

The Imaginary Insider

a review by John Rothchild

*A History of the Modern Age** begins where fact leaves off. This is not to say that Julian Prescott's epic volume is completely misleading, but only to recognize the dilemma that the author himself well understood as the one that created the need for this book: when governments deliberately mask their intentions, when politicians omit their frank appraisals even in memoirs, when the explanations for world events never seem to fit the actions, when, in effect, the political reality is a grand fiction, then the work of the true historian is to imagine. Such was the global mendacity in this modern, post-war cold-war age Prescott so admirably describes that made his bald-faced inventions necessary. Neal Morrison, a fictitious professor who wrote the preface, apologizes, or defends, the deliberate inaccuracies of the author: "Perhaps reality itself is a white blur of paranoid fantasy. Perhaps Prescott's history more closely approximates the truth... than those that pass themselves off as 'true.'"

Those of us who have lived through this Modern Age could only second the sentiments. Prescott is a creation of the current historical nemesis: who can explain the mess we are in? No official rationales have thus far been satisfactory, or even convincing, as to why we got into Vietnam or why we built up the defense establishment, and the more we read

**A History of the Modern Age*. Julian K. Prescott. Doubleday, \$7.95.

John Rothchild is an editor of *The Washington Monthly*.

about it, the more confused we get.

One of the reasons for this, Prescott would postulate, is that in the Modern Age, men do not dare say what they think, and the words that are clearly heard, especially from the powerful, are usually words that have been generated by creative writers. Thus, the historian, if he is to be true to his source, cannot rely on the contrived verbal output of politicians any more than a child can rely on the expressed feelings of a Barbie doll. The problem is compounded by the fact that most historians are paid by the same government, directly or indirectly, that rewards the sources of the words themselves. This makes history, by definition, a double fiction, and the only way to combat this circular illusion is to divine what really would have been said if the principal actors on the world stage had been free to improvise. This Prescott has done—giving us the first reliable insider's account on what was going through the minds of everybody from Stalin to Dulles to Kennedy as they committed us to the lunacy in which we live.

Prescott's *A History of the Modern Age* is true to its own form in the sense that Julian Prescott himself is a fiction—a product, like all the cold war dialogues dutifully recorded within—of the imagination of Albert Fried, an assistant professor at Sarah Lawrence. (It is easy to believe that it took less imagination on Fried's part to guess what was really being thought than on the part of all his contemporaries to write the official versions.)

Even for all its gaps, and for the fictitious nature of both Morrison and Prescott (Morrison himself even doubts Prescott's credibility—he writes in a footnote, “How could Prescott have known what passed between Eisenhower and Nixon? Either one of them later reconstructed the conversation for him, or he invented it”), there is little doubt in my mind that *A History of the Modern Age* is the most convincing chronicle of the period that I have yet read or ever expect to read. The result of this declassifying-through-fantasy, this make-believe history of Fried's, is that one is glad Prescott was there to make some sense out of all of it—and should this book be left alongside *Vantage Point* and the other works of delusion for the readers of posterity, Fried's will surely be the authoritative document. His dialogues stick in the brain, much as a wrong definition that sounds closer to what the meaning should be than the real definition itself.

Ike's Dream and Inner Prescott's

Fried is faithful to the facts, at least as far as great events are concerned—all his places and dates and battles are correct, and his complete panorama of the maneuverings among Russia, China, and the United States takes us back in objective fashion through the cold war—the division of Germany, Korea, the rise of Mao, the death of Stalin, the McCarthy era, Sputnik, U-2, the Bay of Pigs, Indochina. His own inventions are the conferences that occurred before these events, where the various courses of action are debated. It is in these meetings that Fried puts words in the mouths of Kennedy, Rusk, Khrushchev, and comes out with a subtle, convincing, and hilarious mixture of ideology, fear, pettiness, rectitude, cussedness, proverbs, sarcasms, and dim thoughts, the fuel on which the world does, and has always, revolved. The subtlety of Fried's genius is illustrated in the fact that Herbert

Mitgang, editor of the op ed page of *The New York Times*, inquired of the publisher whether the real author of *A History of the Modern Age* hadn't seen an advance copy of the Pentagon Papers, guessing that he couldn't have written such an authoritative and convincing account without special insider's knowledge.

It is hard to recreate the spirit of Prescott's history, so much of its worth depends on context and detail, but the following is an attempted condensation of why we went into the Bay of Pigs.

The issue was decided, Prescott says, in a National Security Council meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, along with Rusk, McNamara, Douglas Dillon, Robert Kennedy, CIA Director Dulles, McGeorge Bundy, Rostow, Fulbright, and two unnamed professors present.

Kennedy: “Gentlemen, you know what brings us here. The situation in Cuba has reached a crisis point, and we—I—must come to a determination one way or another. Without further ado I'll have Mr. Allen Dulles explain the situation to you.”

Dulles: “All of you are familiar, I'm sure, with events in Cuba and our relations with the Castro regime. . . . I'm not suggesting that Batista wasn't bad, only that Castro wasn't the most desirable alternative from our point of view. And so when he seized power a little more than two years ago my people weren't surprised when he turned out to be a Marxist-Leninist and when he pretty rapidly joined the Soviet camp. There was a great hue and cry in this country, but we—and I claim this with no special sense of pride—we had foreseen these developments. . . . We currently have some 15,000 Cuban exiles, all young and eager, under arms and in various stages of training and proficiency. So far as they are concerned, I would say, yes, they, or most of them, are ready to go in and fight. They are well led and know what to do.

“Mr. President, I would urge that they go in within two to three weeks. The moment is critical. The guerrillas in the Escambrey Mountains and elsewhere are strong and await the signal to come down. The cities will rise up simultaneously. Our operatives there tell me that discontent is rife, though it must remain invisible for fear of the secret

police, who are ubiquitous.”

When one of the unnamed professors asked what kind of a government this action would produce, he got this response:

McGeorge Bundy: “The Administration has given the matter considerable thought. We’ll settle for nothing less than a liberal, democratic government, one that guarantees free elections and civil liberties. We’re not as stuck as our predecessors were on returning the nationalized industries to American firms. We’ll insist only on responsible compensation.”

Rusk: “That’s exactly right. And Mr. Dulles, your men have weeded out the most notorious of the Batista followers from the training program, haven’t they?”

Dulles: “So far as I know, Mr. Secretary, they have, yes. But sometimes it’s difficult, and we’ve found that the people who worked for Batista have proved the most experienced in handling arms, in giving commands, and the like. . . .”

Schlesinger: “What we have, then, is the vital center, the democratic way between totalitarian extremes among the exiles. And when they assume power they will maintain the vital center as their controlling ideology.”

Dulles: “Why yes, I would say so.”

The foregoing excerpt represents only one dimension of Fried’s history—the attempt to fill in the factual gaps with imagination. (Sometimes he fails in this, but generally his guesses seem on the mark.) In a second dimension, though, he tries to by-pass our overblown concern for accuracy—what was said, when, and by whom—with complete and undisguised fantasy. In what other history can you find the convincing report of the cold war strategy session, coupled with an account of a meeting at which Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson struggle to interpret President Eisenhower’s disturbing dream that he is walking through a corn field of grave markers back in Kansas? And who else but Prescott can give you both the inside story on the Eisenhower U-2 meetings, which actually occurred, and also a vivid account of a more ethereal meeting between Khrushchev and Mao Tse Tung in Mongolia that

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kicked off the Soviet split? (“Even the West knew nothing about it,” says Prescott.) In these latter passages, Fried confronts our own prejudices and cultural views by exposing them as reality.

Fried’s imaginary insider, then, is an attempt to free the secrets of Washington not only from the diplomatic files but also from somewhere deep within our own minds, and the Prescott who roamed the corridors of the powerful is the same as the one who roams somewhere in our own consciousness. Most history makes the reader an audience, but Fried’s fictional approach forces participation because he does not separate the characters from the matrix of belief that produced them. To the extent that leaders express or culminate national values, our search for a salvation in facts, which often leads us to seek more facts than really exist, denies the personal intuitions about society that would make such facts superfluous or predictable. If current history is a continual surprise, it is because we haven’t examined our inner Prescotts thoroughly enough—even Fried’s casual look makes things begin to fall into place.

Prescott in the Shag Rug

On either of these levels, a reading of Prescott is ample proof of its own worth, but it must also be judged as a reaction to the current theories and practices of history. The limitations of the popular techniques (that make Prescott’s unique approach so useful) are demonstrated in the very manner that the nation’s reviewers—the historians of literature—have reacted to the book. When first published, *A History of the Modern Age* got a flurry of notoriety, as *Time* launched the speculation on the real identity of Prescott, and deduced from the quality of the book, “a fascinating chronicle of the cold war,” that its author must be an insider of important political lineage, and most probably John Kenneth Galbraith.

But no reviews were forthcoming, the *Time* article deferred the commentators from their normal rhythms as they waited for the announcement of the author—presumably they didn’t want to be embarrassed by mis-guessing the identity of an obviously well-known statesman writing his pop memoirs. Then *Newsweek* blew the cover, and this Galbraith turned out to be a mere assistant professor at a girls’ school, and, as *Newsweek* put it, “the closest Fried ever came to the high councils of state was when he flunked a job interview with the U. S. Foreign Service nearly 20 years ago.” This announcement consigned the book to obscurity—no major publications save *The Saturday Review*, and no large newspapers save *The Washington Star*, reviewed it—not *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, the two aforementioned news magazines, *The Washington Post*, or *Book World*. The tables were turned—where the quality of the book had first suggested that the author had great stature, now the stature of the book was reduced to the relative lack of notoriety of its real author, and Fried, like his man Prescott, became anonymous.

Of course, Fried himself wrote the history because the reported details of the personages involved often masked the real import of what they believed, so perhaps it is fitting that the reviewers proved the point in reverse. If Prescott had been real, he would have been handicapped by the same ill fate as the other chroniclers of the time—who treated government as they treated Fried’s book, giving credence in proportion to status, leaving various gems of history on the shag rug while searching in the clouds. Hence, the necessity for this hunched-over, invisible, hanger-on to see things that others didn’t.

Peace Among the Scribes

This is not the first time that an age has needed its Prescott, nor the first time that popularity has treated

such an effort unkindly. In one sense, his book attempts to break a historical cycle—the politicians who want to live in history tend to imitate the bombastic pose of past politicians as portrayed by past historians who were trying to become transcendent by imitating the bombastic prose of their predecessors.

In pursuing this end, Prescott and his admirers do have a few predecessor allies. There was Hendrik van Loon, who interviewed the great men across the centuries and across the spectrum of sympathy from Erasmus to Torquemada. There was Karl Marx, who, as journalist Murray Kempton points out, wrote *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* with no access to inside sources and produced a work remarkably akin to that written by de Tocqueville, who had the keys to the palace. Then, there were the Greeks. Morrison, in his introduction, makes some mention of them, remarking that Prescott “compared the United States to Athens in the fifth century B. C., following the defeat of Persia.” The historians of Hellas were well acquainted with Prescott’s methods, in fact, the innovation for them was the factual account, not the fictional rendering. Thucydides was thought to be the most accurate chronicler of the time, but even he was famous for contriving interviews to fill in the gaps. Aside from the more philosophical motivations of Fried, however, Thucydides did so largely because of problems of reproduction in an age without tape recorders or newspapers:

As to the speeches which were made either before or during the war, it was hard for me, and for others... to recollect the exact words. I have therefore put into the mouth of each speaker the sentiments proper to the occasion, expressed as I thought he would be likely to express them. . . .

The Greek historians debated the foibles of their craft much more openly than the historians of our own day, and we find that they amply covered the merits of subjectivity and objectivity. We can hear Arthur

Schlesinger’s answer to Prescott in Plutarch’s retort to Herodotus, well-known for his fanciful invention:

Is it not more likely that our author, with his picturesque and entrancing style, his charm and wit and grace, has been telling us “old wife’s tales with all the poet’s skill,” and not merely with the poet’s polish and sweetness? No doubt everybody finds him attractive and enchanting, but evil-speaking and slander lurk among his smooth, pretty phrases like stinging flies among roses. Be on your guard, or he will poison your minds with grotesquely false ideas of the noblest and greatest countries and men of Hellas.

Or Sorensen’s answer in Polybius’ attack on Timaeus:

A historian’s duty is not to practice upon his readers or to show off his literary ability at their expense, but to do his best to investigate and elucidate the words actually spoken, confining himself throughout to the most vital and effective passages. . . . The fact that every volume of his works is full of such spurious matter is common knowledge.

The squabbles of the Greeks provided the tonic that neutralized their own particular inaccuracies. A reader can always play one off against the other, the debates between them providing ample evidence of the pettinesses and blind spots of each.

In our own time, however, we find that none of the historians lampooned by Fried—either indirectly through the challenge of his method, or directly by being quoted in the book—have seen fit to respond to his challenge. This makes Prescott all the more necessary, because when historians, like labor and management, do not tussle publicly among themselves, then truth must be the loser. One cannot believe that current history is any more inherently objective than that of Thucydides’ time, but the nature of its subjectivity is harder to grasp in the public peace among the scribes and in the conformity of their approach—which is as damnable as peace among the tyrants—more so, in fact, because the only way left to oppose a tyrant is to put him down on paper.

MEMO of the Month

Sacramento City-County Library

Intra-Department Correspondence

Date October 14, 1971

To : ALL LIBRARY PERSONNEL – Shirley Louthan

From : HAROLD D. MARTELLE
CITY-COUNTY LIBRARIAN

Subject: PERSONNEL PROFILE FORM AND TELEPHONE DIRECTORY ATTACHMENT

The newly devised Personnel Profile form comprises a very necessary and integral function in the intellection of personnel services to this library system by providing data not currently available, by synthesizing employee qualifications and by projecting the basis for a comprehensive codification of all library staff experience and talent.

Although some of you have questioned the requirement for such a form by referring to application forms or Civil Service records, retrospection reveals that when the library's administrative offices were relocated to 1930 T Street in February 1967, a significant portion of extant personnel files accidentally was eliminated and has never been replaced. Therefore, institution of the Personnel Profile will eliminate the paucity of available data while expending a minimum of time and expense. This form also will assist in the efficacious programming of manpower skills to related positions and/or need. In addition, the form will facilitate the immediate retrieval and expeditious articulation of available skills and personnel through an extensive codification of data.

In order to implement this form as soon as possible, please complete and return both the Profile and the attached sheet relating to the projected telephone directory of library personnel to the Personnel Office by Wednesday, October 27, 1971.

Thank you for your cooperation and immediate attention.

Harold D. Martelle, Jr.
City-County Librarian