twentieth century.14 Though he frequently took pains to inject unfriendly comments about socialism into his writings, Rogers supported striking farm workers and voiced enough anti-Tory opinions to get himself run out of his professorship at Oxford.15

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> As in monarchist Germany and aristocratic Britain, so in republican America: outspoken radicals had a markedly low survival rate in academia. There was Daniel DeLeon, who received the prized lectureship at the newly formed School of Political Science at Columbia College in 1882. Elected president of the Academy of Political Science in 1884–85, DeLeon seemed securely launched upon a promising career. But one day, while he sat with some of his colleagues, a crowd of workers trundled by in the street below. They were celebrating their victory after a hard-fought strike in which they had been treated brutally by management and police. Hastening to the window to view the procession, DeLeon's colleagues expressed such utter contempt for the laborers as to infuriate him. In short time, DeLeon threw his support to Henry George, the radical single-tax advocate, whom the unions were backing for mayor of New York. He began speaking publicly for George, identified as "Professor DeLeon of Columbia College." President Barnard, supported by Columbia officials, acted swiftly to end the

“outrage” of associating the name of their institution with a “monstrous agitation” that threatened to “overthrow the entire structure of civilized society.”16 Columbia was a pillar of the established order, preparing young men for leadership roles in the financial and legal world and upper echelons of government service. DeLeon’s political activities prevented him from ever becoming a regular member of the Columbia teaching staff.17 Even though he had demonstrated considerable ability as a scholar and a teacher he was not, as would normally have been the case, offered a professorship. In 1889 he left the faculty in disgust.18 In twentieth-century United States, a dismaying number of radical academics came under fire. Among the better known victims were E. A. Rose, Scott Nearing, Edward Bemis, and Paul Baran. Of special note was Thorstein Veblen. Although his formal training was in economics, Veblen regularly challenged the received truths of bourgeois history and social science, which he saw as little more than an extended apologetic for the existing politico-economic system. Common lore has it that his personal lifestyle, including a stormy divorce and illicit liaisons with various women, was the cause of his checkered career in academia. One of his editors sets the record straight, noting that what really upset Veblen’s academic employers and peers “was less his unstable ménage than his dangerous thoughts. They got back at him in many ways. He was ‘not sound,’ they said; ‘not scholarly.’” They froze his meager salary and delayed his promotions. Despite his fame, his productivity, and the relatively wide readership he had gained, his choice of teaching posts shrank and never was he awarded a grant for any research project he submitted.

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As late as 1890, many gentlemen historians—in the words of one—had “no ambition to be known as a Professor of American History,” and emphasized their European training and orientation so to avoid “being regarded as an American provincial.”21 Relatively few courses in American history were offered at Harvard and Yale, and none at all at Princeton. This snobbery began to recede after the Spanish-American War of 1898, when the United States was recognized as a world power by the European nations. During the next fifty years American history became the most assiduously cultivated field in both teaching and research.22 In the United States, through the first half of the twentieth century, a noticeable number of prominent historians were wealthy (George Beer in tobacco, Rhodes in iron, Beard in dairy farming), or editors of big business publications (Oberholtzer), or quasi-official

scribes for Rockefeller and Ford (Nevins), or U.S. Navy admirals (Mahan and Morison).23 One of them, Rhodes, remarked in no uncertain terms that they conceived of history as an “aristocratic profession” and “the rich man’s pastime.”

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Historians like Schlesinger and Boorstin walk in Ranke’s footsteps, faithfully serving the powers that be and reaping all the rewards, including choice academic appointments, prestigious awards, and high-profile nonacademic posts. Schlesinger served in the Kennedy administration, and Boorstin was appointed Librarian of Congress. Enjoying the benefits of their intensely partisan proestablishment careers, they advise their colleagues to eschew partisan causes that might detract from the professional quality of their scholarship.60

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An end run around the media blackout was achieved by Oliver Stone’s film JFK. Released in late 1991, the movie exposed millions of viewers to the many disturbing aspects of the assassination. JFK was repeatedly attacked seven months before it was released, in just about every major print and broadcast outlet, usually in the most caustic and general terms. The media’s ideological gatekeepers poured invective upon Stone, while avoiding the more difficult task of rebutting the substantive points made in his film, and without ever coming to grips with the critical historical literature upon which the movie drew. A full exposure of the assassination conspiracy, that might unearth CIA or military intelligence involvement, would cast serious discredit upon the nation’s major institutions.88 Oliver Stone’s JFK continued to be attacked years after its initial run. Stone was pilloried as a “ranting maniac” and a “dangerous fellow,” guilty of “near-pathological monkeying with history.” The idea of a conspiracy in high places was ridiculed as a fanciful scenario that sprang from the imagination of a filmmaker. Like the Warren Commission, the press assumed a priori that Oswald was the lone killer. In 1978, when a House Select Committee concluded that there was more than one assassin involved in the Kennedy shooting, the Washington Post editorialized that there still probably was no conspiracy, but possibly “three or four societal outcasts” who acted independently of each other spontaneously and simultaneously to shoot the president.89 Instead of a conspiracy theory

the Post created a coincidence theory that might be the most fanciful explanation of all.

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Meanwhile, in answer to the question, Did Oswald act alone? most independent investigators concluded that he did not act at all. He was not one of the people who shot Kennedy, although he was involved in another way, in his own words as “a patsy,” concluded the critics. In the wake of the public’s renewed interest in the Kennedy assassination, the media bestowed fulsome publicity on one Gerald Posner, a little-known New York lawyer and writer, helping to catapult his book, Case Closed, onto the national best-seller list. Posner’s book ignored the abundant evidence of conspiracy and coverup and used outright untruths to conclude that Lee Harvey Oswald was a disturbed lone leftist who killed Kennedy.90 Neither before nor since has a writer about the Kennedy assassination been accorded such lavish fanfare. Posner’s book was featured in prime display spaces at major bookstores around the nation. It was quickly adopted for bookclub distribution. Posner himself enjoyed ubiquitous major media exposure, being treated as the premier authority on the case.91 He was granted guest columns and lead letters, lead articles, and adulatory reviews in just about every major publication in the United States. A review of his book in the Journal of American History reads more like a promotional piece than an evaluation of a historical investigation.92 Case Closed was hailed as “brilliantly illuminating” and “lucid and compelling” by New York Times reviewers who knew all along that conspiracies to murder the president do not happen in a nice country like the United States.93

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The gaping deficiencies in Case Closed went unnoticed in the major media. None of the pundits or reviewers remarked on Posner’s bad habit of referring to sources as supporting his position, when in fact they did not. Thus, he very selectively cited as new scientific “proof” the computer-enhanced studies by Failure Analysis Associates, without mentioning that the company had produced evidence for both sides in an American Bar Association mock trial of Lee Harvey Oswald. In a sworn affidavit, the CEO of Failure Analysis, Roger L. McCarthy, pointed out that “one Gerald Posner” consulted only the prosecution materials without acknowledging “that there was additional material prepared by

> FaAA for the defense. Incredibly, Mr. Posner makes no mention of the fact that the mock…

Note:

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> Posner has another bad habit. He cites interviews with people whom he never actually interviewed and who repudiate the representations he made about their views. Thus, before the House Committee on Government Operations in November 1993, he claimed to have interviewed two of Kennedy's pathologists, James Humes, M.D., and J. Thornton Boswell, M.D., who supposedly admitted to him that they had erred in their original judgment about the location of Kennedy's skull wound, opting for a higher entrance wound that would better fit the theory that the shot came from the book depository where Oswald was supposedly perched.95 But Gary Aguilar, M.D., an expert on the medical evidence relating to the assassination, telephoned Humes and Boswell: "Both physicians told me that they had not changed their minds about…

Note:

Yellow highlight | Location: 3,840

> Are we to believe, asks Aguilar, that Boswell admitted to Posner he saw a high skull wound at very nearly the same time he was claiming he saw a low wound to a fellow pathologist, the editor of JAMA, in a published interview in that journal (May 27, 1992)? Are we to believe that Boswell would forget that he had repudiated his own sworn testimony and autopsy report in a conversation with Posner? Furthermore, such a retraction by Humes and Boswell would have had enormous forensic significance. Why then did Posner fail to mention this "case-closing" news anywhere in either edition of his book? So many inconsistencies in Posner's account exist that only a full release of his…

Note:

Yellow highlight | Location: 3,847

> In Case Closed, Posner maintains that James Tague, a bystander at the assassination, was hit by a fragment from the first of three shots.98 Tague maintains that he was not hit by the first shot, which means there must have been a fourth bullet from someone other than Posner's lone assassin.99 In an April 1994 telephone conversation, Tague told Gary Aguilar the same thing he had told the Warren Commission, thereby flatly contradicting Posner's reconstruction of his testimony. Even more

unsettling, in Case Closed, Posner cites two interviews with Tague to support his version of Tague's testmony. But Tague informed Aguilar that he has never spoken to Posner.100 Posner "picks and chooses his witnesses on the basis of their consistency with the thesis he wants to prove," comments G. Robert Blakey, chief counsel to the House Select Committee on Assassinations. "All through his book, Posner uses our investigation when it serves his purpose but disregards it when it runs counter to his thesis." One example: Secret Service agent Paul Landis, who was riding the running board of the follow-up car, heard shots that came from both the grassy knoll and the book depository. Posner knows about Landis; he quotes him as a credible witness on the timing of the first shot but ignores his testimony about the direction of the third shot, just as he ignores the testimony of others who reported gunfire from the grassy knoll.101 There are many questions Posner does not address: What of the witnesses who saw something different from what the…

Note:

Yellow highlight | Location: 4,390

Here we might note the significance of Vice President Millard Fillmore's views. A devoted friend and admirer of Henry Clay, Fillmore informed Taylor that in the event of a tie in the Senate on Clay's compromise package, the vice president, as presiding officer, would cast the deciding vote in favor of it.47 It must have been a discouragement to the chief executive to know that his vice president would line up against him. Clay's omnibus bill, in the words of one historian, "was doomed as long as Zachary Taylor lived."48 It was no secret that if Taylor died and Fillmore became president, there would be a dramatic shift in policy on the slavery question.

Note:

Yellow highlight | Location: 4,489

Taylor's death marked a dramatic turning point in policy. Immediately after his demise, the policy of containment against the spread of slavery was reversed. On July 11, 1850, with Taylor not yet entombed, Daniel Webster wrote to an associate that Fillmore's "coming to power is a heavy blow" to the "half abolition Gentlemen. I believe Mr. Fillmore favors the compromise, & there is no doubt that recent events [the president's death] have increased the probability of the passage of that measure."78 Later, Webster wrote, "I think the country has had a providential escape from very considerable dangers."79 Clay was of like

mind, writing to his daughter-in-law: “I think the event which has happened [Taylor’s death] will favor the passage of the Compromise bill.”80

Note:

Yellow highlight | Location: 4,497

The two old rivals, Clay and Webster, joined forces with Clay’s friend and admirer, the newly installed President Fillmore, who put the power of his office, including its ample patronage resources, behind the compromise package.81 Within a month after Taylor’s death, many of the issues that fervently concerned the slaveholders were settled to their satisfaction. The Texas boundary was set at expanded limits of 33,000 square miles above even what Clay had proposed. California was made a state but New Mexico remained a territory. The interstate slave trade continued without federal interference, and a strong fugitive slave bill was passed. Fillmore’s vigorous enforcement produced “an era of slave hunting and kidnapping.”82 People who harbored runaways, and even persons who had knowledge of such activity but failed to report it, now risked fine and imprisonment.

Note:

Yellow highlight | Location: 4,509

If someone had wanted to poison Taylor, it would not have been too difficult a task to accomplish. There was no Secret Service in those days. Security in the White House was poor and in the White House kitchen nonexistent. Uninvited guests wandered about upstairs.84 A would-be assassin who gained employment on the White House staff or perhaps a well-bribed southern sympathizer or an interloper on familiar terms with the staff could have done the deed.

Note:

Yellow highlight | Location: 4,531

Most of the evil in history is perpetrated not by lunatics or monsters but by individuals of responsibility and commitment, whose most unsettling aspect is the apparent normality of their deportment. In any case, the men whom Genovese

Note:

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> A closer examination of the postmortem investigation and the historical record should leave us more discomfited than ever. The presence of arsenic was never satisfactorily explained, and the levels were sometimes inaccurately reported. The suspiciously high antimony level went unreported. The samples themselves were of dubious reliability. No precise sectional hair analysis was performed. The symptoms were distinctly those of poisoning. The ludicrous cherries-and-milk, cucumbers-and-cabbage, sunstroke-and-sickness explanations for Taylor's death conjured by historians are without a shred of supporting evidence and cannot be taken seriously—yet they are. If we cannot say for sure that Zachary Taylor was poisoned, we can say with certainty that he did not die from sunstroke or cherries and milk. Yet these latter imaginings remain the acceptable explanation, the one that puts to rest any thoughts about an ugly side to U.S. history. The case of Zachary Taylor's death demonstrates how ideological gatekeepers close ranks against any issue that challenges their expertise or suggests conspiracy in high places.

Note: