American Historiography Since 1945
Avery O. Craven

If there is anything that is constant and enduring in American historiography it is the total absence of anything constant and enduring. Revision and reinterpretation have been the rule in American history, and historians have come to accept the maxim that "each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time." That is only to say that what has seemed significant to the historians of one generation in the United States has usually lost its place by the time the next generation begins its writing.

Sometimes this has been the result of new materials that have been discovered and put to use. Sometimes it has been due to the application of new historical theories or to the use of new methods. Most of the time, however, it has simply been the rewriting of American history to make it fit the needs of rapidly changing world, for American life is usually in a process of change.

Neither the American people nor the physical stage on which they have lived, has for any extended segment of time, remained the same. Unlike most nationality groups in the world today, the people of the United States are not ethnically rooted in the land where they live. Only the American Indian can claim ancient native origin. The rest of the American people are imports, coming at various times, for varied reasons either to adjust themselves to the new conditions which they find or to reshape conditions more or less to their own needs. In either case, change has been a basic fact with which the American historian has had to deal.

Europeans who crossed the Atlantic Ocean entered one of earth's great land masses, varied in topography, resources, and accessibili-
ty. It was all wilderness in the beginning, and at each step away from the Eastern coast there was implied, in most cases at least, a degree of change from old ways and values to something more simple, and then with time, of course, a reversal of the process. Change both in men and in nature thus became a permanent factor in American life. Time units, therefore, often embracing little more than the life-span of a single generation, became historical units, or even sometimes we have called them "Ages" to be studied as such. That gave local history a rather unique place in the national history and, in the long run, forced the American historians to become specialists in some area or period of time, which they interpreted and reinterpreted at almost regular intervals. Fields of history thus became sharply divided and the historian dealt with the American Colonies, the American Revolution, the National Period, the Age of Jackson, the Civil War, etc., etc.... He also reflected different points of view that emerged in widely scattered geographic basins with their distinctive cultures and interests. Soon men would write as Southerners, New Englanders, and Westerners, or perhaps as people who were representing some peculiar interest.

The point is that in a land of such endless change, history simply refused to stay put. It had to be kept up to date. The revision, therefore, became simply a necessary part of American history. As a result, it has always been responsive to new facts, to new points of view, and to new approaches. It has reflected not only the man who wrote, the place from which he might be writing, but especially what those about the writer at that particular time thought was significant. And I might add that the word "significant" is probably the most important word in all history, because after all something that are significant at one time have no significance whatsoever at another time. You could judge a man's ability as a historian by his ability to pick out what is uniquely significant for his time, his place, and his audience.

These generalities must be recognized if we are to understand the topic, "American Historiography," as it has developed in the
years since 1945. First of all, these years in American life have been changes greater perhaps than any generation of Americans before have experienced.

From a purely physical point of view these changes have come with such violence and such concentration as to justify the term "revolutionary." Crude oil in diesel engines, gas in internal combustion chambers, and now nuclear energy only half understood, have cut space to almost nothing and created a degree of local and world interdependence that has never been dreamed of before in human history. So to a people who have traditionally been isolationist in outlook, and who have always thought of their experiences as being more or less unique, the realities of a new day have come as a distinct shock. Professor Vann Woodward, taking note of these facts, has called attention to "the remarkable degree of military and physical security" which the United States so long enjoyed because of the three great oceans, Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic, which separated it from any other power which might constitute a serious menace. These oceans provided to the United States a security free of charge, and enabled the United States to dispense with heavy expenditures for naval or military security and to use its vast resources, probably more largely than most peoples were able to do, for social and economic improvement and even for extravagance.

It was this situation which influenced the character of American historical writing and which built up the myth of a people who had turned their backs on Europe and perhaps even on history itself, and had begun over again on a fresh new piece of land to write a new page in the history of mankind. It may have been largely myth, but it became to Americans a positive belief. Here, said George Bancroft, one of our early historians, and of course many others who followed him, freedom and equality, which seemed to be enemies elsewhere, could dwell together in peace. General central efficiency and local freedom, also at odds in other lands, could in a fresh new garden, grow and prosper. The simple Amer-
ican farmer on his own piece of land, satisfied with a modest but of course ample return, represented an ideal, thought Americans, towards which civilization had long been struggling. In America, said the historian, these sayings were realities that became the theme of the history in Bancroft and early American historians.

So to suddenly awake in 1945, after two World Wars, and to discover our free security gone, and our protecting oceans to have become only avenues for hostile approach, was a certainly shocking experience. Even the once friendly skies above were now filled with dangers and the idealistic yoeman farmer, quite unnoticed, had abandoned his lands in large numbers and was discovering the great urban centers as the new land of opportunity. This represented, says Professor Vann Woodward, changes so great that it necessitated a new look as important for the American historian as the passing of free land had produced for historians of the preceding generation.

No wonder, therefore, Professor Vann Woodward concluded that it was time for the American historian to take a new look at his past, and to begin what he called “The Age of Reinterpretation,” a rather interesting word. No wonder he quoted another who had written, “The historical process is suddenly accelerated in terrifying fashion. Developments which otherwise take centuries seem to flit by like phantoms in months or weeks, and are fulfilled.”

The new age of historical reinterpretation, which Professor Vann Woodward prophesied, has not come with the rush which he evidently anticipated. The historian like other Americans has experienced the shock and the confusion of the new day, and has been more inclined to spend his efforts in attacking the work of his predecessors than in striking out on new lines for himself. What has been done thus far, it seems to me in this period that I am dealing with, is largely negative in character—what has been done, in other words, has been a sort of sometimes bitter and often unfair resentment against those who, at least for present needs, have not told the American story as present-day young writers think it should
have been told. Yet while these historians have been able to do little other than to criticize their predecessors, they have at least been asking what I think are important questions. What do we know whether the United States ever was as completely isolated from world currents as most Americans, and particularly American historians, have thought? Did we not owe more to the rest of mankind than we had been told by our historians? Were we, after all as a nation, so unique, so independent and so innocent of history as we had assumed? Had not our “free security” been largely responsible for our light taxes and for our high standards of living? Perhaps also it had encouraged a good deal of American waste and extravagance, even an inclination to avoid international responsibility. At any rate they said something is sadly wrong with the way American history has been written up to date. So their first task was one of seeking out the error of the past and in the past American historical writing, and to proceed from that point on. They have not, I might add, proceeded much further than in finding fault with the past.

The first attempt to evaluate the progress that the new group of historians have made, came in 1962 in a publication bearing the rather imposing title: *The Reconstruction of American History*. In the preface the editor, Professor John Higham, explained that the purpose of the work was to deal with “the rethinking that American history has undergone in recent years” (in fact, since 1945). In a series of essays by young historians, specializing in eight different fields, the effort was made “to tell how a standard topic in American History was understood a generation ago and how its interpretation has altered since that time.”

Now I leave it to you that such a statement raises very high hopes. The fulfillment, however, was disappointing. There is indeed in these essays ample evidence of dissatisfaction with what the previous generations of historians had done, but little evidence of progress towards a new independent approach. The editor in
seeking some common thread with which to tie together his various essays speaks of the absence of economic interpretation in present-day historical writing and of the rejection of the "social-conflict approach" taken by such writers as Beard, Turner, and Parrington, but, in the end he is forced to say that these new historians "like the modern literary critics and theologians...seem (only) to say that life is ambiguous"; that the United States has become "a realm of paradox: a nation born of revolt that was moderate, yet genuinely revolutionary; a society that is liberal in its ideals, yet conservative in its behavior; united in its divisions, and divided in its unity." Now if you can make sense out of that, you could do better than I had been able to do. The keynote of contemporary history, he informs us, may best be found in the frequent attempts to combine the old, that is, the history written by their predecessors, with the new without negating either one of them. With what he says, it seems to me, therefore, that no reinterpretation of American history stands out that can be pointed to as a trend in a new direction. The revolutionary changes in American life are there, but American history has not, as has been the usual case, responded to those changes. It has produced no new drastic reinterpretation.

The reason for this confusion and uncertainty, it seems to me, is in part due to the fact that American scholarship itself has been undergoing changes as great as those in the material world around about. The modern age unquestionably belongs to the physical scientist. Much of what has been happening in these momentous years since 1945 has been ascribed to his accomplishments. In fact many have spoken of it all as "The Scientific Revolution." Even before 1945 science as a field of study in the United States had been sharply separated from other disciplines in our universities. The American scientist had already developed his own national organization and had secured heavy financial support from both government and private sources. He was willing to recognize the scientific side of history only in as far as it made use of "objective methods" which "yielded independently verifiable results." For all practical
purposes that eliminated most historians and forced them into what has been known largely as "the humanities." The cruel fact to be accepted was that historical knowledge, in spite of the historians' efforts to be scientific, does not readily provide those "general laws that can be verified and amended by further observation." It yields little that can be measured and reduced to concepts. It deals largely with specific events, and seldom reaches that exactness required for verifiable regularity. It is but both more and less than science. There is entirely too much of art about history to continually fraternize with pure natural science.

The loss of scientific prestige, however, was only the first blow that the American historians had to take. A sharp division in the humanities themselves had already been under way, and, as you know, sociology, economics, and political science, with their greater interest in the immediate, and their "dream of an integrated science of man," now pushed history, as such, from the center of the stage of what was becoming known as the "social science." Although these younger groups had developed largely out of history, they now began to follow a course which, both in method and in purpose, was quite unhistorical. As one writer puts it: "contemporary data, collected under controlled conditions, readily amenable to statistical manipulation, were orderly, precise, and thus much superior to the helter-skelter materials left by the past" and in which the historians seem to be primarily interested. Even a pure science of behavior, which few historians thought was even remotely possible, was soon contemplated by a few, especially by my colleagues at the University of Chicago. They would be entirely rid of "tradition, precedent, and what they considered outmoded forms." The social sciences and history thus also parted ways and went sometimes in rather their own way in an antagonistic frame of mind. That was true at least at our university.

More recently this break has even dropped down to the level of the secondary schools where Professor Jerome Bruner and his
group at Harvard University, a group of psychologists, have insisted that each discipline at this lower elementary level can best be mastered by teaching the basic organizing principle which, according to their view, forms the structure of every natural and social science. They contend that there exists in each "a meaningful and connected pattern." In other words, a structure, a great central organizing idea or concept, "will permit the young student to understand, predict, or even change the world in which he lives." Bruner would include history in such a program only if the historian will reduce his discipline to such patterns and such a structure. Since no historian that I know anything about has as yet discovered in the tangle of past events such a pattern, or such a set of laws, history may in the immediate future be eliminated from what is supposed to become a great new social science program, or elementary schools in the United States.

Now both of these developments have played a part in producing the confusion and the uncertainty of direction in United States historiography in the period that I am to discuss. The historian has not known just where he stands or where he belongs. He does not know exactly what new course he should follow—no wonder he has spent his time criticizing the past. Talk of "new points of view" are met on all sides, but, as I have said, the temper is negative, consisting primarily in criticism of the old. The "Age of Reinterpretation" is still awaiting its master. No outstanding leader with a new approach for reconstructing American History has appeared,—no one certainly to be compared with Turner, Beard, Becker, Phillips, or Parrington of the preceding generation.

Such statements as I have made should not be understood as implying that history in the United States is at a standstill. Far from it. The study, writing, and publishing has actually increased because of the uncertainty of direction. Everyone, high and low, is taking a hand and if doing nothing else, adding to the confusion. Two trends, however, seem to be taking shape. The first is to close
the gap which has developed between history and other social sciences, — for the historian to recognize and to make wider use both of the techniques and the findings of the other social scientists. The second, as of course might be expected, is to take a closer look at American History in terms of present-day needs and to bring it into line with present-day values. Error hunting has become, in other words, the common practice where Americans are being forced to explain themselves to the rest of the world and trying to answer what is American about America.

Let me add by way of comment that it is a startling experience as I have found out in Australia, in England, and in various other places where I have lectured, for the first time to have to see America through the eyes of other people. Other people have a very clear picture of America, I have discovered. It is a sort of lawless place, it is a very provincial place, it is a very undemocratic place in its treatment of minority groups, etc., etc.... They have a very definite picture. But to save my soul when I was asked to see America and to answer what is American about America, I found that while I thought I knew a great deal about New England, the Midwest, the South, and perhaps even the Pacific Coast, I did not know exactly what is American about America.

I began looking for books and I found one book. That book was a book which says that what is American about America is jazz, for instance, which has no beginning and no ending but just goes on its way; or Mark Twain’s writings, which are just episodes, each able to stand on its own feet; or the American cartoon series that runs day after day and week after week, from one episode to another. So America as this author — and that is the only one I could find — saw was a land that is changing but does not know in which direction it is changing or why.

At any rate the historian, in taking a closer look at the old values and the old interpretations given to America, has discovered that much which has passed for history is largely myth. That is why there has been so much of what I would call “myth hunting”
which characterizes the present-day historiography.

As a result American historians have suddenly discovered the fact that there is a need and even some possibility of closing the gap between the economist, the sociologist, the political scientist, the anthropologist, and the historian. The discovery of this fact and the effort to put it to historical use came first when Professor David M. Potter innocently agreed to deliver a series of lectures on the American character at the University of Chicago. He told us that after much confusion and embarrassment he was able to produce a rather slim but highly significant volume entitled *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*. Finding that historians had made "but little progress in articulating a new and tenable theory of national character," he said, he was forced to set about first of all on acquainting himself, then later his audience, with the work that the social scientist, particularly the behavioral scientist, had made in the study of human beings. The first third of his book is therefore given over entirely to a discussion of the errors and inadequacies of the historian's efforts to depict national character, and the far greater success achieved by the anthropologists, the sociologists, and the psychologists, in combination for doing this job. In Potter's opinion, the synthesis of the Freudian view of personality *as an entirety*, further expanded and modified by later scholars, and the concept of culture as a means of *viewing society as a totality*, as developed by the anthropologists, now provide the most valuable tool available for dealing with national characteristics of any kind. This borrowed tool, he says, the historian must learn to use, and the historian's own unique contribution in the study of man "must be primarily...to identify and explain the determinants of the culture, and especially of cultural change." That is the only contribution, he feels, that the American scholars and historians can make.

This Potter attempts to do in the remainder of his stimulating and suggestive study of how a diverse and extravagant abundance in the United States has shaped the presonality of the American
and the character of the United States as a society.

More recently a younger group of scholars have insisted that, in spite of the historian's occupation with the unique and his rejection of laws in history, he has always indulged in generalizations based on such vague hypotheses as "human nature" or "common sense." In doing this, they say, the historian comes close to accepting the social scientist's assumption "that human behavior in causal reasoning is just as lawful as events in the realm of nature."

This has become more and more true as the natural science in the twentieth-century form, speaks of "laws" not as "strict and universal causal generalizations in the old sense" but simply as "regularities expressing themselves as statistical probabilities." Such a point of view, says the younger scholar, opens a wide and varied range of hypotheses in the social sciences which are "fully capable of historical application." Most frequently noted is the case of the psychoanalytic theories where "by applying mutually independent generalizations of varying degrees of probability (drawn from social science) with no one of them considered either exhaustive or exclusive, historians can begin [at once] to refine and to make more explicit their whole procedures" that we can write better history than we have ever written before, and understand society better if we will make use what these psychoanalysts have been doing. At least, the younger historian says, it is the duty of the historian caught in this present confusion to give it all the trial.

Now let me quickly say that not many older historians have accepted this point of view—we are a rather conservative group and we have come very slowly to accept all that I have been talking about. Or have we done much in closing the gap between the social sciences—all of them—and history? In fact few historians have gone further in applying precise techniques in their reasoning or in their writing that just to acquaint themselves, in as far as is reasonably possible, with what the anthropologist, psychologist, and sociologist have been doing. They simply keep what they have done in the back of their mind as they go about their work. And
wherever we find there is possibility of bringing ourselves more in line with what evidently is more scientific approach, we shall make use of what they have done. After all that is just what Professor Potter has done in his pioneering book.

In one line, however, considerably more progress has been made. The use of quantitative techniques as developed in the social sciences has been widely adapted by the historian. Voting records, social data, and economic facts have been tabulated and cross-referenced in order to verify general statements particularly in dealing with parliamentary bodies. A good example of this is Professor David Donald's *The Politics of Reconstruction* in which he has plotted votes on various issues in the Reconstruction period and then gone behind the votes to the constituents to find out what motives that the voter had and what pressures were being brought on him by the interest that lay behind. The promise, however, in this particular field has been greater than the accomplishments and the techniques of even this quantitative analysis have not been applied widely.

Meanwhile, the second effort, that of revising American history to meet the needs of a people whose lives have been undergoing such rapid and revolutionary changes, as I have said, though it has consisted more of criticism of predecessors than in striking out along new lines, has nevertheless been making some progress. The historian has been more able to see what is wrong or inadequate in existing interpretations than he has to discover the meaning of events in transition. The result has been to produce what I would like to call the era of "myth hunting."

An early example of this is found in Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. His thesis, briefly stated, is that the long held belief that the interior of the American continent, occupied step by step by waves of yeomen farmers who "plowed their virgin land, planted their crops and transformed it into the Garden of the World," is only a myth. The facts are quite to the contrary. Our history has been distorted and misunder-
stood because of this "image" of the yoeman farmer as the most significant character in the whole American development, the image of an agricultural society which was the "dominant symbol of the nineteenth century American society." And it is nothing, he says, but a myth.

"The master symbol of the garden," he continues, "embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow."

A realistic look, however, at the South, at the Great Plains and the cattle kingdom, the pinched, narrow life of the average American frontiersmen, and the early dominance of the business East, says Professor Smith, denies the validity of the whole picture and has rendered the work of Frederick Jackson Turner inadequate of a doubtful contribution to the understanding of American history and American character. In other words, here is a body blow, in Smith’s *Virgin Land*, at what has been accepted as perhaps the most fundamental contribution made by the preceding generation of scholars.

Smith’s book brought to a climax the attacks on the frontier hypotheses which had been developing for a decade or more. It quickly became and has remained the classic criticism of the West as the key to what is unique in American development. Other critics had already taken exception to specific items such as democracy, the safety-valve idea, the peculiar individualism developed at the frontier, free lands, loose language, etc., but Smith seemingly had rejected the whole frontier approach.

I happen to have been with Frederick Jackson Turner the last year of his life at the Arlington Library. I happen to have been a student that he had asked to come there that last year and I talked with him about this rejection of many of his ideas. And, as you might know, Professor Turner’s answer was: “I’m surprised that there has not been more criticism than what has come recently.”
In spite of Turner's attitude, answers to Smith were not long in coming. They challenged many of his assertions, I among the rest, his inadequate reading of Turner's works, and, his too literal interpretation of Turner's true meaning. They accepted—and we all have accepted—some of his criticisms. Perhaps Turner drew too much of his thinking from the Midwest of which he was most familiar. But in the main we all insisted that Turner and his approach had their rightful place in American historiography.

First of all it became clear that no person with a strictly literal mind has any business reading Turner. For Turner himself used symbols and made free use of metaphors in writing his kind of history. He took symbols from the geographical and biological sciences of the day and used them much as a poet might do. Yet at the same time he coldly insisted that the historian must include geography, economics, sociology, political science, and statistics,—in fact anything and everything needed to understand the interplay of man and nature in the evolution of the individual and the society from wilderness simplicity to urban-industrial complexity. In this, I insist, he was strikingly modern.

True, we admitted, Turner never gave a definition of the frontier about which he wrote for the simple reason that it was impossible to do so. For in addition to the physical factors operating on any frontier there was always a process involved, in which change and evolution were present. So where human beings differed so greatly in background and values, as did those who came to America and entered the frontier, and the physiographic differences were of such great variety, it was a situation where only generalizations could be exact—I hope you understand the contradiction in that statement. Multiple causation alone applied and no one method seemed adequate where "a complexity of forces" operated.

The frontier, after all, said Turner's defenders, was but one stage in a process of interaction which ran all the way from wilderness to the factory and the metropolitan center. In such a story
the term "free land" was but a symbol of American opportunity; the "Great Forest" and even "the Susan Constant and the Mayflower" were but symbols of the New World and the Old. Understood in this way there was no mythology about Turner's statement that: "American history is chiefly concerned with social forces, shaping and reshaping under conditions of a nation changing as it adjusts to its environment. And this environment progressively reveals new aspects of itself, exerts new influences, and calls out new social organs and functions."

With this made clear historians now generally agree that Turner had been misread and that the frontier approach is still valid for understanding America. Now the same impulse that led to the harsh criticisms of Turner as the spokesman of the past generation had already been even more vigorously applied to the work of Charles A. Beard and his economic interpretation regarding both the earlier Constitutional and the later Jeffersonian periods. Professor Robert Brown has insisted that there is no evidence whatsoever to uphold Beard's assertion that the economic influences determined the character of our Constitution or its adoption. Here again, I might say, there has been reaction. I talked to a rather learned historian only a few days ago who said that he could still insist that wherever you had a dominant economic pattern in American life, you would also bend economic dominance reflected in the political patterns of the day.

The attacks on Turner and Beard and their work and the reaction which followed, are a good example of what is happening in other fields as well. We find on all sides, as I have said, that there is much talk of new interpretations but, on investigation, we find largely criticism of the old. American life itself is in transition and consequently so is the writing of American history. Confusion and uncertainty of direction is evident in both cases. It is easy to find fault, as most Americans are now doing, but difficult to charter the course that ought to be followed ahead. If, as Turner thought, free land made possible all that produced the American and his
unique society, what happens when land is all gone, and the new world of opportunity spreads out from Main Street to the factories and warehouses beyond,—when isolation is ended and world responsibility can no longer be ignored? These problems, I admit, bothered Turner and they still bother the historians who are trying to bring the story of the past into line with the startling new present. The historical road ahead is still not clear. Somehow or other, the first task may be that of finding the error, ridding ourselves of the error. But nevertheless there is bound to be in the American historiography a period of time when the old and the new must be normally and naturally blended more or less together.

A good example of this is Professor Merrill Jensen’s statement that the historians of the American Revolution “still find their field so complex and diverse, that they are swinging back and forth” in their emphasis on the importance of constitutional, economic, imperial or local American factors. After 1800, one group rejected the then popular Whig emphasis on the misdeeds of George III and parliament, and centered their interests on the Colonies themselves. There they found “an undemocratic political society dominated... by an east coast ruling class made up of merchants, planters and British-appointed office holders” who were using the “lower orders” for their own ends in opposing British rule. This, however, backfired when common men revolted and demanded political and social changes which were, as Professor Jensen said, “in fact, if not in name, democratic.” These historians, including such spokesmen as Carl Becker and Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., have been labeled “Progressives.” And they were, in turn, criticised by a later group who denied the “internal revolution” and the struggle over who should rule at home. In fact the newer group insisted that there had been no revolution at all, no political theory in the American Revolution, and certainly no political thought of a new sort. It was, they said, a conservative affair.

Now, however, Professor Jensen tells us that “in the seventh decade of the century, there are signs that the pendulum is swing-
ing again.” Property was confiscated in the American Revolution, even more in percentage than was confiscated in the French Revolution; ideas were “overwhelmingly” important; material interests played their part, and “precisely because they sought to understand both the Revolutionary ideas and American society, ‘the behaviorist historians’ still have an important place in American historiography.” Thus the Revolutionary story is swinging back and forth, and the old and the new have been blended, instead of cutting out all on new lines.

Perhaps a better indication of the unsettled, negative character of present American historiography is found in the treatment accorded to what has been called “The Progressive Era.” These were the years when the United States was attempting to correct the extravagance, the corruption, and the economic unbalance which had followed the American Civil War. The historians of the preceding generation had seen this as the period of great liberal reform stretching in an unbroken line from the Populist uprising, through Progressivism, to the New Deal. And they had dealt with it as an era of liberal thinking and social advance.

Historians of the new group, however, agree that the Progressive Era came to an end in 1952, with the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower to the presidency. The liberalism had run its course. That, of course, required a new look at the period and here, as in other fields, the result has been a sharp pointing out of the errors into which the previous generation of historians had fallen and which called for revision. Most of the new scholars quickly agreed that their predecessors had been wrong in viewing the Progressive movement under Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson as simply a resurgence of the old Populist uprising. The Populist movement had been a farmer’s, primarily midwestern farmer’s, revolt; the Progressive movement, on the other hand, was urban in character and leadership. And to Professor Richard Hofstadter—perhaps the better of the present-day group of historians, a representative re-
action of the Progressive movement did against the loss of status suffered by the leading citizens of the old American towns who were now being overshadowed everywhere by the great, thriving cities and their more wealthy citizens. The Progressive leaders, he noted, were urban in character, usually moderately well-fixed as far as wealth is concerned, and Republican in background, which was completely different from the Populist group. They might adopt old Populist programs and accept the farmer's vote, but they were anything but Populists.... Hofstadter speaks critically of William Jennings Bryan and his inferior intellect, and Professor John M. Blum of Yale has been even more harsh in dealing with Woodrow Wilson. Blum even sees much good in the practical politicians of the period. Louis Hartz goes so far as to repudiate the whole class conflict of which Beard, Turner and Parrington had written by denying that there has ever been in the United States anything resembling the European aristocrats, peasants, and proletariats. The United States had escaped the feudal system and all that went with it. So that the whole class struggle that has been pictured by the preceding generation was nothing but a myth.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., on the other hand, in his Age of Jackson, holds largely to the old point of view and accepts quite frankly the idea of continuity and the struggle of lesser men against business domination. He credits "the coalition of workers, farmers, intellectuals, and liberal politicians" with having swept the leader of the business community out of the White House and electing Franklin D. Roosevelt president of the United States. Professor Higham, in turn, expresses himself as being "in favor of reviving the deeper values of Parrington and Beard: an appreciation of the crusading spirit, a responsiveness to indignation, a sense of injustice."

So the only conclusion to be reached is that the revisionists of the Progressive Era have only challenged the views of those who have gone before, but have pointed to no new approach which will lead in a new direction.
The field of myth hunting, however, has developed most fully where it was most needed, namely, in dealing with the American South and the Negro. Picking-up where Reconstruction left off, the Supreme Court in 1954 resurrected the old Fourteenth Amendment and endowed it with a new meaning. Guilt-laden men and women then began marching on Southern cities and on the all-white Northern suburbs in defense of minority rights. In turn, the young historians, both North and South, literally marched on Southern history to point out the myths which had been for generations accumulating about that portion of the United States. "What is the South?" they asked. "Is there such a reality as the South or has the South been merely the victim of distortion and myth?" All agreed at least that "there are few areas in the modern world that have bred regional mythology so potent, so profuse and diverse, even so paradoxical, as the American South."

The first of these myths had to do with the ante-bellum Southern plantation where a kindly master and his docile slaves were supposed to have evolved a way of life characterized by indifference to all material gain, graced by courtliness, hospitality and a very strong sense of honor. Or by contrast, a social order in which the few lived in idle luxury and debauchery, while the masses, on stingy, eroded lands, merely existed from day to day, abandoned to poverty, disease, and degeneracy. Two myths that have occupied the historians in dealing with the South—contradictions they are, as you know.

William R. Taylor, in his *Cavalier and Yankee*, accounts for the first of these myths as a creation of Northern authors who were disgusted with the crass materialism developing in the North, and so created a false picture of life in the South to compensate. Southern writers, in turn, while conscious of the falseness of the picture in their own day, adopted it as having been true for an earlier Southern society. As such, say a whole group of young Southern writers, it became accepted Southern gospel in the sectional struggle culminating in the Civil War.
The opposite myth grew with the abolition crusade and it became widely accepted gospel in the North in the same period. Today the myth hunters have largely destroyed both of these myths, but the search for that subtle something which makes the American South different and the demands for a central theme in its history still go on. Agreement seems nowhere in sight.

The latest of those central themes, which Phillips started with his declaration of the Southern determination that she remain a white man’s country, is by Professor Vann Woodward who says it is strictly a matter of history, for the Southern people are the only people who have ever known complete defeat; the only people who have ever known complete poverty; the only Americans who really were ever willing to admit that they were guilty and had guilt on their souls because of slavery; the only people after all who have a history that is unique. And consequently the central theme of American history must be sought in the Southern experiences. But there are those who criticize Vann Woodward’s central theme and believe that it is no more sound than was that of Phillips of an earlier period.

On the other hand, the advances made in the reinterpretation of what we know as the “Reconstruction” period following the Civil War, which involves the whole matter of Southern society, the Negro, and Northern attitudes towards the South, have been far more successful and more important. Until the new generation of historians took over, “Reconstruction,” as carried out, was largely held to be an accepted national disgrace. It had been called “The Tragic Era,” “The Age of Hate,” or “The Blackout of Honest Government.” Most historians followed the interpretations of the so-called “Dunning School,” which saw the South brutally tortured, President Johnson crucified, and the Nation dragged down into corruption and turmoil.

Recent studies, however, have found this to have been largely “a tragic legend” and have begun a reinterpretation of the whole period. Critical articles have for some years suggested radical new
approaches but the first full-scale volume in the field was Eric McKitterick's *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction*. In this he "re-opened" the whole question of Johnson's responsibility for the tragic situation which developed following the death of Abraham Lincoln. Where recent biographies had been decidedly favorable to Johnson, McKitterick found him lacking in a fundamental understanding of the social and moral demands of the day and his personality unfit to make the adjustments and to understand the alternatives possible to insure the cooperation necessary for success. As a result, he says, Johnson "threw away his own power both as President and as party leader," and "assisted materially, in spite of himself, in blocking the reconciliation of North and South" and in "disrupting the political life of the entire nation."

Others, like W. R. Brock, the English historian, in his *An American Crisis*, went further in rehabilitating the "so-called" carpetbaggers and scalawags, and especially in justifying the course of the Radical Republicans. Kenneth Stampp then incorporated the whole new point of view into his *The Era of Reconstruction*. Here we learn that Reconstruction was strikingly mild in dealing with the South; that corruption was never great and the benefits of "carpetbag" and "scalawag" rule outweighed all the evils; that the only weakness in the Radical Republicans was that they "refused to believe that the Negroes were innately inferior"; that Lincoln had begun his program primarily to build a Republican party wing in the South on old Whig foundations; and that Johnson was primarily interested in making reconstruction "a time of triumph for the yeoman class," and failed because he tried to establish in the South a kind of involuntary servitude in place of slavery. In other words, Reconstruction was a success and the Negro proved his ability when given a chance, only to be deserted in the end, and the whole race problem left to be faced in the years ahead.

Thus, in one field at least, American history has been widely reexamined and a new interpretation offered. The field will, in all probability, be reexamined by another generation of historians,
for the enthusiasm for revision in America when it once gets under way generally leads to over statement. At least, that has been the way in the past.

Meanwhile, almost unnoticed Professor Lawrence H. Gibson has gone ahead quietly with his multiple-volume history of *The British Empire before the Revolution* (it has now reached thirteen volumes) and Allan Nevins has continued his multiple-volume history of the years since 1850. He has come to near the end of the Civil War struggle. He has now concluded that the war was a needless war, and that its ultimate result was to produce an efficient, well-disciplined nation and to enter the modern world.

More important is the wide spread effort to collect, edit, and publish the vast store of manuscripts of the Adams Family, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John C. Calhoun, Andrew Johnson, and even lesser men. Well-organized and financed projects have already made significant progress, and soon those works of all these Americans will be available to those who work in the American field all over the world. These primary sources will undoubtedly open the new "Age of Reinterpretation" not only by Americans, but those interested in American history wherever they may happen to be. Yet I suspect that it will long be true that if there is anything which is constant and enduring in American historiography it will be the total absence of anything constant and enduring.

Mr. Avery O. Craven is professor of history at Purdue University. This paper was delivered at the Second Annual Conference of the Japanese Association for American Studies, held at the University of Tokyo (Komaba Campus), April, 8, 1967. The above was transcribed by the editorial committee from the tape which recorded his address.