

The 2nd Annual President's Forum:

Verdict(s) of History: Collective Memories of the Twentieth Century

January 30, 2009

Introduction

Paul R. Hinlicky, Tise Professor, Roanoke College

President Maxey, esteemed panelists and colleagues, I am delighted to introduce the topic and the presentations before us this afternoon.

The president whom our new president admires most was pilloried in the press for four years. Lincoln was so roundly despised that he prepared to lose the election of 1864. Within a year, an apotheosis had occurred. Or take another example: Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon in the name of people of Rome, abolished the Republic and created an Empire – an act emulated for centuries to come by warlords from Charlemagne to Frederick the Great, until a military dictator from Germany visited the tomb of Napoleon in Paris in the summer of 1941. Then that model fell from its pedestal. I could go on. Anyone who studies history soon gets to know the history of history with its changing verdicts. History is a fickle lover.

Yet history is what we are. Given who I have been, how shall I become what I hope to be? Or, given what I hope to be, what must I make of who I have been? Either way, we have memories by virtue of the particular body which we are, locating us in space and time with its definite past and a future ahead which intimately concerns us. Memories are the materials out of which we write the stories of our lives, an act of interpretation to the future we project for ourselves. That is precarious enough a construction, all the more so for the collective self, the cultural body to which we belong. Contending forces in society make for even less coherence. I study Martin Luther. To this day many Germans remember him as one of the greatest in their history: Religious genius, hero of conscience, creator of the language and awakener of national consciousness, but Jews, peasants and Catholics have had rather different memories of the man.

We are very close to the Twentieth century. Yet it amazes me when I teach our 18-year olds that they share next to nothing in the memories which formed my soul and many of yours: air raid drills and nuclear bomb shelters, the British invasion and Motown, the assassinations, Selma and Watts, Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive, Kent State, Watergate, the humiliation in Tehran, the Sandinistas, the nuclear freeze movement, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Apartheid. It is striking what a litany I just sang. Your panelists today have noticed that too. Is there something unhealthy about collective memory that so often it recalls the errors and the terrors, forgetting the silent, steady stream of life in the mass of all who labored in hope for a better world? Or was it really just the century of Hitler, Hiroshima and Stalin?

Memories of spectacles like a "Monkey Trial," fraught with provocative symbolism, show the task of "learning from history" precarious indeed. Gil Dunn dissects a cliché of the progressive mind, the verdict of history on William Jennings Bryan in representations like *Inherit the Wind*.

Bryan proves the true progressive in his own day, while those who vilified him, like the journalist H.L. Mencken and Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes took Darwinian science to mean that we may breed humans like horses, getting past religious scruples to cull the population in the name of public hygiene. How are we to remember the monumental scientific advances of the 20th century?

Matt Fleenor asks us to remember that the sciences are human practices, communities of inquiry with cultures of their own, embedded in turn in the wider memories and hopes of humankind. When that collective memory of science is working openly, collaboratively, and honestly, science advances, as may be seen in the example of Robert Millikan, who won a Nobel Prize by the simple yet profound method of making past error the subject of new research. Can the same lesson apply to the collective memory of science too compartmentalized in relation to the wider world, one that systematically forgets that 'unlimited energy means unlimited power for war and destruction,' that 'technology makes evil anonymous?'

Robert Schultz concludes our offerings this afternoon with an insightful and evocative meditation on the unique art-form of Binh Danh, a Vietnamese-American who preserves memories of terrible times in a fashion that tells at the same time of renewal, rebirth, transmigration, resurrection. Bob responds in kind with poetry of his own that remembers Binh Dahn's memories to the same end of life not death, repair not despair, resolve not resignation. Art remembering art, a clue not only to more truthful remembrance but more hopeful imagination after the century past of wonder and horror.