

Reconstructing our National Narrative:

American Historiography at a Crossroads

By Jerry Prout

"A people without history is like a wind upon the buffalo grass."¹ *Teton Sioux Saying*

On October 6 1968, before the fifth game of the World Series, a blind Puerto Rican singer sang a stylized version of the Star Spangled Banner. The following day The New York Times reported that Jose Feliciano's "performance caused consternation and criticism amongst television viewers throughout the nation."² NBC's New York office immediately reported some 400 calls. Across the country the network's affiliates were flooded with irate messages. The interpretation of our sacred national song enraged veterans groups, and the 23-year-old's performance, the first nontraditional version of an anthem to be widely heard by mainstream America, was retrospectively referred to as the Lexington and Concord of *Star-Spangled Banner* controversies when National Public Radio revisited it 38 years later.³



It was estimated that, prior to Feliciano's rendition, the National Anthem had already endured over 1,000 different

¹ Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 8.

² "Fans Protest Soul Singer's Anthem Version," (*The New York Times*), October 8, 1968.

³ Tom Goldman, "Anthem Singer Tests Land of the Free," (National Public Radio) October 27, 2006.

versions.⁴ Feliciano's was remarkable not only because it was viewed by millions, but because it seemed oddly juxtaposed when framed within the penultimate American sports event. Though millions contemptuously thought Feliciano's interpretation of the anthem defamed a national icon, within a month RCA rushed the live version into a record complete with the mixed crowd noises.⁵

Feliciano's rendition occurred only seven months after a South Vietnamese General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the chief of the Saigon national police, executed a National Liberation Front (NLF) prisoner before a rolling camera in what H. Bruce Franklin called "one of the most shocking, influential and enduring single images from the Vietnam War."⁶ This single act further galvanized an already burgeoning anti-war movement. And in many ways the reaction became a complimenting subtext to Feliciano's non-traditional approach to the National Anthem. Both of these acts were performed on a national stage and were viewed differently by two parts of a divided nation, conflicted by the war, America's role in the world and an unsettled domestic landscape.

These images and others that cascaded in front of us during that tumultuous Vietnam period, rekindled the conflicts that an earlier "progressive school" of American historians always saw lurking beneath the surface of our history. These were conflicts a "consensus school" of historians in the period following World War II were only temporarily able to reconcile under the banner of an exceptional "American way of life." In the paradoxes that emerged in the tumultuous, reformist period of the 60's, American history, as Gary B. Nash writes, could no longer be made to be

⁴ Donal Hanahan, "Soul Spangled Banner," (*The New York Times*), October 27, 1968.

⁵ "Anthem, Sung by Feliciano, Is Issued by RCA Records," (*The New York Times*), October 17, 1968.

⁶ H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), p.14.

nice.⁷ Nor could it be easily confined. Greil Marcus suggests it could no longer be studied as a "little Peyton Place of the mind." It had come time to "study America, the whole shebang, in all its imbecile complexity."⁸

The conflicting interpretations of the National Anthem and Vietnam War within the context of this tempestuous period in American history are forever crystallized in these two discrete black and white images. In her work *Prosthetic Memory*, Alison Landsberg asks whether the projection of such imagery by mass technology upon our collective consciousness can actually have a role in the construction of a more tolerant and accepting national ethos. In her view, mass culture has the potential to so commoditize a society's memories that we have the very real potential to share in one another's ethnicity, pain and values. Landsberg asks whether electronic culture can help shape a shared ethos and a more unified community by its use of imagery. Can our collective experience of technologically projected sights and sounds act as a sort of prosthesis that helps eradicate the differences that have traditionally marked the human condition? In this way can mass technology create a more "socially responsible" culture?⁹

The conflicts in interpretation of the Feliciano and Nguyen images would seem to dictate otherwise. At the time, the imagery divided more than it united. And yet against the predominant traditions of American historiography these contemporaneous reactions are both explainable and predictable.

⁷ Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1997) p.56.

⁸ Greil Marcus, *The Old, Wierd America*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997) p. 91.

⁹ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

Then and now, these images serve to remind us that left unexplained, the impressions of any period are chaotic, contradictory and confusing. Post modern U.S. historiography, it will be argued here, has greatly enriched and enlightened our understanding of specific cultural phenomenon from our collective past, though often in very narrowly confined temporal and spatial dimensions. As broadening as these studies are to our vertical understanding of specific periods, places and people, they now need to enlighten our horizontal understanding of the broader themes that unify our American experience.

As historians we have a critical role, if not obligation, to help interpret the dissonant imagery that comes to us when we train our eyes on any period. The images of Feliciano and Nguyen still stare at us almost two generations later begging us to sort through the conflicted imagery of a past still clouded by too vivid memories. We are at a juncture in U.S. historiography, it will be argued, where our penchant to sift meticulously through the rubble of the past, and micro analyze its granularity, is beginning to threaten our ability to form a broader integrative narrative and fulfill history's role in the development of a widely shared national ethos.

In examining the American past, our historiography has typically alternated between consensus and conflict.¹⁰ Prior to World War I, American historiography was largely a celebration of the similarities in the American tradition; or, at the very least history's role was to promote a perception of a shared American experience, even if that meant ignoring or rationalizing the slave experience, the oppression of the Native American or other subtexts that distracted from the American "epochal." The debate then largely focused on the way history could be most objectively discovered and told in the traditions of a post Baconian

¹⁰ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.320-360.

Enlightenment imperative that affirmed the past could be reduced to a series of immutable facts, if not truths. As Peter Novick incisively offers, the cozy atmosphere of those few scholars who defined what was appropriate made it possible to define objectivity because there was a shared agreement on "a history:"

No community can be satisfied that its discourse is objective---or even know what it would mean to be objective---without substantial agreement on values, goals and perceptions. ¹¹

Thus the debate over the objectivity of historical endeavor which predominated at the time the American Historical Association was founded (1884), was in some ways moot due to the homogeneity in background of those practicing the craft. History as practiced by the Bancrofts, Motley's, Parkman's and Prescott's at the turn of the century was largely a unified history because these were all Harvard graduates from New England backgrounds. As John Higham has suggested, American history was the story of "... freedom realized and stabilized through the achievement of national solidarity."¹²

But within a period of sixty years from the AHA's founding American history underwent very different treatments by two contrasting historiographical traditions, one emphasizing conflict and tension in the American tradition, the other based on a consensual meta-narrative that emphasized the inherent ability of America to subsume conflict. The progressive historical school of Turner, Robinson, Beard and Becker, focused on the "discontinuity" of the past" and gravitated toward a neo-Marxian view of the class conflict in U.S. history, that "give(s) the language of social conflict a distinctively American inflection."¹³

¹¹ Novick, *Noble Dream*, p.61.

¹² Higham et.al., *History: The Development of Historical Studies in the United States* (Princeton, 1965), pp.158-160.

¹³ John Higham, "Changing Paradigms: The Collapse of Consensus History," *The Journal of American History*, Volume 76, No.2 (Sp.,1989) p.462.

By contrast, the consensual school that emerged post World War II, was marked by the publication of Richard Hofstadter's *American Political Tradition* in 1948. The consensus school sought to subsume the conflicts inherent in progressive historiography into a broader conception of the exceptional American ethos. In the aftermath of post World War II, this approach to American history gave special emphasis to our unique heritage based upon a Lockean liberal consensus of property and individual rights. Unlike the Progressivism of Beard or Van Woodward, which stressed the conflict inherent in our economic and societal structure, the consensus historians sought to project how America was spared the feudal traditions of Europe and thus did not possess a conflict ridden, class oriented society. This lack of class ridden antagonism was complimented by a rational democratic political order built upon Lockean notions of property rights and individual liberty (at least for most white males).¹⁴

What was consistent historiographically with both these schools of American history was the conceit that the "big truths" of history were so self-evident that, by a communitarian criterion of the truth, to be within the consensus was *ceteris paribus* to be objective." The triumph of the consensus school, at least so they thought, was in sustaining their view of "a variegated people held together by a unifying ideology or a common way of life."¹⁵ Hofstadter proclaimed that the "rediscovery of complexity in American history was the greatest achievement in postwar historiography."¹⁶ That the consensus school thought they could find unifying themes midst this complexity stands in stark contrast to what was soon to follow.

¹⁴ Paragraph drawn from my 5 page paper (Book review of Hartz and Ward)

¹⁵ Higham, "Changing Paradigms," p. 464.

¹⁶ Novick, *Noble Dream*, p.324.

For with the watershed publication of Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* in 1977, a new period in American historiography emerged. The narrative of the "American consensus" was challenged and the field embarked on what unfortunately has come to be termed a "deconstructionist" phase. This is an unfortunate label because the new historiography is deconstructionist only in the sense that it challenges the artificial constructions of the consensus historical school and pushes against the bipolar constraints of the progressives. More constructively what the post moderns have done in the last 30 years is to reestablish and illuminate the sense of remarkable complexity that Hofstadter himself had found beneath the surface of consensus.

For the post moderns no subject escaped the camera's lens (Nguyen) or was beyond the singer's interpretive range (Feliciano). Levine, and soon his myriad new school disciples, noting that "historians are the prisoners of their impoverished sense of sources and historical subject matter,"¹⁷ sought to open the doors on new research material and give voice to the narratives of those left by the curb of American historiography. The result was a deconstructionist, post modern explosion of cultural and intellectual treatments of what Nan Enstad has appropriately and ironically (given its association with British imperialistic military structure) termed "subaltern" history:

In recent years, a dynamic multi racial cultural history has emerged from the continuing development of Latina/Latino, Asian American, Native American, African American, gender and sexual histories, from the challenges to the fixed nature categories, and from the notions of

¹⁷ Nan Enstad, "On Grief and Complicity: Notes toward a Visionary Cultural History. Forthcoming in Cook, Glickman and O'Malley eds., *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past Present and Future* (Chicago, 2007), p.6.

borders and empires as they shaped the identities of residents and migrants.¹⁸

In the post Vietnam era, we have surely expanded our consciousness of the breadth and depth of history in ways that even Levine might not have been able to grasp. It is from the heights rather than the depths of this new platform that we can now more fully address the seemingly dissonant underlying subtexts such as Feliciano's rendition of the National Anthem or more fully comprehend the significance of Nguyen's Vietnamese street assassination. Rather than foreclose the possibility of a new approach to American history, the post modern school actually unlocked the very possibility; one yet to be realized.

So how is a unifying American narrative to be discerned and redefined from the now growing body of granular analyses and the exploding number of post modernist "period" pieces that address various cultural phenomena from prostitution to minstrelsy? For example, we can marvel at the precision with which Elizabeth Blackman in her 1990 work *Manhattan for Rent* (to pick one from this genre') peers into the dustiest archival data on property ownership, floor plans, and city directories to bring us a masterful analysis of "class geography" in ante bellum America. Certainly the fecundity of such highly focused treatments, done over the last thirty years have significantly enriched the potential to understand our past and begin to conceive how a new meta-narrative might emerge. The scholarship is in many cases stunning in its depth, taking us down deep silos to the grainiest of micro-revelations and in the descent, leaving traditionalist white man's history in the dust. But do these works collectively constitute enough of the sort of "thick description" that we need to begin to resurrect a coherent American ethos?

¹⁸ Enstad, p. 11.

In his classic work *The Interpretation of Cultures* the anthropologist Clifford Geertz addresses the very tension between the "thick description" of the astute ethnographer, and the role of cultural anthropology to ascribe meaning to observation. As Geertz says, "it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something." Perhaps more relevant to the dilemmas that the historical method shares with that of the cultural anthropologist, is the temptation to concentrate ever so finely upon the minute so that any sense of the interpretive is buried in the descriptive. And yet, at the same time, Geertz persuasively argues, the generality of theory cannot obliterate the specific of observation. Thus Geertz would suggest that we need always be mindful of the ongoing tension between the empirical and the theoretical and that the balance in describing culture is ever so subtle: "What generality it contrives to achieve grows out of the delicacy of its distinctions, not the sweep of its abstractions."¹⁹ So when Geertz in his classic work writes about the cock fight in Bali, this tension between the objective and the abstract is in full view and the delta between the two always credible. He can derive a unique Indonesian cultural ethos from the observation of Balinese males in this ritual, "paradigmatic, human event,"²⁰ because his interpretation seldom strays very far from the events or their description.

If as historians we are to be able to explain why America would so deeply divide over the imagery of Feliciano and Nguyen, we need be mindful of the tightrope Geertz walks. We need recognize what happens when the historian assumes too much the role of novelist or public intellectual, and less the role of the enlightened Baconian scientist or investigative journalist; too much the story teller and not the fact finder? The historical

¹⁹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 25.

²⁰ Geertz, p.450.

literature is littered with the results of those who seek to use selective historical facts for their own ideological purposes.

In reacting to the "granularity" of post-modernism we can tip the scale too far and quickly fall into the genre of politicizing our past. For example, Civil War history has been a magnet for the editorialist as historian seeking refuge in overt "historicism." David Blight depicts the nostalgic confusion that occurred in post-Civil War America as individuals on both sides of the Mason Dixon line let their current perspectives shape their views of the recent past. The Reconstruction fell woefully short of providing finality; indeed serving to exacerbate the underlying divisions between races and regions and allow selective memories of the war to cascade into the next century and this one as well.

Most notably beyond the concrete memorialization of the victims of the War, this irresolution gave birth to the mythology of the Lost Cause, a genre of historical revisionism that became a "full fledged mythology across American society."²¹ The historical tributes to the Lost Cause came to occupy a large space between the cynicism of Ambrose Bierce's depictions of the atrocity and emptiness of the war, and the "cause lost" realism of W.E. B. Du Bois's masterwork *Black Reconstruction in America*.

The Myth of the Lost Cause gripped the South in the wake of Reconstruction and emerged as a force that, as Rollin Osterweis argues, could allow this defeated region and "way of life" to do in peace what it had been unable to do in war, "overcome the victor."²² The South would indeed rise again propelled by this revisionist view of its noble history. So large was this sentimentalist approach to the past that its grip extended well into Northern states, and as Blight has suggested became "a tonic

²¹ Blight, p. 251.

²² Rollin G. Osterweis, *The Myth of the Lost Cause* (New Haven: The Shoestring Press, 1973), p. 5.

against fear of social change,"²³ as a wave of industrialization, immigration and geographic mobility predominated at the turn of the century.

No single feature of the Lost Cause Mythology was more powerful than the apotheosis of Robert E. Lee as the dignified fallen leader of the cause itself. In the example of Lee the danger of superimposing the historical needs of the present upon the past becomes abundantly clear. For the Lost Cause historicists who sought to continue to project the Confederate cause in spite of their military defeat were able to enlist the imagery of the gentlemanly Lee as a way to reestablish its justness of their cause. Among the most unabashed Lee apologists was Douglas Southall Freeman, editor of the *Richmond News Leader*, who solidified the General's image in a series of articles and a biography that "marbleized" and created a canon of Lee imagery that caused Freeman to become "impatient with those who sought to investigate more deeply."²⁴

The "Lost Cause" approach to the past, as used here, is meant to refer to a fundamentally flawed historiographical approach that seeks to impose a theory of how the present might best be explained, or lived, by selectively and conveniently reconstructing the memories of the past. Using this method, the facts are redesigned to conform to a specific ideology or theology of the present. The school of sentimentalist, Lost Cause historians are significant here for the method they used rather than to any real contribution to our understanding of the Civil War or its aftermath. The concern is that historical accounts that fall into this "Lost Cause" genre, those with predetermined narratives in search of the supporting facts, are still very much with us. So while this approach may give us tempting narratives

²³ Blight, p. 266.

²⁴ Thomas L. Connelly, *The Marble Man* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1977), p.152.

to reconcile the conflicting reactions to Nguyen and Feliciano, the integration and unification it allows are at the steep price of accuracy and empirical truth.

Today, for example, the Lost Cause approach is evident both in the "Noble Cause" revisionism of Vietnam War history and the reaction this revisionism has produced as manifest in works such as *The Spitting Image* (Jerry Lembcke) and *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* (H. Bruce Franklin). The divide between these ideological interpretations of the Vietnam War is very similar to those so-called histories that followed in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. And in the case of Vietnam, they are as divisive as the War was itself to the American polity. As Lembcke so insightfully concludes, how we remember Vietnam is becoming increasingly important not just for the sake of historical accuracy, but because it goes to the very essence of what historians offer in the ongoing debate over what it means "to be a good American:"

Reclaiming our memory of the Vietnam era entails a struggle against powerful institutional forces that toy with our imaginings of the war for reasons of monetary, political, or professional gain. It is a struggle for our individual and collective identities that calls us to reappropriate the making of our own memories. It is a struggle of epic importance.²⁵

These new Vietnam interpretations, arguably too close to their subject period, like other Lost Cause approaches, do not illuminate the past. Rather as Lembcke himself suggests, they move us farther away from a more dispassionate view of what actually occurred during the Vietnam era. They leave the conflicting reactions to the imagery of Nguyen and Feliciano intact and in fact exacerbate the underlying tensions.

²⁵ Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p.188.

Thus Vietnam, like the Civil War, provokes nostalgic revisionism, and is a tempting target for those who want history to be shaped to advance political and ideological agendas. And like the Civil War, with emotions still raw thirty years since it ended, Vietnam is an example of how current context may be inappropriately used to advance historical interpretation over historical evidence; to put the narrative ahead of the gathering of fact. But it is hardly the only example of the dangers inherent in contextualized history.

The inappropriate filter of contemporary context is central to the Lost Cause approach to historiography. Jane Tompkins is among the most adamant in the belief that in historical analyses, context has a too dominant influence and one that is hard to ameliorate. She notes historians need to be keenly vigilant of the way decisions and judgments (in her case those regarding what literary works were to be included in the forming of the 19th century American literary canon) are handed down to us through generations. For Tompkins it is essential to parse through the hegemony of bias that captures any period, "because *looking* is not an activity that is performed outside of political struggles and institutional structures, but arise from them." ²⁶

Being able to sort through the influences a given period has on how its memories are projected and thus how they are subsequently received becomes a paramount factor in the pursuit of accuracy. Historical treatments of the Holocaust present real insight into the dangers contextualization pose for the historian. Dismissing the fringe conspiracy theories that question the very historical reality of the Holocaust, the more vexing issue is how the Holocaust has been assigned an importance, or as Peter Novick

²⁶ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.23.

would put it, has moved from the margins of American consciousness to the center.

To draw from the approach Tompkins's has applied to "great" literature, it is clear that the Holocaust's plot line, like that of any classic novel, has not changed. What have changed are the circumstances (or context) that suddenly elevate the event to occupying a space in our collective memory. And Novick attributes this sudden ascendancy of the event not to any new discovery of its horrid dimensions, but rather to a complicated set of factors that formed a new context in which it is viewed, among them a post Vietnam "victimization syndrome," the fear among Jewish leaders that their Jewishness was being subsumed by a more diverse American culture, and the media's projection of the Holocaust through news documentaries and mini-series. To paraphrase Novick, it is not that the Holocaust changed, but rather we did.

The challenges of elevating above context and cause are formidable for historians seeking to reconcile the conflicted imagery of any period. But as the post modern era reaches a sort of stasis, American historiography is at a tipping point. We remain vexed by the challenge of how to better explain the images of Feliciano and Nguyen and more importantly why they evoked such dissonant reactions. The challenge is to clearly place their images in the larger sweep of American history divorced from context or cause. So what methodology should we adapt that brings rigor to our analysis and overcomes the burden of context and cause?

Marilyn Young argues that "the essential American meta-narrative has traditionally been based on a belief in the fulfillment, over

time, of the enduring principles of the Founding Fathers."²⁷ That simple statement implies that the fulfillment itself is indeed a continuing struggle and that we are defined more in the journey toward their attainment. This existential view is akin to that put forward by one of the leading consensus historians, Louis Hartz, who saw America always differentiating and distancing itself from Europe by its adherence to principles of Lockean idealism. Hartz and others in the consensus school were not enamored with using conflict as a way to structure the narrative of American history, and in fact insightfully noted that the Progressives had their own Hegelian model to overcome the conflicts they were so ready to portray:

Actually there was amid all the smoke and flame of Progressive historical scholarship a continuous and almost complacent note of reassurance. A new Jefferson would arise as he had always arisen before. The "reactionaries" (i.e., Hamilton) would be laid low again.²⁸

In short, even the Progressive school saw arising out of the constant conflicts in our history a new synthesis which, as the consensus school was obliged to point out, resulted from that unifying subtext that seems to underlie the exceptional American narrative.

But for us today, having come full blown into the post-modern period, placing the increasingly complicated and conflicted new revelations of historical fact into the neat and clean basket of the Lockean- Republican democratic ideal is becoming ever more challenging. The legacies of slave masters' tortuous practices, the no-nothing's harassment of immigrants, or the industry captain's heavy handed treatment of labor organizers, are but a few among many episodes difficult to reconcile with the liberal traditions of the Founders. And the continuing examination of

²⁷ Marilyn B. Young, "Dangerous History: Vietnam and the 'Good War'" in *History Wars* (New York: Henry Holt and Company), p.200.

²⁸ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1955), p. 32.

resistance to equal rights for African Americans, Native Americans, and women, whose own narratives have been so recently enriched by the post-modernists, also poses a challenge for contemporary historians seeking a new paradigm that will more fully explain and unify our historical experience. Recent accounts of these struggles have become the "inconvenient truths" which we need to reconcile. These are the lurking shadows in the Feliciano and Nguyen images that are begging us to weave a new meta-narrative that will help us deal with the irony of the past and overcome the tendency to view them as backwaters rather than integral to the mainstream of our history.

Joyce Appleby and her colleagues have described "the urgency each generation feels to possess the past in terms meaningful to it."²⁹ But in the wake of post modernism how should that meaning be reassembled? Post modernism has offered analysis rather than synthesis, and in the process caused a puerile counter-reaction in the recent political assaults on the historical profession itself as lacking any standards or beliefs. Indeed post modernism has irritated a cadre of traditionalists who view post-modernism as failing to enrich our understanding of forgotten American narratives, and instead disassembling long held American mythologies, including the bedrock notion of progress itself. So the traditionalists characterize post modernism as:

...insist(ing) that the experiences of genocide, world wars, depressions, pollution, and famine have cast doubt on the inevitability of progress, enlightenment and reason, even while they implicitly deny human access to certain knowledge of these same disasters.³⁰

Against the backdrop of this traditionalist critique it is legitimate to ask how historians should now proceed to synthesize

²⁹ Appleby, p. 265.

³⁰ Appleby, p. 202.

a broader narrative; to build upon the richness of post modern studies rather than simply critique its effects.

Simply continuing to critique post-modernism not only unnecessarily politicizes the study of history but misses the fundamental issue. For the valued contribution of post modern relativism is a fecundity of new racial, ethnic and gender narratives, as well as an explosion in cultural histories that upend long held beliefs about traditional power structures in America. Collectively these have a feeling of standing apart from one another; disconnected from what we conceive to be part of a more traditional American narrative. Standing on their own they are often profoundly insightful, but toward what end? In the post-modernist, multicultural genre, the challenge is how to avoid a multiculturalism that simply panders to the desires of every sub-group in our society to know its own past, and instead use weave a broader narrative about of how each of us carries a "complex fusion of cultural identities and attitudes"³¹ that has enriched our historical experience and indeed does argue for its exceptionality. Before too quickly discarding the protests of those historical traditionalists who see in the post modernists a simple obsession to elevate separate histories and a dangerous trend toward historical relativism that tears at the national fiber, we need ask ourselves the relevant question: How can we put together a more encompassing narrative that addresses these concerns?

History, as Nash reminds us, is almost always a means of furthering a sense of national self, a way to "promote national cohesion and civic pride."³² Historians, though clearly limited by their own historical contexts, nonetheless possess an enormous responsibility to forming our concepts of community and nation. If a new conceptualization of the underlying sentiment and

³¹ Nash, p.77.

³² Nash, p. 15

morality that informs our beliefs, practices, and customs (i.e., a national ethos) is to emerge, then historians share a large part of the burden of helping shape our understanding of how a newly defined ethos is consistent with our variegated past.

Thirty nine years after the images of Feliciano and Nguyen, we can be far more comfortable with a narrative that can explain the conflicts they stirred. Their images have given way to new ones that reveal much about what we have become in the intervening years, and how our national ethos has expanded, in no small part to the bounds broken by reformist historians, in ways the white "Founding Fathers" might find ironic, though nonetheless pleasing.



In the wake of our Vietnam experience, whether tragic or noble, our national ethos now allows us now to fully engage a communist country our President has admiringly called a "young tiger." And so in November 2006, in a supreme irony of the present, a President engaged on his own mission for democracy can stand smiling beneath the statue of Ho Chi Minh in an economically vibrant, communist country which we recently engaged in a free trade agreement. And similarly, in this same month, in the continuing national struggle to accept all peoples as equal and to honor their disparate voices__ even the echoes of a blind, Hispanic singer 38 years ago__ perhaps we now can better understand the emotion of Andrew Young sobbing on the shoulder of Jesse Jackson at the dedication of the new Martin Luther King Memorial on the national mall.

Perhaps then, as historians, we are that point when the multiple and disparate symbols that mark the underlying ethos of our own age can be synthesized into a broader meta-narrative that captures and reformulates our national ethos in ways made far richer and fuller by the deconstructionist histories of the last thirty years. The challenge becomes how to arrive at a new consensus without creating a new consensus school. How to find solid ground again when the post modernists have created a prevailing relativism? It is not a dilemma dissimilar to one confronted by the Metaphysical Club of Boston in the 1870's in addressing the prevailing "agnosticism" of its day.³³ Perhaps then, current historians might do well to ponder the approach taken by the intellectual forefather of pragmatism and one of the Club's founders.

Charles S. Peirce was at his core an empiricist and tolerated no views that were not grounded on some hard empirical research. But he also was tolerant of divergent views that emerged from similar empirical observation. And in taking the next step to discern some broader truth from "higglety pigglety" of reality, Peirce noted the need for "solidarity among competing views." In Peirce's construct, truth derives from the "opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate."³⁴ This is no mean task for American historians, since their interpretations of America in the past are inextricably bound up in their views of America at present. But here is where the historian must separate from the propagandist, editorialist and pundit, in order to get the story out of history rather than superimposing an ideology (i.e., The Lost Cause) on our past.

³³ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 2001) p. 201-210.

³⁴ Novick, pp.570-72.

Moreover, if at this particular juncture our history is only further deconstructed by ever more finite analyses of minute "aspects" of the past, it will become more and more like a sophisticated ethnographic chronicle than a historical narrative. This would indeed be unfortunate since, as Hayden White suggests in *The Content of Form*:

Historical discourse is a privileged instantiation of the human capacity to endow the experience of time with meaning, because the immediate referent of this discourse is real, rather than imaginary events.³⁵

White positions historical narrative at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of story telling. Telling the story of the past is not a passive chronicling, nor a scientific endeavor. Rather it possesses a unique space that should be larger not smaller. It is as White concludes the ability to simultaneously experience time in the past, present and future tense.

Surely, a new meta-narrative of our national history that credibly unifies the dissonant chords of post modernist interpretation will emerge, just as surely as the consensus school followed the progressives. Ideally it will be one that does not leave us in the rich rubble of post modernism or unable to explain the ironies of the past. Nor will it be one that superimposes interpretation over the solidity of the evidence. Rather it will be a historical narrative that sees in the images of Feliciano and Young, Nguyen and Bush a wonderful symmetry in the space of our recent history, and reflective of unifying themes that come to us as myth and symbol that need to be debunked or explained.

³⁵ White p.173.

