

**A Place Lost? The Limits of Time in Historical Scholarship.
Lessons Learned from Shifting Perspectives in U.S. Studies,
1976 to the Present.**

Talk by Laura Garcés given at a reunion of the Capital Area Chapter of Independent Scholars (CAIS), May 2005.

The purpose of this talk was to use my personal journey in U.S. scholarship to weigh the limitations of a historical inquiry in time. What is the worth today of an interpretation advanced on the U.S. in the mid eighties? In the late 1980's, I published a book on U.S. foreign policy, titled *The Globalization of the Monroe Doctrine in the Wilson Era*.¹ It was my doctoral thesis in International Relations. It insisted particularly on the narrative of the foundation, as a decisive factor in the formulation of policy. The 1980s were a different time: scholarship in this country reflected the celebratory mood of the 1976 foundation's bicentennial. After President Carter's unfortunate dip in the "malaise" thing, Ronald Reagan had steered the country back towards familiar and comforting allegories. The cold war, as we recognize today, was a factor of stability. Today, however, this narrative is worn and fragmented. Does it doom the work weaved in its framework?

I. Some Observations on the Burden of Time

"We live forward; but we can only think backward", Kierkegaard.

The object of this talk is to ponder the significance and relevance of a historical work, which is inevitably shaped and influenced by prevalent currents of thought. Thinking about present events, domestic and international, necessarily guides our quest to understand the past. For it is our efforts to comprehend our world, that lead us in our search to uncover and recover what came before. Even when a historian sets out on a task apparently innocuous because it centers on a very precise object, one perhaps that seems even trivial to others, and remote from present concerns, he relies on

¹ The book was published in French by Payot (Lausanne), 1988. Original Title: *La mondialisation de la doctrine Monroe à l'ère wilsonienne*.

his awareness to ask relevant questions. This awareness is rooted in the present. As Eric Foner remarks in his brilliant *Story of American Freedom*, which delves into the ambiguities and contradictions of this notion, “a story is both a history of actual events and an intention”.² One could in fact add an “invention”. Because, however much the scholar strives towards objectivity, his or her historical perception is fashioned in a time that blends past and present in ways often intricate, even impenetrable, a time defined by, and suspended between a certain degree of remembrance and oblivion. This time where past and present intersect is called memory. Memory originates in different sources, which plant in each and all of us a special attentiveness, and sensitivity, for certain different questions. Memory is both individual and collective. Again here, it is difficult, and perhaps futile, to differentiate the individual from the collective. It consists of my, your, his or her ancestry; my, your, his/her, genetic makeup; the specific background, that shaped a certain vision of the world; one’s personal path, whether one perceives it as smooth, bumpy, or whether it is marked, and severed in places, by discontinuities, and loss. As we evolve, moreover, our perspectives shift: a bump, even an erratic change, can gradually find a spot that we one day reclaim, not as a hiatus, or a departure from, but as part of our ongoing journey, and gradually settles gently into our narrative.

But it is not all relative. As Gerda Lerner puts it so beautifully: “We live our lives; we tell our stories. The dead continue to live by way of the resurrection we give them in telling their stories. The past becomes part of our present and thereby part of our future. We act individually and collectively in a process over time which builds the human enterprise and tries to give it meaning. Being human means thinking and feeling; it means reflecting on the past and visioning into the future. We experience; we give voice to that experience; others reflect on it and give it new form. That new form, in its turn, influences and shapes the way next generations experience their lives. That is why history matters.”³

² Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, NY, WW Norton and Co., 1998, p. xxi.

³ Gerda Lerner, *Why History Matters: Life and Thought*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 211.

The Impact of Current Events on the Field of International Relations

When your field is the history of International Relations, the intrusion of the present into the past is all the more acute. First, there is the question of new sources declassified and released, or simply discovered, which refine and redefine those past equations that you took for granted. For example, it was long thought that George Kennan was the sole architect of containment, a strategy that he defined in 1946 and published in 1947. The release of the British Roberts telegram, and more importantly perhaps, of that authored by the Soviet Ambassador in Washington, Nikolai Novikov in September 1946, puts this long-held assumption in another perspective, by showing that (as is often the case) similar notions were establishing themselves within these different, even clashing, cultural entities. While this does not diminish Kennan's pivotal role in shaping US foreign policy in the Cold War, it certainly brings into light the fact that other protagonists were simultaneously holding comparable thoughts, and hence offers different scenarios for the interpretation of the early cold war dynamics. A parallel can be drawn with today's popular concerns about the "clash of civilizations" between the West and the Muslim world, that appears to be at the forefront of national as well as transnational preoccupations in the US, in Europe, in Asia, and in the Middle East.

In addition to the recovery of hitherto undisclosed sources, there is always the problem of distancing oneself from the object of study. How do you narrate the history of the Solidarity movement in Poland at a time when the Soviet Union is still intact? Can you write, or even formulate questions, without somehow situating yourself on one side of the divide? How do you write on Kosovo when the war in the Balkans is raging, and that contested area the site of mass murders? The political implications of revisiting the past are often enormous. In many areas tormented by strife (like Colombia, another of my subjects of interest), historians risk their lives daily, simply by offering their interpretation of the past. Sometimes, scholars prefer to avoid controversial positions and remain securely situated within the

confines of acceptable objects of study: Ivo Banac, who is member of the Croatian Parliament and the author of well-known works on the Balkans (*The Nationalist Question in Yugoslavia*), remarks with this in mind, that others of his historian colleagues are medievalists⁴... But revisiting the past need not always cast a curse on its authors: it has been several decades now that truth commissions have been set up as a means to probe into the origins of current grievances, and on that basis to correct the historical record, with the view of establishing peace.

A Personal Odyssey

How does a scholar in international affairs minimize the interference of the present in the past? How does an outside observer attempt an approach to U.S. foreign policy, for instance, that does not at the outset taint the work with partiality? One way perhaps to circumvent the value issue, is to investigate the workings of collective memory, as a venue to understand and explain what certain events (e.g. Kosovo) represent and why for both sides. That is why the theme of memory has become a growing field of study in history.⁵ It has long been for me a topic of predilection, and when I started working on U.S. foreign affairs, my specific quest was to understand the workings of time in the American collective unconscious as defined by the political establishment. I tried, more specifically, to study the influence of myths on the collective identity, and to derive from this baggage a distinct vision of the meaning of time, where history came from, and where it was aimed at. I then strove to understand the manner in which this perspective on time's orientation impacted U.S. foreign policy. I delved into the relationship of time and space to uncover what US foreign policy owed to a perspective on time deeply steeped in mythology and religion. I thus started on a journey, one that has intrigued me ever since, to understand a peculiar feature of U.S.

⁴ Intervention at the Meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies, Philadelphia, May 2005.

⁵ In 1984, French historian Pierre Nora, proposed a new object of study: "le lieu de mémoire", which became the title of a vast publishing venture. For a recount of the rising interest in memory, see François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris, Seuil, 2003, pp. 11-17.

collective identity, once incisively commented upon by the great American historian, the late Richard Hofstadter: *The United States*, he is said to have dryly observed, is “the only nation that began with perfection and aspires to progress.”⁶

I chose as my central focus the Progressive Era and Woodrow Wilson. In 1988, I wrote a dissertation in French, which was then published as a book, the title of which in English translates as “the Globalization of the Monroe Doctrine in the Wilson Era”. I am now revising and updating this work in English. Although the core of the new study will pertain to US foreign policy today – i.e. in the post-cold war era, I still believe that the Wilson period founded the framework of this behavior: it forged the perspective that still influences policymakers today (even -- or more so -- to the right – if one considers the neo-cons’ missionary zeal); and it defined the 20th Century dynamics of the international arena in three ways: first, in securing the preponderance of the nation-state, already established since the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia; second, in making democracy the cornerstone of the national project; and third, in channeling and pursuing the international endeavors that stirred many in Wilson’s generation, by formulating a coherent structural scheme for the world community with his proposal for a League of Nations.

Another factor that weighed in my choice of Wilson, were his inherent contradictions, and the fact that he synthesized the various policy tools advocated by his opponents. He is known mainly for his messianism, but in fact he used Teddy Roosevelt’s big stick policy on many occasions – He hung to isolationism in the first phase of the European war, and on occasion seemed quite satisfied with the “dollar diplomacy” implemented by his Republican predecessor, William Howard Taft.

Finally, what made this period particularly interesting, was that the diplomatic framework put in place was to a substantial degree inspired by the US experience of the Civil War. The members of the political establishment had been profoundly influenced by that event,

⁶ Quoted in Joyce Appleby, *A Restless Past. History and the American Public*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005, p. 98.

and so the narrative on the First World War with all its colorful metaphors (Wilson's "war to end all wars" is an example) was directly drawn from the recent national experience. And the general desire at the end of the civil war to underscore the victory of right over wrong (the Southern bitter version of its defeat developed later), handsomely fit the mythical underpinning of collective perspectives, which gave to events a providential meaning and a purpose. All these elements lent a pivotal quality to this period as a bridge between the US national past and the international behavior that Washington would exhibit during the next century, and indeed even today. (Right after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I went to a lecture in the Wilson Center where the speaker compared the end of the cold war to the peaceful resolution in the U.S. Civil War. The analogy at the time made me gasp, all the more so because he did not understand my question which referred to ideological differences. But today, I see this remark as a sign of the resilience of this parallel).

Shifting Perspectives

To what extent did my thinking in the 1980s formulate a position that I could endorse today? What I propose here is a critical reflection on my own past work, with an attempt to identify the influences, which to a certain degree nourished my reading of the time. Where do I stand today in regard to this analysis which I am revising and updating? In what way has the progress of American studies influenced my version of events? In what does domestic policy as well as world events in the post cold-war context affect my reading? After discussing these points, I will attempt to define this "lost place", the caption that I gave to this talk. What is lost and what remains of an historical exploration in time? If obviously all such journeys are not doomed to obsolescence – seminal historical works are here to stay - - beginning with Thucydides' study of the Peloponnesian wars --, what can one reasonably expect from an approach such as mine? I hope to close on some thoughts that are relevant not only in my field, but in yours, and to spur some discussion.

Let me first address the changing contexts, which dominated then and now. At the time I did my research and then wrote, the cold war still provided the framework of International Relations. The Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan, while the U.S. fought a proxy war against the Sandinistas. The Iran-Contra matter showed that Communism was still the major evil in Washington's perspective, and the outlandish idea of offering the Iranian Mullahs a cake as a goodwill gesture showed that the apprehensions revolving around the alleged Muslim hostility today were not yet on the radar screen. The Europeans oscillated between bewilderment and genuine concern about the potential backlash that the Reagan administration's bellicose language could elsewhere induce. The Western powers of the international community nevertheless hung together. With Carter as President, moralism was in the air. With Reagan, one could not help but be struck by the heavy allegorical charge of his rhetoric (the "evil empire" and the "city on the hill"; "it's Morning in America" "we have a rendez-vous with destiny"). Each, in different ways, brought me to Wilson.

What a contrast with 2005! The waning of the cold war has shown that the big power rivalry that galvanized the international scene during half of a century was in many ways a factor of stability. The end of the big power contention has brought about centrifugal tendencies in states formerly controlled, whether officially or tacitly, by one of the contending powers. The arsenals of the former two blocs are dispersing. Nuclear stockpiles are multiplying. The threat of further implosion looms over Russia, and its proximity to troubled Central Asia is cause for genuine concern. China is a big contender on the world scene, an imponderable protagonist. The Middle East is in disarray, with Palestine locked in what could appear as a desperate predicament, Iraq bogged down in what seems will be a long drawn-out struggle that pits various political, religious, and ethnic factions against each other, a situation that is destabilizing the whole area. Today, the nation-state is eroding due to transnational globalizing forces, while the capacity of the UN to curb national interests, or merge them into a harmonious unity, is highly debatable. The former Western camp is divided by rivalries and resentments. And then there is Bush, a fierce ideologue, nourished by his born-

again convictions and determined – at a high cost to his country – to spread democracy. For someone who has long studied U.S. foreign affairs in the 20th century, there is an eerie feeling of *déjà vu*. How could it be, a century later, as we grope our way towards the challenges of the 21st century, that we are back to the quandaries of the Wilson period?

Notwithstanding the repetitive diplomatic behavior, the field of U.S. studies has evolved considerably. Let me single out some factors that have affected the content of these studies, between the date of the bicentennial of the Foundation, 1976, and 1992, the date of the commemoration of the discovery of America.

1976 and 1992, on the one hand, evoke two very distinct periods, while, on the other, they delimit a phase that saw a general fragmentation in U.S. studies, and a paramount shift in paradigm. My research, initial writing, and the task I have at hand today confront me with clashing perspectives, which must be evaluated. This shift in dominant scholarly tenets has interesting implications for my work.

Writing in the mid-1980s, I was inevitably confronted with the bicentennial vintage of events. During the years following 1976, there was a flurry of publications infused with the euphoria of the foundation. The “consensus” works generally developed along the following lines: The United States is an achieved utopia. Contrary to European nations, which are hostages to history and doomed by the inevitable corrosion that comes with time, the new nation is built outside of – and against -- time (source: British philosophers of the 17th century, and the “bon sauvage” analogy developed on the continent during the 18th century). It would be able to follow its exceptional vocation because of the special advantages afforded by space (Machiavelli distinction between the virtue of space and the decadence of history; Newton’s discovery of the “universal” laws of nature; French Enlightenment). Space was understood both in a literal and in a metaphorical sense: the pamphleteers and founding fathers pointed at the Atlantic Ocean that presented a physical barrier, and on that basis succeeding political leaders established U.S. diplomacy (Washington’s 1796 Farewell to Europe and the 1823

declaration of President Monroe which declared this hemisphere to be Washington's sphere of influence. Later Presidents would extend this sphere as the original areas of settlement expanded, or rather as the establishment sought to extend it (main phases: Jackson, Polk, McKinley, Roosevelt).

In addition to the Atlantic Ocean, the immensity of available land to the West (for a long time, the Indian was a non- or sub-human) seemed a guarantee against poverty, from which the majority of settlers had sought to escape. There was a moment of gloom at the end of the nineteenth century when the census declared the closing of the frontier (Frederick Jackson Turner) but consensus historians were able nevertheless to position "The Machine in the Garden", to quote a 1970s title by Leo Marx. Industrialization, they posited would multiply the bounties hitherto yielded by land. Innocence industrialization and capitalism were alive and well, through progress (influence of Darwin).

In the consensus school, space also represented a metaphorical insurance against corrosion (Machiavelli). Because they built their political system on laws of nature, conceived as universal, as defined by Newton and Locke, and were careful to establish weights and counterweights to prevent the ascendancy of tyranny, the framers of the constitution and those pamphleteers who vulgarized it, expressed their conviction that the passing of time could not deteriorate it. At the end of the 19th century, during what is known as the Progressive Era, there was a feeling among political leaders that corporations were intruding negatively and preventing the smooth functioning of society. In the 1912 election, both Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson presented their particular brand of progressivism, allowing for various degrees of state intervention to combat the impact of big business.

What dominated the field then was the parable of an exceptional nation, although this version of events was strained after the 1970s owing to the increasing flow of contesting readings. The melting-pot, argued the late historian Wiebe, was only harmonious in so far as the availability of land did not place the motley groups in too close

proximity to each other.⁷ Other scholars, Eric Foner and David Hackett Fischer and others, have expounded since upon the diverse, even contradictory, notions covered by the words liberty and freedom.⁸

Dissent flourished especially in the field of foreign policy, challenging the consensus school's image of an innocuous giant wholly bent on bringing about development and democracy. Some historians expounded on the parallels between the brutal domestication of the West and U.S. imperial diplomacy (Richard Slotkin: *Gunfighter Nation*, for instance). All over the world, especially in Europe, in the 1960s and 1970s, books appeared that blasted the *Empire Américain*... In the U.S., the "revisionist", or "new left", school developed around William Appleman Williams in Madison, Wisconsin, beginning in the sixties also generated very critical works on U.S. imperialism⁹. Some of his students continue in his footsteps. Others, like Horowitz, have reversed their position, emerging as the champions of a new brand of conservatism, which replicated the moralizing thrust of former Wilsonians.

Many of those dubbed neo-cons, the importance of whom is much overstated today, have a leftist past. They switched sides during the counterculture of the 1960s, which they believed introduced excessive relativism, and which offended in some their sense of patriotic pride. This can lead one to ponder the critical value of their past leftist works. While their denigration of US foreign policy may have intended at the time to be thorough, many writers of the new left had simply inverted the traditional mold. They had not fundamentally altered the framework of their scholarly perspective. The moralizing

⁷ Robert Wiebe, *The Segmented Society. An Introduction to the Meaning of America*, London, Oxford University Press, 1975.

⁸ See in particular Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, *op. cit*, David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America (America: A Cultural History)*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989.

⁹ The roots of this school of thought go back to the Nye Committee of Investigation into World War I, established in 1934 to determine whether the arm industry had played a role in US intervention. After two years of hearings, the findings of the seven member working group were that the industry had exerted undue influence on foreign affairs.

tone that infused early self-congratulatory works, also saturated those writings condemning US diplomacy. Today, they preach democracy on the pulpit of the right, which leads Zvetan Todorov to dub them, not “neo-conservatives”, but rather “neo-fundamentalists”.¹⁰

I had an early feeling of discomfort, even distrust for much of the contending literature on the right and on the left. First of all, many centered on the futile debate of intentions, an imponderable factor. A rewrite of the US as an achieved utopia seemed either like rephrasing some 18th century travel notes jotted down by a European observer¹¹, or a useless addition to an already saturated field of narcissistic works. Marxist frameworks could seem attractive to some, at a time when perspectives were influenced by the cold war conflict. But the Marxist viewpoint compressed the U.S. reality into a straitjacket. It reduced what most intrigued me – this peculiar vision of the world – to a Machiavellian market reflex, when it seemed to encompass much more. I chose a different angle of approach. I thought that even when political leaders lie and deceive (again, an imponderable factor), they have to transmit it in ways that touch a collective chord, one that strikes the national psyche. Consider the notion of *exporting democracy* appealing to a large section of the American people, while frankly frightening in other countries...

What I saw as an either or alternative between liberal and socialist readings led me to an impasse, which I tried to solve through a study of language, of the metaphors it conveyed, of the mental world that it expressed, with its particular anchoring in time and space. I soaked up reels of Congressional microfilms, read the many books that political leaders wrote in those days, went on to ingest the manuscripts, all this in an attempt to capture a certain vision of the world. Post-modernism – with its focus on language and borders, was in the air. Michel Foucault died in 1984, as I found out reading the

¹⁰ Zvetan Todorov, *Le nouveau désordre mondial. Réflexions d'un Européen*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2003, pp. 27 ff.

¹¹ Joyce Appleby reminds us that the Europeans were the actual authors of this myth: see Joyce Appleby, *A Restless Past. History and the American Public*, Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005, p. 92.

paper one morning in the DC metro. In the following years, books would appear that explored rhetoric and memory in US studies.

Without even being conscious of it, I also followed the current trend. Daily, I met my turn of the 20th century new pals in the manuscript room of the Library of Congress, and distanced myself from the voluminous literature that I had studiously imbibed and dissected. They fascinated me, irritated me at times, but always kept me thinking. Their notes revealed features of the period previously undisclosed, or superficially addressed in the scholarly literature. I discovered for instance, the central importance of the “hyphenated American”, which generated wide-ranging concerns after the beginning of the European war. During the period of US neutrality (1914-1917), there was a common fear that the “melting pot” was unraveling and that its various elements were secretly conniving with their country of origin. The suspicion was mainly directed against the Germans, and triggered some very stringent measures: in Oklahoma, it was even forbidden to speak German over the phone -- The “hyphenated American”, was not, I discovered, a passing and fleeting reference. He represented the archetype of the un-American. Later, he would take the colors of communism, and today the guise of terrorism. He incarnates in collective thought a dreaded fantasy, that of returning to, of being engulfed by a European past. This fear appears with changes in the environment, and fuels contradictory reflexes: retreat and isolation as well as intervention. On the domestic level, the “un-American” dread has periodically brought about stringent measures limiting free speech, from the 1918 Sedition Act to the current Patriot Act. This is well explored in a new book by Geoffrey R. Stone, *Perilous Times. Free Speech in Wartime. From the Sedition Act of 1798 to the War on Terrorism*.¹²

In addition to triggering drastic domestic measures, the emergence of the un-American specter has consistently spurred an intense political debate among those advocating diplomatic intervention, and others who seek to shut the world off. Today, there are clear parallels to be drawn with the Wilson era.

¹² New York, WW Norton, Inc., 2004.

Rhetoric and memory were therefore the substance of my early work, which brings it closer to today's perspectives than to the euphoria of the 1976 bicentennial commemoration. In other respects, however, the work is dated. It does not reflect the fragmentation that has more recently characterized the field.

A Field Fragmented.

If 1976 gave reason to celebrate, the 1992 commemoration of the discovery of America denoted more sober times. In effect, these opposing trends originated in the 1940s, and both developed and gained firm ground during the Nixon years, fueled by political developments at home and abroad. As contending forces, they nourished each other, and had ripple effects throughout society. The contention reached a peak in the early 1990s, during the elaboration of national guidelines for the teaching of history. These were geared towards expanding the substance of U.S. studies to include groups previously absent, or underrepresented (African Americans, workers, women, gay and transgendered individuals), as well as opening the field of methodology to new perspectives, notably to postmodernism, which Joyce Appleby, former President of the OAH, AHA, and of the Society for historians of the Early American Republic, characterizes somewhat dubiously as "(...) that amorphous collection of twentieth century philosophes, literary scholars, science skeptics, and social critics who have joined forces in a comprehensive assault on Western metaphysics, which flowered in the eighteenth century enlightenment."¹³ History emerged then suddenly "as a 'wedge issue' in the so-called culture wars", writes Eric Foner. "During that time," he continues, it sometimes seemed, one could scarcely open a newspaper without encountering bitter controversy over the teaching and presentation of the American past."¹⁴ The drafting of these guidelines triggered a nasty and very public clash of opinions, "including comparisons to Nazi and Bolshevik efforts to shape public

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁴ Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*, New York, Hill and Wang, 2002, p. xii.

opinion”.¹⁵ In a column entitled “The End of History,” which appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* on October 20, 1994, “Lynne Cheney, former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, maligned the National History Standards that she had funded (along with the Department of Education) as a “grim and gloomy” monument to political correctness. She pronounced the standards project a disaster for giving insufficient attention to Robert E. Lee and the Wright brothers and far too much to obscure figures (such as Harriet Tubman) or patriotically embarrassing episodes (such as the Ku Klux Klan and McCarthyism).”¹⁶

The contention was not confined to arcane debates among academics, but sprang on the national scene as discussions arose over whether to exhibit the *Enola Gay* – the plane that bombed Hiroshima -- and whether the discovery of America was a source of pride, or of shame. At the time Mexican diplomat and historian Carlos Fuentes recalled, not without humor, having been present at a play in the fifties, which reenacted the discovery. After a two-hour drawn out replay of the perils at sea encountered by the *Niña*, the *Pinta* and the *Santa Maria*, the dozing audience, he recalled, was suddenly awakened by the actors impersonating the exuberant natives, as they jumped for joy on stage, and jubilated: “we have been discovered, we have been discovered!” What a contrast with 1992! What marked the anniversary then was the mournful procession of American Indians

¹⁵ Joyce Appleby, *The National Standards: A US history perspective*, 10 November, 1994 <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45/001.html>

¹⁶ Gary B. Nash, “Lynne Cheney's Attack on the History Standards, 10 Years Later”, *History News Network*, 11/08/04, <http://hnn.us/articles/8418.html> (April 2005). Nash also evokes Cheney’s role in this regard: Ms. Cheney, it will be remembered, asked the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA to coordinate the writing of the standards that Congress had mandated in 1992. The standards were developed over thirty-two months in Los Angeles and Washington with teacher task forces working with academic historians, school administrators, and other history educators. Though approved by a national council, half of whose members were her appointees and endorsed by thirty major professional and public interest organizations, the standards were dismissed by Ms. Cheney as having no redeeming value. Her attack sparked a fierce media debate as the nation prepared for the November 1994 election.”

on the Washington Mall.

I settled in the United States in 1988, as this process of fragmentation was eroding what had until then appeared as a perennial given for scholars in US studies. Some well recognized professors, including U.S. Wilson expert, the late Princeton Professor Arthur Link, showed interest in my work and encouraged me to publish it in English. I worked on a couple of drafts, and then put the whole thing in a folder, which I never touched again. Like many products born from strenuous efforts, it was densely packed, contained many an intricate sentence, included the countless quotes that a doctoral student feels she needs to prove a simple, self-evident point, and hence, was difficult to digest. But there was more: U.S. studies as they were then evolving, were pulling the rug out from under my feet. Could it be that the U.S. collective identity did not have one notion of time? Today, in addition to works on the memory of various groups (African-American/Native Americans...), we have a growing body of material on the particular identity and specific memory of the US South. Could it be that the space that I had seen operating as a major factor in foreign affairs was a simple delusion? Patricia Nelson Limerick had just published (1987) her important book, *the Legacy of Conquest. The Unbroken Past of the American West*, which continued dismantling the notion that a single space existed. Where I had seen and sought to study a people and a territory, there were now crowds of motley groups in places that had little if anything in common. So be it. Since time and space were in their very essence torn and infinitely diverse, I would tread in places where these organizing factors were really in disarray. Thus began another journey into “terror”.

A New Territory for U.S. Studies

Fragmentation and the increasing wealth of material relating to rhetoric, and memory, are paramount, but not the only influences on the evolution of the field. In addition to the changing substance and perspectives on US studies, one also needs in this context to take into account the changing position, or status if you will, of U.S. studies with respect to culture. It is evident that any change in the

protagonists involved in the recovery of the past also carries an incidence on the historical debate. As long as American studies remained confined to a select few scholars, its polemical potential was circumscribed to the auditoriums of universities. But since the 1970s, increasingly, there has been a subtle shift of this discipline within US society. Previously the domain of scholarly endeavors, the turf of US studies has now become the pursuit of society at large. Witness the sudden popular frenzy for genealogy, the growing audience for history and/or talk shows on TV and the radio, or the exponential growth of the series of “history for dummies”... This trend has contributed to the politicization of the scholarly debate. Everyone, it seems today, is well versed in U.S. history. And most politically motivated people will back-up his/her position by reference to events of the past, which are construed not as relative and intellectually constructed, but as “correct” or “incorrect”.

There are several reasons for this evolution: the contribution of powerful political personalities, like Ronald Reagan; the tremendous development of media resources; and the political appropriation of history by religious pressure groups.

First, one should underscore the role of powerful political personalities in introducing the realm of history into the political debate (and in fact in fundamentally altering this area of study). Ronald Reagan played a paramount role in this respect. He was the successor to a President whom many saw as indecisive, and most of all, he was battling the Vietnam syndrome, and trying to rid the nation of the creeping malaise, a feeling ill suited to the American psyche. In so doing, Reagan crafted a new narrative that intimately blended the factual with the mythological imagery. There was again a “city on the hill”, and an outside “evil empire”. There was a struggle for good, which the U.S. epitomized. Ronald Reagan was, by virtue of his nature and perhaps of his training as an actor, the “Great Communicator”. He stirred the national consciousness and molded popular opinion in ways that previous Presidents had not. A recent

book recognizes Ronald Reagan as the first “post-modern” President.¹⁷

One should not underestimate Reagan’s symbolic legacy, and his role in popularizing a misconstrued version of history. In regard to his symbolic legacy, sociologist Jean Baudrillard noted that “with Reagan, a value system formerly effective turn(ed) into something ideal and imaginary. At a point in time when it was unquestionably compromised, the image of America (became) imaginary for the Americans themselves”.¹⁸ Reagan sought to obliterate the national crisis by lulling the country into a superficial sense of grandeur through symbolic wars in tiny Grenada or Panama. He fathered the “Star Wars” which Sakharov characterized as “a kind of ligne Maginot in space – expensive and ineffective”.¹⁹ Today, the powerful myth subsists, and missile defense still has many supporters, despite its uselessness in combating the current threat of terrorism.

Reagan did more: he turned FDR on his head. A long-time admirer of FDR for whom he had voted in the past, Ronald Reagan imported much of the former president’s imagery, and principally the messianism, which until then had been dominant in the democratic narrative, while the Republicans remained essentially in the line of the Hamiltonian legacy. One of his most astute biographers, Lou Cannon, observed: “Culturally, he remained a Democrat who drew his metaphors and inspiration from the New Deal. Other Republican politicians spoke to the majority of the electorate as outsiders, trying to induce Democrats to come over to their side. Reagan spoke as an

¹⁷ Gil Troy, *Morning in America. How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 15: “ (Reagan’s) optimism and pro-Americanism forged a governing template useful to future presidents from both sides of the aisle. Ronald Reagan taught Bill Clinton and George W. Bush the importance of big picture governing, of integrating cultural and political leadership, of shaping a transcendent narrative that could insulate the president from the inevitable missteps and even larger scandals and errors. One cannot understand how Bill Clinton survived the Monica Lewinsky scandal, how George W. Bush thrived after September 11, without first understanding Ronald Reagan’s model of presidential leadership.”

¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, London, Verso, 1988, p. 114.

¹⁹ Quoted in Dusko, Doder, Louise Branson, Gorbachev..., p. 208.

insider.”²⁰ But even as he quoted FDR, Reagan persisted until the end of his presidency in portraying the system as an evil outsider. By successfully dissociating himself from what he saw as the undermining of the country’s health by Washington’s political machine, Reagan contributed in no small measure to alienate the American people from their system.²¹

Reagan’s fundamental misconstruction of history had a particularly detrimental effect. Even though he came after Vietnam, Reagan persisted in minimizing – even denying – the role that nationalism can and does play in conflicts. He perceived every conflict as an underground operation of the Soviet Union. Moreover, he transposed events into the realm of right versus wrong, spoke of a “rendez-vous with destiny”, and predicted happy endings. With him, history was propelled forward. It belonged to the future. Whether he simply quoted Tom Paine’s conviction that “we have it in our power to begin the world over again”, or quipped that he knew Jefferson. He was a friend of mine, as he did in the Republican Convention in August 1992, Reagan entertained a confusion between past, present and future. As perceptively noted by Garry Wills, “Reagan gives our history the continuity of a celluloid Möbius strip. We ride its curves backward and forward at the same time, and he is always there. There is an endlessness of surface that becomes a kind of depth... Reagan’s image precedes us when we ride forward or backward in time, anticipating our reactions, reflecting us back to ourselves, stirring ‘memories of the future’.”²²

This transposition of history into myth sustains the notion that the U.S. “won” the Cold War, with scant attention to the implosion of the Soviet Union. By implication, it supports the belief that showdowns of strength will perpetually guarantee Washington’s supremacy in world

²⁰ Quoted in Leuchtenburg, p. 225

²¹ George F. Will, *The Morning After, American Successes and Excesses, 1981-1986*, New York, The Free Press, 1986, p. 357, comments that at least until the Iran arms scandal, “the public just didn’t connect this man with his own government.”

²² Garry Wills, *Reagan’s America, Innocents at Home*, p. 371.

affairs. Continuing in Ronald Reagan's steps, George W. Bush, has recently voiced the mistaken belief that Churchill and FDR gave the Baltic states away to Stalin at Yalta in February 1945. As noted by Jon Meacham, managing editor of *Newsweek* and author of *Franklin and Winston*, "The legacy of Yalta . . . , was more about ratifying facts on the ground than it was about pressing ahead in new directions", while "to put Yalta in the same sentence with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact unfairly casts Roosevelt and Churchill in the same light as Hitler and Stalin".²³ A fundamental misconstruction of the notion of appeasement, has thus found a central place in the official U.S. diplomatic rhetoric.

Ronald Reagan, in summary, reshaped popular notions about politics, merging history and mythology, introducing a messianic tone in the narrative of the Republican party, and making politics the stuff of the people, not the elite. His legacy remains evident in the thrust of the neo-cons' discourse, in the Republican party's monopoly on the good/evil imagery, and in the concept that U.S. foreign affairs must be driven by the quest to extend freedom.

Since Ronald Reagan's presidency, other factors have intervened to extend the impact of this popularized version of U.S. history: one element is the exponential development of media resources, which has vastly expanded the reach of the popularized historical debate. In addition to this quantitative factor, there has been yet another qualitative change: the religious component. Part of this evolution is specific to the United States; and part is a reaction to the trend of globalization, which is affecting the whole world.

The Religious Component

The religious contentions underscored today do not really indicate a clash between spiritual and secular orders, as is commonly believed. This assumption is dangerous, because it might well trigger the very confrontation that is, for many, of paramount concern. As we saw in the dynamics of the cold war, hard held beliefs serve to nourish, not

²³ Jon Meacham, "Bush, Yalta and the Blur of Hindsight", *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2005, p. B4.

to dissipate or prevent confrontations. The intensification of religious issues reflect a profound restructuring of the relationships between, on the one hand, the secular state and society, and on the other hand, religion. This reorganization has been brought about by the acceleration of the transient quality of human interaction, the collapse and reforming of communities, real and virtual, caused by globalization. Such is the convincing thesis of Islam specialist, Olivier Roy, in a forthcoming book, *La laïcité face à l'État*, which seeks to debunk some widely held myths about the alleged threatening assault of neo-fundamentalism on the secular state.²⁴

In the United States, the equation between the secular and religious realms presents itself differently. First, religion – more precisely Protestantism – is an integral part of the national identity, and while the “melting-pot” has been able to accommodate other confessions, importing even some of their imagery (“city on the hill”, “chosen people”), there has always subsisted a tension between the secular notion of freedom and specific commitments of the different confessions. In U.S. history, there have been recurrent bouts of anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, and these feelings of exclusion have traditionally fed the agenda of movements on the fringe of the extreme right. Tensions are particularly acute today. Anti-Muslim feelings are paramount. Concerns are voiced by scholars (Huntington being the most known), and also by religious leaders. Pastor Ted Haggard, who presides over the National Association of Evangelicals (NEA, the most powerful religious lobbying group, comprising 45,000 churches and 30 million believers), worries about the “little clash of civilization” which he sees coming: “ (...) the battle boils down to evangelicals versus Islam. ‘My fear’, he says, ‘is that my children will grow up in an Islamic state.’ And that is why he believes spiritual war requires a virile, worldly counterpart. ‘I teach a strong ideology of the use of power’, he says, ‘of military might as a public service.’ He is for preemptive war, because he believes the Bible’s exhortations against

²⁴ See the following extract: Olivier Roy, “La crise de l’État laïque et les nouvelles formes de religiosité”, in *Esprit*, No. 312, février 2005, pp. 27-44.

sin set for us a preemptive paradigm, and he is for ferocious war, because 'the Bible's bloody. There's a lot about blood.'²⁵

The power of religious groups today cannot be overly stressed. As pressure groups, they played an instrumental part in the ascendancy of the Republican party. As documented by several scholars, the clout of religious groups is a coolly devised stratagem engineered by secular individuals, who energized the religious base and pushed it to a greater involvement in social and political affairs. As a consequence, mass mailings to potential supporters, and especially radio talk-shows polarized opinions over divisive social issues, such as abortion and/or gay unions, bringing in new sectors of the electorate and feeding their resentments (a resentment triggered by the counter-culture of the 60s and transformed into political capital by Ronald Reagan and various protagonists of the changing, Southernized, Republican Majority).

This evolution has coincided with two other trends, that have compounded its severity. The first of these trends, explained above, is the popularization of history during the 1990s, and its entry into the political debate as a principal object of contention. The broadening adoption of the doctrine of creationism in the states' history curriculum, manifests this political exploitation of history. Aggravating this trend, is the mythologizing tone of U.S. studies since Ronald Reagan and the waning of the cold war.

In short, the most critical development that has intervened between the early 1980s and today, has been the zeal to appropriate history as a weapon (a trend also apparent in Europe); a political exploitation of history; and the transmuting of history to the realm of indelible myths (this accompanied the religious appropriation of history, but is also the product of powerful political personalities, beginning with Ronald Reagan). These two elements: the changing content of US Studies, and its repositioning from the fringes of historical scholarship into the wider realm of the debate on U.S. society necessarily have important implications on any scholarly work.

²⁵ Jeff Sharlet, "Soldiers of Christ. I. Inside America's Most Powerful Megachurch", *Harper's*, May 2005, Vol. 310, No. 1860, pp. 42, 48.

Mapping U.S. behavior in Today's World.

1976 and 1992 are the markers of two very different times. Compare yesterday's maps with today's: some geographical entities have broken up – the Soviet Union; and with this fragmentation some have lost their previous meaning and are in a process of redefinition (as for instance Eastern Europe). Within geographical borders, nations are meeting new challenges as ethnic flows gather momentum in the new era of globalization.

How does this affect a reading on rhetoric and memory? The study of a peculiar vision of the world is, in a sense a map. Saül Friedländer once compared myths to an atlas, which gives meaning, shape and direction to events. It is the perceptual foundation of collective awareness. As such, the general framework on which I based myself in the mid 1980s, still appears valid, with some reservations.

I remain convinced that the U.S. mind continues to process time and space in a very different way than other cultures. Time, even today, retains its pejorative connotation, while space incarnates fantasies of potential renewal, with all the deplorable diplomatic consequences this entails. Today, however, I will be less clear-cut in my presentation of space as a substitute for history, and will have to include the fragmented historical reality.²⁶ Recent scholarship has added important perspectives on the U.S.' sense of time. For all the denial perpetrated by the consensus school, the various groups of the "melting-pot" have a historical awareness, as do those traditionally excluded (African- and native- Americans, women). And in this vast continent, events, and conflicts, have been and continue to be perceived differently. When I wrote about the Wilson era, I was focused on the official rhetoric, and excessively influenced by the triumphant tone that dominated in the rhetoric on the Civil War. The progress of scholarship on the South has described how a vindictive spirit has returned with a vengeance. It has shown the rise within the Republican party, of a strand of thought very different from that of the

²⁶ See David W. Noble, *Death of A Nation, American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2002.

former North Eastern establishment, a conquistador disposition prone to plunder rather than investment, a spirit infused today with bigotry and the return of an ancestral desire for revenge. Works on memory have added perspective on some critical events (Vietnam), as well as on some seminal characters in this nation's history and mythology (William E. Leuchtenburg *In the Shadow of FDR, From Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan*, James T. Baker's *Abraham Lincoln, the Man and the Myth*, Gil Troy's *Morning in America...*) Explorations of this nation's rhetoric has shattered the compact notion of liberty, which conceals many divergent meanings, and is the source of central political contentions (David Hackett Fischer). There is therefore today a profusion of new material to incorporate.

There are also new developments that must be taken into account, namely the political machine, the tremendous corruption that it fosters and shields, and the popularization of history through the media and other agents of socialization. An updated version that focuses on today cannot limit itself to the established political elite.

Let me return to where I began. I set out to tell a story. And the story around this story. And I tried to show how events and changing perceptions reverberated against my narrative, how they have shaped my perspectives, so that I myself also am part of this journey through time. Revisiting this narrative will take away some of the dated interpretations. It will be nourished by my observations of today's world and inevitably driven by my concerns. It will mean unavoidably using another framework that will fade through time. But then all narratives, even a historical inquiry on memory such as this one, have as part of their function that of anchoring us in the present, of playing the role of navigator. They decipher the past in present terms, identify sources of behavior, trace the mental boundaries of perception, much like a translator expands or shrinks the meaning of a word, a phrase, a sentence, to fit a foreign universe.²⁷ As historians of contemporary affairs, we are in, and we are out at the same time. It would be irrelevant to be in or out totally; it is frustrating, but not meaningless, to remain at the periphery of a past universe, because

²⁷ This is the interesting analogy made by Marc Augé, *Les formes de l'oubli*, Paris, Payot, 1998, pp. 12-13.

through our interpretations, we bring it back with a new raison d'être – that of understanding our present.

Laura Garcés, May 2005

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