

## A Last Lecture

I first saw the beautiful Cornell University campus nearly fifty years ago, in the summer of 1962, when I drove here to do research in manuscript collections for my Columbia University doctoral dissertation. I was 25 years old, not much older than you, and after working in the library I would take my 2-year old daughter swimming at Robert Treman state park. I still have photos of Lisa riding on my shoulders as I paddled around on all fours.

It didn't occur to me during the few days I was in Ithaca that, just four years later, I would join the Cornell faculty, nor certainly that I would spend the rest of my life here – and would end up teaching more than 25,000 students. But it was the best thing that could have happened to me. I've always believed that the job I have here is the finest job any historian could have, and over the years, when I've heard Cornell faculty members grumble about this thing, or complain about that, as faculty members are inclined to do, I've always become somewhat impatient.

So what I want to do today is pay tribute to some of the individuals who have done so much to help me, to recall some of the events that stand out in my mind, to say a little about my philosophy of teaching, and of course to offer you, my last class of Cornellians, some advice I hope you'll find helpful. I'll end by telling you briefly of my plans for the future so far as I can discern them.

At the age of 17 I entered Brooklyn College, and soon thereafter had to choose a major. The only subject I knew I liked, and for which I thought I might have any aptitude, was history, so without giving the matter much thought I chose it as the field I would study. I really didn't know what an eminent group of scholars and teachers I'd find in the department: the Russianist Jesse Dunsmore Clarkson, the English historian Madeline Robinton, the German historian Hans Rosenberg, and the Asianist Hyman Kublin, to name a few. I was particularly fortunate to take a western civ course with Abraham S. Eisenstadt, a truly gifted teacher who later directed my senior thesis.

But the person who influenced me the most was the newly appointed department chair, John Hope Franklin. When he came to Brooklyn College in 1956, my junior year, he was the first black historian ever to be appointed to the faculty of a college that was not historically

African-American. He had recently served as an advisor to the NAACP on the brief it submitted to the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*. He taught a course on Jacksonian democracy, the civil war and reconstruction, and I couldn't wait to get to class each day, so thoughtful and passionate were his lectures.

When I was preparing to enter graduate school, it was Professor Franklin who persuaded me that Columbia, because of its faculty in the field of recent American history, would be my best choice. When I was writing my masters essay – on an aspect of late 19<sup>th</sup> century African-American history -- it was Professor Franklin who took me to lunch in the faculty cafeteria, treated me like a professional historian, and told me of the information I would find in the Booker T. Washington Papers in the Library of Congress. And it was John Hope who, when I later served as chair of the Cornell history department, came to give a wonderful guest lecture and who remained a friend until his death at the age of 94 in 2009.

I attempted several years ago to read aloud a passage from his autobiography, *Mirror to America*, to a freshman writing seminar, but broke down and cried. I'll give it another try now. He is describing the day in 1947 when he completed writing 'From Slavery to Freedom', the history of the Black experience in America:

“In the planning and writing of my work, I had witnessed more than five hundred years of human history pass before my eyes. I had seen one slave ship after another from Portugal, Spain, France, Holland, England, and the United States pile black human cargo into its bowels as it would coal or even gold had either been more available and profitable at the time. I had seen them dump my ancestors at New World ports as they would a load of cattle and wait smugly for their pay for capture and transport. I had seen them beat black men until they themselves became weary and rape black women until their ecstasy was spent leaving their brutish savagery exposed. I had heard them shout, 'Give us liberty or give us death,' and not mean one word of it. I had seen them measure out medication or education for a sick or ignorant white child and ignore a black child similarly situated. I had seen them lynch black men and distribute their ears, fingers, and other parts as souvenirs to the ghoulish witnesses. I had seen it all, and in the seeing I had become bewildered and yet in the process lost my own innocence.”

In 1958, following John Hope's advice, I entered the Columbia graduate program, and over the next few years encountered other gifted scholars and, though Columbia was hardly noted for this, even a few excellent teachers. I took classes in British history with J. H. Plumb and J. P. Kenyon, in German history with Fritz Stern, in early modern Europe with Garrett Mattingly, and I studied American history with Richard B. Morris, Robert D. Cross, and John Higham, who supervised my master's essay.

The person who had the greatest impact on me, however, was my doctoral advisor William E. Leuchtenburg, a man whose commitment to teaching and scholarship I found exemplary -- and still do: just two years ago, in 2009, at the age of 87, Bill published a new book on Herbert Hoover. And just a few weeks ago you may have seen him as a talking head on Ken Burns' PBS series on Prohibition.

Over the years we've had countless conversations, many during the semester he was in residence at Cornell as Newman visiting professor. But the one I remember best had nothing to do with progressivism, or the New Deal, or even American history. It was very brief, and it took place on the phone: I called Bill early in the spring of 1960, quite nervously, to ask whether I might be excused from our graduate seminar that afternoon because the night before I had become a father. "Of course, Dick," he exclaimed: "of course, that's wonderful news, just wonderful!" It's an indication of what Columbia was like in those days that Bill's kindness and warmth actually came as a surprise, but I've never forgotten it.

Three years ago when I told Bill that I had spent an afternoon, with two friends, my wife, and son visiting Pete Seeger, talking and singing with him at his home on the Hudson, Bill recalled that for a time after World War II he had rented a basement apartment from Seeger's in-laws in Greenwich Village; and one evening he had heard music, and so he wandered into the basement area to find Pete Seeger -- AND Woody Guthrie -- singing and playing.

Since Bill had received his undergraduate degree from Cornell, I was particularly gratified to receive the offer from the department in 1965.

When I arrived on campus I became a colleague of many renowned historians, among them Paul Gates, the expert in American land policy, who had joined the faculty in 1936, the year before I was born,

and who had studied at Harvard with Frederick Merk, who was himself a student of Frederick Jackson Turner. And I joined a group of young American historians – Walter LaFeber, Michael Kammen, and Joel Silbey – who would before long establish themselves as the pre-eminent figures in their respective fields, and who now, after nearly half a century, remain good friends.

I was especially fortunate that the chairman of the department was Frederick George Marcham, a man with an extraordinary passion for undergraduate teaching. Born in 1898, he'd fought in the British army during World War I, came to Cornell as a graduate student in 1923 and joined the faculty three years later, and so became a colleague of Carl Becker. Fred, who taught well into his nineties, was a specialist in British constitutional history but his true calling was the art of teaching young people -- encouraging their interest in history, drawing them out, building their self-confidence, showing them how a liberal education could help them lead richer, more satisfying lives. For many years our offices were next to each other, and the talks I had with him each morning, before or after we'd taught, about what we'd done in class that had worked well, and sometimes about the things that hadn't, were, I now realize, the most meaningful discussions about teaching I've ever had.

Quite aside from my association with colleagues, one of the wonderful things about teaching at Cornell is that it enabled me to meet some extraordinary people: some I needed to interview for research purposes, others I was asked to introduce at lectures, some visited my classes to speak, and a few just passed my way. The list includes Supreme Court Justices Louis Powell, William Rehnquist, and Bryon White; authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, Susan Sontag, Bob Woodward, Dwight Macdonald, William Styron and Isaac Bashevis Singer; musicians ranging from Mstislav Rostropovich to Pinchas Zukerman, folk singers like Pete Seeger and Peter Yarrow, and blues artists such as Toby Walker and Paul Geremia; the physicists Robert R. Wilson and Freeman Dyson; and figures as different as former attorney general Janet Reno, the sportscaster Howard Cosell, and the punk rocker Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys.

Perhaps I may be permitted to say a word about four other individuals who made an especially strong impression on me.

One of them was Alger Hiss, who visited Cornell in 1975. The students who invited him asked me if I would introduce him, and naturally I agreed.

Hiss was born in 1904, attended Harvard Law School, and then clerked for Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in the 1920s: when Holmes was happy with his work he called him “sonny,” and when he wasn’t he called him “idiot boy.” Hiss went on to serve in various New Deal agencies in the 1930s, to accompany FDR to Yalta in 1945, and to head of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. But in 1948 he was accused by Whittaker Chambers of having been a communist in the 1930s, and when he charged Chambers with libel for having made the accusation, Chambers alleged that Hiss had actually been a spy, who helped pass government secrets to the Soviet Union back in 1938. Hiss was indicted for perjury – lying to the House Committee on Un-American Activities – was tried in 1949, and after the trial ended in a hung jury, was retried and convicted in January, 1950. He served a prison term and faced many difficulties after his release, but in 1975 was much in demand as a speaker since Richard Nixon, who had played a large part in the case, had fallen into disgrace the year before and had to resign from the presidency following the Watergate revelations.

He was scheduled to speak in Ives, but many more students showed up than the room could hold, and so the venue was moved to Bailey Hall. I walked over to Bailey with Hiss, and then talked to him for the hour it took to open the building, get everyone seated, and set up a sound system. Before meeting him I leaned to the view that he was indeed guilty of perjury, but after spending time with him I began to lean the other way. There was something so honorable and straightforward about the man; it just didn’t seem he was capable of telling the lies that he supposedly told. I began to understand why his character witnesses had included such dignitaries as Justice Felix Frankfurter, Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson, and 1924 Democratic presidential candidate John W. Davis. His behavior in the 1930s – the generous gifts he gave to Chambers, for example – which had always seemed suspicious to me, now seemed to make perfectly good sense, given his sincerity and sweetness of disposition.

The Supreme Court Justice with whom I got to speak at some length was Sandra Day O’Connor who spent a few days visiting the Cornell

law school shortly after she retired from the Court in 2006. Among the things she did was to give a lecture in Bailey Hall, a lecture named for a distinguished Cornell professor, Milton Konvitz, someone I'd known rather well, who'd passed away in 2003 at the age of 95. The dean of the law school asked if I'd introduce her, presumably because if he'd asked any law faculty member to do so all of the others, who weren't asked, might never have spoken to him again.

So I looked through the Konvitz papers in the ILR library, and found some of the interesting, indeed humorous correspondence he'd had with Thurgood Marshall when he was working for the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund. I quoted some of Marshall's letters, and then talked about Justice O'Connor's enormous personal admiration for Marshall, despite their differences of opinion, an admiration she expressed quite movingly in her memoir. I also managed to quote a few sentences from one of her opinions that denounced the Bush administration's handling of terrorism cases. She wrote, for example, in the Yaser Hamdi case: "A state of war is not a blank check for the President when it comes to the rights of the nation's citizens."

My wife and I chatted with Justice O'Connor before her lecture, and we attended a small dinner with her afterwards. Despite my disagreements with many of her rulings, I came away mightily impressed by her intelligence, integrity, genuine interest in whomever she was speaking to, and down-to-earth manner. President Obama later awarded her the presidential Medal of Freedom as an "agent of change," and that is certainly an apt description.

Another person I wish to mention is Professor Hans Bethe, the renowned theoretical physicist and Nobel laureate. Born in Germany in 1906, he lost his position at the University of Tübingen when the Nazis came to power in 1933, immigrated to the United States and began teaching at Cornell in 1935. He was recruited by Robert Oppenheimer to help develop the atomic bomb during World War II, and later, when the Korean War broke out, he played an important part in the development of the hydrogen bomb.

Bethe was not only an associate of Oppenheimer's but also his friend, and so when I began delivering lectures on Oppenheimer and the security clearance hearings of 1954 I had an opportunity to talk with Bethe on a few occasions. I lectured once to the Physics

Department faculty colloquium on the Oppenheimer case, with Bethe in the front row, and later I spoke at Kendall of Ithaca where he resided during his last years.

After the first lecture he invited me to see him in his office at Newman Laboratory. He said he wanted to correct something I'd said. I'd explained that on one occasion in 1951 Oppenheimer had gone to the blackboard at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton and drawn the formulas, or equations, that showed how a hydrogen bomb could in fact be built. Bethe asked where I'd gotten that information and I told him in which book I had read the story. "Oppie didn't go to the blackboard and draw the diagram," Bethe said. "He didn't?" I replied, "then who did?" Bethe smiled triumphantly and said, "I did." Well, it's not the kind of correction one could easily dispute.

After the second talk we spoke and he wrote me a long letter about his association with Oppenheimer, which I've deposited with my papers in Olin Library, but I remember how it began: "Dear Professor Polenberg. I agreed with most of what you said the other night in your talk on Robert Oppenheimer, therefore I did not heckle you."

The last person whom I'll always remember is Daniel Berrigan – who recently celebrated his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. A Jesuit priest, Father Berrigan was assistant director of CURW from 1966 to 1970, though I did not get to talk to him until a few years ago when we both addressed an alumni gathering here in Ithaca. In the 1960s, Daniel Berrigan, and his brother Philip, had denounced the war in Vietnam. In January 1968 he traveled to Hanoi to 'receive' three American airmen whom the North Vietnamese had released, and in May 1968 the Berrigans and others set fire to draft board files in Catonsville, Maryland with homemade napalm. He was arrested, sentenced to three years in prison, went into hiding, but was eventually apprehended.

Before the alumni meeting got underway I approached Father Berrigan, introduced myself, told him how much I admired his witnessing for peace, and said I always quoted one of his poems whenever I lectured about the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. He had written the poem when he was in a bunker in Hanoi during an American bombing raid. It's called, "Children in the Shelter." Seeing a little girl and her even littler brother, huddled together, he had gone over to comfort them and had picked up the little boy. Then I began to

recite from memory his poem that I'd used in my lecture: "In my arms/ fathered in a moment's grace" and Father Berrigan joined with me to complete the line, "the messiah of all my tears."

When I began teaching at Cornell, I can't say that I had a pedagogical philosophy: I just tried to do what my own teachers, the ones I most admired, had done. But over the years I began to give more thought to the matter. I remember that once a young woman in my class was waiting to see me during office hours, I asked what I could do for her, she told me she was an engineering student, and then said: "Prof, you really think that history is *neat* – can you tell me why?"

It wasn't a question I'd ever been asked before – or since.

What I said was something like this: I think history is neat because the problems that human beings have faced in the past are essentially the same problems that we face now. So seeing how people went about dealing with those problems – sometimes successfully and sometimes not – helps us understand how we might deal with them today. The problems, broadly stated, are those Americans always have, and always will, face: the problems of justice, equality, and freedom – how to define, defend, and develop them. Those problems naturally assume different forms in different eras, but the problems themselves don't change that much. As Reinhold Niebuhr once said, democracy is a means of finding "proximate solutions for insoluble problems."

So my approach to teaching lecture courses was to emphasize how those broad issues affected real people. What I cared about the most, I realized, were the human beings who are the stuff of history, and not impersonal forces, or broad trends, or large-scale developments. And those people were as likely to be outsiders, victims, or the powerless as they were to be insiders, victors or the high and mighty.

Consequently, students who took my classes heard a lot about Sacco and Vanzetti, and Japanese-American internment, and the Rosenberg case but not much about traditional topics. I told myself that students could always read about the subjects I neglected but that my role was to let them see how much the past meant to me, how deeply I cared about it, how specific historical cases provided insight into the larger problems we face as citizens.

More than seventy years ago, Carl Becker identified the Cornell tradition as one that embodied both freedom and responsibility. I count myself fortunate to have found a home in a Department that's always given me the freedom to offer courses on any subject, and I gladly took responsibility for teaching recent American and constitutional history. How wonderful to have been able to teach small classes on topics related to my own research – on Holmes, Brandeis and the First Amendment, for example or on Benjamin Cardozo and the judicial process – or even on topics I just found intriguing, like the Blues and American Culture. Students seemed happy to take the courses, and some submitted research papers that I cited, with great pleasure, in the books I eventually wrote.

Indeed, Cornell undergraduates have seldom failed to impress me. Some years ago, when I was teaching a sophomore seminar on the age of Franklin Roosevelt, two Cornell alumni happened to be attending a meeting on campus: one was president of the New York State Bar Association, the other a judge on the New York State Court of Appeals (the court Benjamin Cardozo once headed) who has since been elevated to the U. S. Circuit Court of Appeals. We'd arranged to chat, and so I invited them to attend the seminar. The class discussion happened to be on Roosevelt's court-packing plan of 1937, and the students expressed their opinions, as always, quite vigorously. With 20 minutes left in the class, a student raised his hand; I called on him; he turned to the lawyer and judge, and said, "I wonder if our two distinguished guests would like to tell us what they think of Roosevelt's plan." That is exactly what they proceeded to do, much to my own, and of course the students', edification.

I've always known that, as much as I could teach students, I could also learn from them. A few years ago I used to play the guitar and sing with two undergraduates, one of them a fine blues guitarist. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, he listened to my lectures and took notes; but on Sunday afternoons, at my home, I was the one who asked him if he would show me how he played certain unusual chords, or blues riffs, on the guitar. I was quite happy to let him instruct me, and he also seemed happy to do so.

I've been fortunate that during most of my time at Cornell, the university has had extraordinary presidents who have taken a personal interest in faculty members and students.

President Dale Corson not only shared with me his recollections of his association with Robert Oppenheimer when he was a graduate student in physics before World War II, but also asked if I would write the faculty obituary notice for former president James Perkins. I told Dale that I had strongly disagreed with Perkins's handling of the Cornell crisis of 1969, but he nevertheless urged me to do it and promised to offer comments on whatever I wrote. In doing the research I gained a better understanding, I believe, of why President Perkins acted as he did during those tumultuous days, and wrote what, I trust, was a fair-minded memorial.

Hunter Rawlings once heard me make some remarks at a meeting of Cornell employees in which I quoted James Madison, who, in defending freedom of speech, remarked, "some degree of abuse is inseparable from the proper use of anything." Hunter, himself an authority on Madison, asked if I'd mind if he audited my forthcoming lecture on Madison in my constitutional history course. Mind? I was honored. My students? They were flabbergasted – but pleased -- when the president of the university took his seat among them.

And Frank Rhodes? I could not possibly say enough about his kindheartedness and graciousness. Once a student's mother, who was suffering from a terminal illness came to Ithaca for her daughter's graduation, but was simply too ill to attend the ceremony. After visiting her in her room, I wrote to Frank to tell him about the situation, and he sent the woman a lovely personal letter expressing his concern and complimenting her on her daughter's success. And he enclosed a copy of his speech. How much that must have meant to her! Friends of mine who teach at other universities have told me this could not have happened at their schools.

I've found, over the years, that the Cornell administration has been responsive to concerns that mean much to me. Back in the 1970s a plan was announced to hold commencement exercises, in alternate years, on Saturday. With Rabbi Morris Goldfarb, of blessed memory, and two undergraduates I went to see then-provost Keith Kennedy. We explained that orthodox students and their parents would be

unable to attend graduations on the Jewish Sabbath, and asked that the plan not be adopted. Keith listened carefully, said he'd consider what we said, we thanked him, and a week or so later it was announced that the change would not be made

I've also found that Cornell is the kind of place that fosters a lasting bond between professors and their students. Many of my former students have gone on to make important contributions in the fields of law, medicine, business, journalism, education and politics and yet, for some reason, they still want to speak with me when they return to campus, or else remain in touch by phone and e-mail. I'm especially indebted to a particularly generous alumna, Elizabeth Grover, who some years ago created a fund, in my name, in the History Department to be used for enhancing undergraduate education.

Now there is one final piece of advice I wish to give you -- and it also comes, appropriately, from Professor Marcham. He'd say to his students: there will be a few times in your life, perhaps 3 or 4 in all, when you will face complete disaster: you may lose your job, or fail at what you set out to do, or face rejection from the person you love, or be afflicted with a serious illness. As difficult as it may be, you mustn't give up, you mustn't lose hope. Rather, keep to your own standards and principles, and recognize that failure and sorrow are, inevitably, as much a part of life as success and happiness.

Last July I turned 74 years of age, and while I very much look forward to retirement, there are still many things I'd like to do in the coming years.

I want to continue being a disc jockey on "Key to the Highway," my weekly Slope Radio program on the blues and folk music

I recently visited the Auburn Correctional Facility, audited a class, and will give a talk there in February. Next year, if all goes well, I hope to teach a course -- perhaps on American constitutional history -- for inmates of the prison who seek to obtain college credit.

I've been invited by NYU to spend a week in residence, next June, directing a seminar on the 1960s for faculty members from around the nation, many of them teachers in historically black colleges.

And next week I'll be in New York City to talk with folks at NYU about the possibility of teaching a two-month course for undergraduates studying abroad in Abu Dhabi.

And I have another book in mind: I've been in touch with the Cornell University Press about writing a short, interpretive biography of the anarchist Alexander Berkman, a project that would take me to a number of archives here and abroad.

In case any of you just can't bear the thought of not hearing me lecture again, remember, this Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings I'm giving talks following the Readers' Theatre performances of "A Steady Rain."

Well, If anyone had told me in 1962, when I first laid eyes on this lovely campus, that nearly fifty years later I'd be standing here giving my last lecture, I'm sure I wouldn't have believed it. So you never can tell where life will take you, but my wish for all of you fine young men and women is that it will lead you in directions that, while yet uncharted, will prove to be rewarding -- satisfying to yourselves, and a blessing to others.