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James Piereson: Camelot and the Cultural Revolution: Study Guide

Steven Alan Samson
Liberty University, ssamson@liberty.edu

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Recommended Citation
Samson, Steven Alan, "James Piereson: Camelot and the Cultural Revolution: Study Guide" (2008). *Faculty Publications and Presentations.* Paper 176.
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JAMES PIERESON: CAMELOT AND THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION: STUDY GUIDE, 2008

INTRODUCTION

Review

how the assassination stalled the advance of 20C liberalism
unraveling of liberal doctrine
Kennedy: pragmatic liberalism
Merrill Peterson on public remembrance of the past
effect of the assassination on conservatives
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CHAPTER ONE: LIBERALISM

Study Questions

1. [The phrase "the promise of American life" (p. 2) is an allusion to the book of that title by Herbert Croly, a progressive journalist and founder of *The New Republic* who laid the foundation of modern liberalism]. What does the author mean by saying that "in many ways Kennedy's death severed the ties between reform and the idea of historical progress?" [Both were very important to the development of modern reform liberalism. J. B. Bury published his classic work, *The Idea of Progress*, in 1920. Like the idea of progress, the idea of reform gained impetus as early as the 1830s in England and America. The 19C English philosopher John Stuart Mill is regarded as the progenitor of modern reform liberalism. His father James was a colleague of Jeremy Bentham, the founder of Utilitarianism].
(1-2)

2. What was peculiar about the character of postwar liberalism? How did it differ from the Progressive and New Deal movements that preceded it? What put it on the defensive? The pragmatic liberal journalist Walter Lippmann published a book on the liberal "public philosophy" in the mid-50s. [In academic circles, this was the heyday of the "consensus" historians: Hartz, Hofstadter, Schlesinger, and others]. (2-3)

3. According to Richard Hofstadter, what was distinctive about the new post-New Deal liberalism? What were the emphases of the earlier Progressive reform agenda? What gave the movement a certain crusading and moralistic character? How did the New Deal differ? What actions did President Roosevelt take to guarantee its long-term survival? How did attitudes toward party politics change? [Sidney Milkis, who now teaches at the University of Virginia, has depicted the administrative reforms of the Third New Deal (1939) as a conversion of the bureaucratic machinery into an engine of New Deal-style liberalism. Indeed, it is reasonable to conclude that the national treasury itself was effectively converted into a "non-partisan" political slush fund]. What programs were included in the foundations of the American welfare state? What made the liberals of the 1950s "too conservative" for critics on the Left? (3-7)

4. In the view of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., how did big-business conservatism and Progressivism discredit themselves? What are some of the ideas of New Deal reformism represented by Schlesinger? How did he view the Cold War? (7-9)

5. What changed with the rise of Joseph McCarthy? How was the accepted wisdom being reversed? What was significant about Alger Hiss's conviction on perjury charges? How did McCarthy turn the tables on the liberals and steal the mantle of populism from the liberal New Dealers? [Kenneth Minogue has observed that modern parties steal each others' clothes].

Where did the most pressing challenges to liberalism come from in the 1950s and early 1960s? How did Adlai Stevenson regard his Republican opponents? (9-11)

6. Who were some of the chief intellectual spokesmen for the liberal movement and what was their persistent focus? [The last of them is Daniel Bell; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., passed away early in 2007; Seymour Martin Lipset passed away at the end of 2006]. What was Louis Hartz's argument in *The Liberal Tradition in America*? What was the basis of Hartz's consensus theory? Why did Hartz and others believe Americans were prone to moralism in politics? [Others would attribute this to an inheritance of Puritanism that was modified in the 19C by Unitarianism and Transcendentalism]. Why did the United States lack an authentic conservative tradition? A class-based socialist movement? Why do attacks on liberalism tend to be radical or populist in nature? What made the literature of the far right a "literature of resentment?" [Reference is made to the Frankfurt School sociologist, Theodor Adorno, who was the lead author of the 1950 study on *The Authoritarian Personality*]. How did Hofstadter regard these "pseudo-conservatives?" (12-14)

7. What did Hofstadter mean by blaming the far right on a politics of prosperity? [The Depression and Second World War certainly bred similar groups and individuals, such as the American Liberty League and the journalists Rose Wilder Lane (who encouraged her mother to write the *Little House* series) and Garet Garrett]. What is meant by "status politics"? What role is played by "rootlessness" in Hofstadter's model? By "the dispossessed" in Bell's? How did these historians and sociologists account for the long lineage of American extremist movements? What role is played by the theme of conspiracy? (14-16)

8. What broader phenomenon did Hofstadter seek to portray in "The Paranoid Style in American Politics?" How did he answer arguments that produced documented evidence? What liberal assumptions did he bring to the surface? How did Hofstadter describe Barry Goldwater in the revised version of his lecture? [A popular rebuttal to "In your heart, you know he is right" was "In your guts, you know he is nuts"]. What factors help account for the liberal preoccupation with the "politics of irrationality," the dark underside of political life? Just as a Manichaean dualism could be seen in the writings of the Progressive historians, what sort of dualism was evident in Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*? (16-19)

9. What was Daniel Bell's thesis in *The End of Ideology*? How did he view Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* thesis? What disquieting aspect to the postwar situation did he note? [This anticipated Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*]. (19-20)

10. What were the chief attributes of the liberal view of history, according to Herbert Butterfield's "Whig Interpretation of History" and George Orwell? [The Whig interpretation may be compared with M. Stanton Evans "liberal history lesson" in *The Theme Is Freedom*, which was further developed as the "grand narrative" in David Gress's *From Plato to NATO*]. Why is Butterfield's advice to develop an objective history so hard to follow? Who were the Progressive historians and how did they aid the rise of Progressivism as a political movement? How did Schlesinger's and Hofstadter's political loyalties color such works as *The Age of Jackson* and *The Age of Reform*? What did John Stuart Mill mean by "the stupid party." [A number of years ago Wyoming Sen. Alan Simpson contrasted "the stupid party" with "the evil party"]. (20-23)

11. What conservative arguments were being ignored by liberals at the time? [Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* was given a major review in *Time* magazine by Whittaker Chambers in 1953]. What was the nature of the decades-long countermovement Christopher Lasch identified as the "new radicalism?" What were their intellectual sources? What were their preoccupations? Who were some of their key figures? Why did they move into politics? [Ralph de Toledano gives an overview in his *Cry Havoc! The Great American Bring-down and How It Happened*]. (23-25)

12. What did Lionel Trilling find lacking in his criticism of liberalism from the inside? [Russell Kirk, on the other hand, emphasized the place of the imagination in conservatism; Trilling in turn became

a sympathetic critic of the new conservatism]. What did Trilling believe to be the essential task of the writer and critic? What did he see as the great weakness of liberalism? (25-26)

Review

liberal siege mentality | Richard Hofstadter | merits and rhetoric of conservatism
Progressivism vs. the New Deal | Progressive reform agenda | politics of moral uplift
American welfare state | Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s critique of conservatism and progressivism
The Vital Center | Joseph McCarthy | liberal consensus
Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* | lack of a conservative tradition
Daniel Bell's dispossessed | literature of the radical right | status politics
"The Paranoid Style in American Politics" | *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*
"End of Ideology in the West" | Herbert Butterfield | "Whig Interpretation of History"
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Lionel Trilling | *The Liberal Imagination*

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