

# The Education of Richard Hofstadter

**Review by Sam Tanenhaus**

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At his death in 1970, Richard Hofstadter was probably this country's most renowned historian, best known as the originator of the "consensus" school, whose measured siftings of the American past de-emphasized conflict — whether economic, regional or ideological — and highlighted instead the nation's long tradition of shared ideas, principles and values.

This school had a limited shelf life, but Hofstadter's work has outlived it, owing to the clarity and nuance of his thought and his talent for drawing parallels between disparate episodes in our national narrative, almost always bringing the argument around to the concerns of midcentury America. "I know it is risky," he acknowledged in 1960, "but I still write history out of my engagement with the present." The gamble, of course, was whether questions so pressing in his time would continue to engage later generations. To a remarkable extent they have, and so Hofstadter remains relevant — in some respects more relevant than ever.

This isn't to say he was the most enduring historian of his time, but rather the one who came closest to being his generation's exemplary intellectual. Others, like Bernard Bailyn and C. Vann Woodward, probably left a deeper imprint on the profession; or, like Arthur Schlesinger Jr., had greater influence on the important events of the day. But no other historian wrote so penetratingly about the politics of the moment, and at the same time none did more to establish pragmatic liberalism as a kind of unofficial, if constantly imperiled, public doctrine during the peak years of the cold war. Indeed so immersed was Hofstadter in the complications of postwar liberalism that he came finally to dramatize them, not only in his work but also in his life. This is the story David S. Brown tells in "Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography." Brown, who teaches history at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania, describes his intelligent and stimulating book as "an extended conversation with the formal writings of Richard Hofstadter." That's too modest. Brown's interviews with Hofstadter's colleagues and students and his careful reading of Hofstadter's copious writings, including unpublished manuscripts and letters, help situate the work in the context of Hofstadter's short life (he died, at age 54, of leukemia) and also within the larger tumult of his period.

Brown admirably balances respect for his subject with critical distance and persuasively makes the case that the ambiguousness of Hofstadter's legacy is inseparable from his continuing interest. There is, first, the ambiguity of his professional identity. Though he held a distinguished Ivy League professorship and wrote important books on higher education and on historiography, Hofstadter characterized himself as being "as much, maybe more, of an essayist than a historian." Some of his most famous formulations, for example on "status politics" and "the paranoid style in American politics," came in think pieces first published in general interest magazines, and were written in elegant, ironic prose modeled on that of social observers like H. L. Mencken, Thorstein Veblen and Edmund Wilson.

Hofstadter's books were also long-form essays, and they survive today as bravura performances rather than as instances of high scholarship. His signature works, including his two Pulitzer Prize winners, "The Age of Reform" and "Anti-Intellectualism in American Life," are virtually devoid of primary research — drudgery best left, in his view, to "archive rats." For this reason he remained, to some in the profession, a kind of outlier; and his interpretations, for all their originality and force, have proved more vulnerable to revisionism than the closely documented studies of Bailyn and Woodward. Then again, as Brown points out, Hofstadter's books consciously "reflected the personal interests and ideological concerns of their author."

And those interests and concerns mirrored, in turn, Hofstadter's classic odyssey, which took him from the outer precincts of the country's intellectual life to its hot center. Although routinely identified as a member of the group known as the New York Intellectuals, Hofstadter came from Buffalo, where he was born in 1916, when it was a flourishing city that retained the lingering flavor of an older "Western" Protestantism, even as its population was being transformed into a jumble of immigrant ethnicity. Hofstadter felt directly the collision of these cultures. His father, a furrier, was a Jew born in Poland; his mother (who died when he was 10) came from more established German Lutheran stock. Raised in the city's vibrant German community, Hofstadter was christened in a Lutheran church and sang in a Lutheran choir.

At the University of Buffalo, he gravitated toward both journalism and philosophy and was inflamed by the "progressive" writings of Charles Beard, the era's regnant historian, whose "Economic Interpretation of the Constitution" — which depicted the framers as would-be oligarchs intent on securing their financial interests — was an epoch-changing work.

After a brief, unhappy time at the New York School of Law, Hofstadter entered the graduate history program at Columbia in 1937. Like so many young intellectuals of the period, he flirted with radicalism, joining the campus unit of the Communist Party. But he was appalled

by the movement's inflexible dogma and by the emerging facts of Stalin's purges, and lasted only four months. He maintained his leftist sympathies, however, and these informed his early work.

His doctoral thesis, "Social Darwinism in American Thought," published in 1944 and still in print, was a precociously assured and fluently written discourse on 19th-century social scientists like Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, who had debased the theory of natural selection into high-minded apologetics for Gilded Age rapacity, with help from the racially tinged speculations in Darwin's own "Descent of Man." The argument, as Brown notes, is grounded in Beard's economic determinism, though the study comes most alive when it moves into philosophy, religion and literature, pointing toward Hofstadter's later explorations of "political culture" and "styles of thought and rhetoric."

The book was a critical success, and the young author, marooned in a teaching job at the University of Maryland but angling hard to return to Columbia, was brought back to fill a position in intellectual history, edging out another promising candidate, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., whose "Age of Jackson" won the Pulitzer in 1946.

Once resettled at Columbia, Hofstadter completed his next book, "The American Political Tradition," serial portraits of political leaders from the Constitutional era through the New Deal, each a case study in "the ideology of American statesmanship." Urged by his publisher, Alfred Knopf, to impose a unifying theme, Hofstadter wrote a brief introduction that challenged the precepts of "conflict history" advanced by the progressive historians, many of them Midwesterners steeped in the romance of the frontier. In narratives pitting "the people" against "the interests," they had dramatized what they saw as the tensions between the forward-looking Western ethos and the settled prejudices of the East.

To Hofstadter this dynamic evaded the larger truth that "almost the entire span of American history under the present Constitution has coincided with the rise and spread of modern industrial capitalism," with the result that just about everyone, all across the political spectrum, and up and down the economic ladder, joined the contest for riches. Even the most divisive conflicts unfolded within this "common climate of American opinion," shaped by a universal "belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, the value of competition."

Exhibit A was the ideas held by the nation's leaders, who almost without exception embraced the free-market credo, as Hofstadter showed in satirical profiles of, among others, the agrarian Thomas Jefferson ("The leisure that made possible his great writings on human liberty was supported by the labors of three generations of slaves"); the trust-buster Theodore Roosevelt (whose writings betrayed "the intellectual fiber of a muscular and combative Polonius"); and the reformer Woodrow Wilson (an unrepentant Calvinist who

“proposed that the force of the State be used to restore pristine American ideals, not to strike out sharply in a new direction”). Even Abraham Lincoln, “among the world’s great political propagandists,” was captive to the “self-made myth.” But there was one startling exception to the rule, Franklin D. Roosevelt. In previous writings Hofstadter had been scathingly critical of Roosevelt — of the concessions he’d made to his party’s Southern conservatives and of the New Deal’s hedged meliorism. But Hofstadter had since made what Brown calls a “private pilgrimage from the left to the liberal center” and now appreciated that Roosevelt, catapulted into office amid the crisis of the Great Depression, had “allowed neither economic dogmas nor political precedents to inhibit him” as he groped toward relieving economic distress through the improvised regulatory machinery of the New Deal. Roosevelt lacked a mature political philosophy, but he had broken the stranglehold of the free-market doctrine and so was destined to become “the dominant figure in the mythology of any resurgent American liberalism.”

This interpretation — repudiating critiques from both the left (which saw Roosevelt as an unprincipled compromiser) and the right (which despised him as a “traitor to his class”) — placed Roosevelt outside or above familiar ideological quarrels, and neatly distilled the we’re-all-in-this-together exigencies of the early cold war. At 32, Hofstadter succeeded Beard, who died in 1948, as “the most influential and intellectually significant American historian of his time,” Brown writes.

Soon others would draw out the theme of national agreement, giving rise to the school — or “cult,” as one critic put it — of consensus. But Hofstadter himself resisted the consensus label, particularly its overtones of boosterism, and was exasperated when his acidulous critique of American ideology was lumped with the “anti-intellectualist” cheerleading of a book like Daniel Boorstin’s “Genius of American Politics.”

Beyond this, Hofstadter’s liberal vision was as much cultural as political, trained, as he later wrote, “on matters of tone and style.” Thus, he had little use for Harry Truman, though Truman had diligently perpetuated the New Deal legacy, because his “impassioned rhetoric, with its occasional thrusts at ‘Wall Street,’ seemed passé and rather embarrassing.” That is to say, it echoed an outworn hick radicalism rather than Roosevelt’s modern cosmopolitanism.

Richard Hofstadter in 1956.  
General Photographic Collection, University Archives,  
Columbia University



Or so it appeared to Hofstadter in 1954, when he was mourning the defeat of a more satisfying politician, Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic presidential nominee in 1952. Stevenson looked like a better edition of Roosevelt — more sophisticated, with an intellectual's fine-tuned detachment. When Stevenson invoked the New Deal he sounded less like a Democratic partisan than a pragmatic administrator; in polished tones he stressed the need for “conserving all that is best” in the Roosevelt program, and for “building solidly and safely on these foundations.”

Hofstadter normally shunned political activism — as well he might in a time when professors with Communist histories, however inconsequential, were being subpoenaed by Red-hunters in Congress. But, Brown surmises, he “seemed to believe that the fate of postwar liberalism hinged on” Stevenson's election, and so was swept up in the campaign. Hofstadter signed (with 30 others) a letter published in *The New York Times* protesting the paper's endorsement of Dwight Eisenhower and also drafted a pro-Stevenson advertisement signed by more than 300 Columbia faculty members. It too was published in *The Times*, to the dismay of Grayson Kirk, the university's second-ranking administrator and the handpicked successor to Eisenhower, who was still Columbia's president.

Eisenhower, of course, coasted to victory, to no one's surprise. But the loss, in its magnitude, stung Hofstadter, who henceforth “retreated altogether from politics,” his student Eric Foner remembered. Looking back on the election a decade later, Hofstadter found it “hard to resist the conclusion that Stevenson's smashing defeat was . . . a repudiation by plebiscite of American intellectuals and of intellect itself.”

The election also marked a striking transformation in Hofstadter's interpretations of the American past. The mordant anatomist of the materialist tradition now set off on a new quest: to make sense of the nation's recurrent outbreaks of irrationality and illiberalism —

the “periodical psychic sprees that purport to be moral crusades,” the “revolt against modernity,” the “paranoid style in American politics.”

These were Hofstadter’s subjects in his most productive years, the 1950’s and 60’s, when he nested among a nucleus of thinkers at Columbia that included the social theorists Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset and Robert K. Merton and the literary critic Lionel Trilling. Together they formed a loose federation of like minds and temperaments. All were secular Jews (or in Hofstadter’s case, half Jewish). Many had weathered chastening experiences on the left. Most were influenced by European social science, in particular by psychoanalysis and depth psychology, which offered more fruitful diagnostic methods than the tired formulas of Marxism and the class struggle. The Columbia group did much to create the vocabulary of midcentury liberal thought in America as it sought to move beyond ideology and toward a kind of broad public doctrine or “orthodoxy,” as Brown puts it.

In Hofstadter’s case this meant exploring in a systematic way “the sociological penumbra of political life” — the murky substratum of desires and impulses that underlay the surface pageantry of American politics. He was much impressed by “The Authoritarian Personality” (1950), a survey of contemporary American political attitudes compiled by a team of researchers under the direction of the German émigré Theodore Adorno. Hofstadter adapted Adorno’s “social-psychological categories” in his essay “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,” an attempt to uncover the hidden sources of McCarthyism.

Like so many others, Hofstadter had been struggling to decode the signals sent by right-wing anti-Communists as they inveighed against the dangers of global Communism but opposed efforts, including the Marshall Plan, to shore up vulnerable European democracies; denounced Truman when he sent troops to Korea and denounced him again when he dismissed Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who had pushed for escalating the conflict into a full-scale war with China. Through it all, the right seemed to have less appetite for sensibly meeting the actual threats posed by Communist regimes than for staging a “Great Inquisition” at home.

McCarthyism, Hofstadter argued, was best understood not as a political movement but as a cultural phenomenon. In what would become his most famous formulation, he identified two distinct types of political protest. In dire economic times, for instance the depressions of the 1890’s and the 1930’s, the dispossessed banded together “to reform the inequities in our economic and social system.” This was an example of “interest politics.” But in times of prosperity, when social mobility increased and “the rootlessness and heterogeneity of American life” left many behind, the losers indulged in a different kind of protest, fixated on the search for scapegoats. This was “status politics.”

In the boom years of the 1920's, for instance, millions of small-town and rural "native stock" Americans, alarmed by the ascendancy of the country's pluralistic urban culture, had embraced the organized bigotry of the Ku Klux Klan and flocked to the punitive crusades of anti-evolutionism and Prohibition. The pattern was being repeated in the 1950's, also a boom period, only now it was a curious alliance of upwardly mobile white ethnics (many of them Catholics) and downwardly sinking displaced WASPs, who looked to secure their status as authentic Americans by converging upon "liberals, critics and nonconformists of various sorts, as well as Communists and suspected Communists."

Moreover, "the growth of the mass media of communication and their use in politics have brought politics closer to the people than ever before and have made politics a form of entertainment in which the spectators feel themselves involved. Thus it has become, more than ever before, an arena into which private emotions and personal problems can be readily projected. Mass communications have made it possible to keep the mass man in an almost constant state of political mobilization."

Half a century later Hofstadter's grasp of the relationship between politics and culture, along with his feel for what he later termed the heartland's "underground revolt," seems not only prescient but thoroughly up-to-date. And his clinical tone still conveys tremendous authority. But his thesis also avoided large political realities: legitimate strategic differences over how best to prosecute the cold war, lingering questions about Communist espionage under Roosevelt and Truman, not to mention the animosities sharpened by a greatly enlarged federal bureaucracy staffed by policy intellectuals who spoke in terms alien to those of many Americans.

Hofstadter acknowledged all this, but his analysis gave little or no credit to thoughtful conservatives. His most gifted protégé, Christopher Lasch, exaggerated only a little when he later said of the liberal theorists of status politics that "instead of arguing with opponents, they simply dismissed them on psychiatric grounds." Worse, Hofstadter proceeded axiomatically from suspiciously flexible premises. For instance, he depicted enemies of the New Deal as extremists, even though he himself had made the case that the Roosevelt years represented a defining break with a "tradition" dating back to the founders. If this was the case, didn't it stand to reason that some should seek to revoke those changes? So too with "status politics." If its psychological calculus were applied neutrally, the stimuli that propelled the "mass man" toward Joe McCarthy did not differ from those that sent Manhattan intellectuals toward the "egghead" Stevenson. And if, as Hofstadter maintained, political issues now reflected a wider cultural debate over "the capacity of various groups and occupations to command personal deference in society," then the largely Jewish inhabitants of what Brown calls the "Claremont Avenue ghetto" were, for all their seeming detachment, as deeply embroiled in the struggle as Midwestern rubes or urban Catholics.

In any event, for Hofstadter the lines were now clearly drawn. The fundamental division within America was not between Democrats and Republicans, nor between liberals and conservatives, but between cleareyed intellectuals and benighted philistines, between the rational elite and the impassioned mob.

But this yielded a fresh paradox. Hofstadter remained certain that the New Deal was the starting point of a mature modern politics that transcended ideology. And yet to many liberals — including a formidable historian like Schlesinger — the Roosevelt revolution derived from a populist tradition that enshrined the “mass man” whom Hofstadter distrusted and feared. And true enough, it wasn’t just Truman who had railed against Wall Street. Roosevelt himself had reached into the populist lexicon in his attack on “unscrupulous money-changers.”

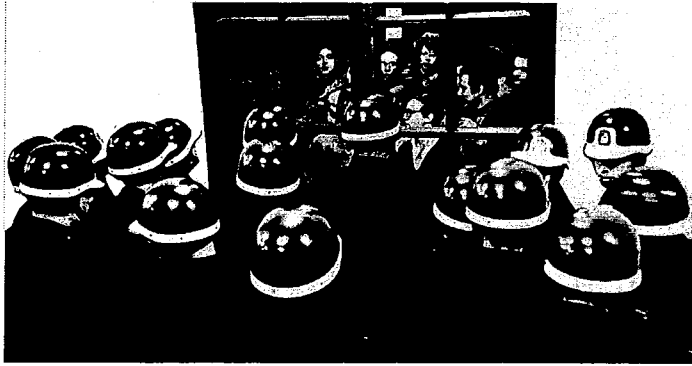
In his next major work, “The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.,” published in 1955, Hofstadter aimed to disprove Schlesinger’s argument by revamping the case he’d made in “The American Political Tradition.” In his new account, Roosevelt was no longer a lucky improviser but rather the conscious inventor of modern government, the first American statesman to realize that the economic and social conditions of a complex society must be centrally organized and administered by intellectuals. This vision had no real basis in turn-of-the-century reform movements — rural populism and urban progressivism — which Hofstadter now depicted as retreats from modernism, retrograde protests on the part of those “bypassed and humiliated by the advance of industrialism.” What appeared to be forward-looking programs were in reality rear-guard campaigns to restore America to the “sacred” conditions of its rural infancy, when it had been “a homogeneous Yankee civilization.”

The crux of Hofstadter’s analysis was his merciless description of the reform era’s dark underside — its hatred of pluralism and modern life, its nativist and anti-Semitic prejudices. The Populist Party’s clamor for economic reform, admirable though it was, had coincided with fears that capital was flowing from the virtuous “yeoman farmer” to the corrupt urban laborer. And the muckrakers’ impressive exposés of urban political corruption masked the progressives’ “genteel” revulsion against “the most exploited sector of the population,” the growing immigrant communities whose urgently practical needs were met far better by city bosses than by the reformers’ agenda of civic virtues (“responsibility, efficiency, good government”). Even the reformers’ laudable efforts to control the predations of the robber barons were raveled up in delusory fears of a “secret conspiratorial plutocracy.”

All this, Hofstadter said, pointed to an ingrained historical cycle of “deconversion from reform to reaction,” wherein liberalizing energies (“popular, democratic, progressive”) coexisted with destructive ones, often expressed as bigotry. This was most glaringly the case with William Jennings Bryan, the three-time Democratic presidential nominee who had



begun by assailing the moneyed interests and the “cross of gold” but ended up in the sinister embrace of the Ku Klux Klan and as the courtroom jester in the Scopes trial. In sum, the age of reform appeared, on close inspection, “very strongly to foreshadow the cranky pseudo-conservatism of our time.” Bryan’s authentic heir wasn’t Roosevelt, the Dutchess County squire. It was Joe McCarthy, who even delivered — in Wheeling, W. Va., in 1950 — his own cross of gold speech, a carnal roar against subversives, real and imagined, recipients of “all the benefits that the wealthiest nation on earth has to offer — the finest homes, the finest college education and the finest jobs in government.”



Hofstadter was distressed by the confrontation between students and the police at Columbia in May 1968.

Larry C. Morris/The New York Times

The impact of “The Age of Reform” was tidal. Thirty years later it remained “the most influential book ever published on the history of 20th-century America,” in the judgment of the historian Alan Brinkley. The novelty lay not in Hofstadter’s argument. The malign potential of mass political movements had been clear at least since the demagogic heyday of Father Coughlin and Huey Long in the 1930’s. And the thread connecting McCarthy to popular left-wing dissent had been visible from the outset of his rampage; he came, after all, from Wisconsin, the home of the great progressive reformer Robert M. La Follette.

And to be sure, Hofstadter once again overstated his case. In an incisive essay, “The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual,” C. Vann Woodward, whose own work traced the evolution of popular protest, pointed out the narrowness of an analysis limited to the history of the Midwest and Plains states to the exclusion of the South, where populists, far from being bigots, had courageously battled the injustices of Jim Crow (at least at first). Other critics chipped away too — at Hofstadter’s slighting of cooperative associations and the other economic alternatives reformers had offered in a society dominated by big business. In the next generation a small library of counter-interpretations would appear, each undoing another strand of Hofstadter’s argument.

But in the end, these defects mattered little. Long after the wave of revisionism crested and crashed, “The Age of Reform” endures, thanks to the vitality of Hofstadter’s narrative, its fluency, its wit, its seamless weave of examples and sources (from apocalyptic novels to

muckraking journals) — anticipating the cultural studies of a later era — its demythologizing power, above all its feel for “the emotional and symbolic side of political life.”

And yet there is something claustrophobic in “The Age of Reform,” as indeed there is in nearly all of Hofstadter’s later work. It emerges in the prose, the relentless assertiveness of its arguments and also in its sweeping descriptions (“the progressive movement is the complaint of the unorganized”) and caustic epithets (the “pathetic proletarianism” of the 30’s; the “rural-evangelical virus”). Hofstadter records not only his subjects’ delusions but also his own disillusionment. He accuses the populists and progressives of a “destructive alienation” from America and “its essential values,” but his own alienation seems even more severe. For Hofstadter, increasingly, all American politics incline toward pathology. They are a continual eruption of “hostility” “grievances,” “resentments,” “anxieties.” His horror of “mass man” borders, in places, on a loathing of democracy itself. In his many writings, there are very few moments — apart from his accounts of the New Deal — when political energy springs from inspiring, or even honorable, sources.

Hofstadter openly aired his own grievances and anxieties in “Anti-Intellectualism in American Life,” published in 1963. His most personal book and also his most idiosyncratic, it is a wide-ranging meditation on philistinism in American religion, politics, business and education. America had always distrusted original minds, Hofstadter wrote, but in the post-Sputnik moment, “the national distaste for the intellectual appeared to be not just a disgrace but a hazard to survival.”

Coming from one who deplored ideological overstatement, this alarmism was disingenuous, at the very least. Equally disingenuous, and faintly ludicrous, is the spectacle of a much-honored public eminence warning against the dangers of American philistinism at the height of the Kennedy years, when a conveyor belt ran from Harvard Yard to the White House, and a major historian, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., served as a presidential adviser. Then again, Hofstadter, who “was directly afraid of power,” as his close friend Alfred Kazin once remarked, was skeptical of cozy transactions between thinkers and doers and later rebuffed an invitation to join an advisory group in the Johnson administration. However much “deference” intellectuals were being accorded in the early 1960’s, Hofstadter seemed to be saying, their only safe habitat was on the social margins.

The very title “Anti-Intellectualism in American Life,” verging on operatic self-parody, might have been invented by one of Saul Bellow’s comic narcissists. Indeed there seems a satirical hint of Hofstadter in Bellow’s “Herzog” (1964). Herzog too is an intellectual historian, the author of a study embraced by a new generation, who “accepted it as a model of the new sort of history, ‘history that interests us’ — personal, engagée — and looks at the past with an intense need for contemporary relevance.” Herzog too registers the distance in America

between the intellectual and the man of action. The letters he feverishly drafts but doesn't send include a rambling lecture addressed to Hofstadter's *bête noire*, the ur-philistine Dwight Eisenhower. ("Intelligent people without influence," Herzog explains to Ike, "feel a certain self-contempt, reflecting the contempt of those who hold real political or social power, or think they do.")

Not that Hofstadter doesn't have a case to make. "Anti-Intellectualism in American Life" includes many brilliant pages. There is a discussion of early American evangelism and its attack on learned clergy, the eggheads of their day. And there are justly celebrated passages on "the revolt against modernity" that occurred in the early 1900's — "the emergence of a religious style shaped by a desire to strike back against everything modern — the higher criticism, evolutionism, the social gospel, rational criticism of every kind."

But Hofstadter's repetitions seem obsessive. The familiar cast reappears: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, William Jennings Bryan ("a layman who combined in his person the two basic ancestral pieties of the people — evangelical faith and populist democracy"). And he rehashes the election martyrdom of Adlai Stevenson ("the victim of the accumulated grievances against intellectuals and brain trusters"). Only now he concedes what was obvious to others in 1952, that Stevenson had been "hopelessly overmatched" against Eisenhower, "a national hero of irresistible magnetism." Also, "after 20 years of Democratic rule, the time for a change in the parties was overdue, if the two-party system was to have any meaning."

Hofstadter had reason to think more charitably of Eisenhower, who, in the end, had proved a moderate caretaker of New Deal gains, as many observers had expected he would be (including Eisenhower's fierce opponents on the right). Since then a new tribune had emerged on the right, Barry Goldwater, a sworn enemy of Roosevelt's welfare state. Goldwater's presidential nomination in 1964 was "a vital blow at the American political order," in Hofstadter's view. His subsequent thrashing in the general election was "the most satisfying political experience of Richard Hofstadter's life," according to Brown. But even as others predicted the demise of Goldwaterism, Hofstadter, in the many pages he wrote on the phenomenon, gathered in "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1965), understood that the movement represented a "permanent force." Unlike McCarthy, who had been a one-man and one-issue show, Goldwater represented a more disciplined extremism. He too beheld a government conspiracy directed by an all-powerful few (hence his "paranoia") and like the McCarthyites was guilty of "heated exaggeration" and "suspiciousness." But his politics grew organically out of public frustration with a world proving resistant to American ambitions. "The American frame of mind was created by a long history that encouraged our belief that we have an almost magical capacity to have our way in the world, that the national will can be made entirely effective, as against other peoples, at a relatively small

price,” Hofstadter observed. No wonder Goldwater, and before him John F. Kennedy in 1960, had insisted the cold war could be won outright if only America were tougher in its dealings with the Soviets.

Goldwater had the further advantage, unlike McCarthy, of being an organization man who attracted “dedicated enthusiasts” easily “mobilized” in the service of the cause. And he was ideologically pure. His proximate goal was not to win elections — in fact he had been the most reluctant of presidential candidates — “but to propagandize for a set of attitudes.” All this implied future success if only right-wing Republicanism could overcome “its inability to rear and sustain national leaders.” Within a generation Ronald Reagan would solve this problem.

Of course Reagan had help from the left. Little did Hofstadter suspect that a year after the publication of “Anti-Intellectualism in American Life,” attacks on autonomous liberals far more damaging than any inflicted by the right would come, as Brown writes, “from the children of the liberal class itself.” University-based militants of the New Left began echoing the criticisms of the liberal establishment the right had been making for years. The wave of campus protests, which started at Berkeley in 1964, reached Hofstadter’s Columbia in 1968, when student radicals occupied buildings and intimidated faculty. The administration summoned the police, and a violent battle ensued. Hofstadter, respected on all sides — not least because he was an early opponent of the Vietnam War and had joined one of Martin Luther King’s voting-rights marches — acted as a conciliator. When Grayson Kirk declined to appear before outraged students on commencement day, Hofstadter took his place, offering a ringing defense of academic freedom. He spoke with the authority of one who in 1950 had turned down a teaching offer from Berkeley because the state of California enforced a loyalty oath. But to members of Columbia’s Students for a Democratic Society, his speech reeked of mandarin “privilege,” precisely the charge Joe McCarthy had leveled against liberals in 1950.

Hofstadter was forced now to examine the liberalism he had hitherto exempted from the hard scrutiny he had trained on the right. As early as the mid-1950’s, some had detected “neo-conservative” strains in Hofstadter’s critique of the populist tradition. In the last years of his life he adopted views very similar to those of disillusioned intellectuals who felt “mugged by reality.” Like them he grew convinced, Brown writes, “that the prevalent style of liberalism was not liberal at all. It was soft, weak and ideologically inconsistent. Rather than serve as a kind of consensual middle ground for the majority of Americans — like the Johnson constituency of 1964 — liberals were tilting toward the left, in a sense abandoning their liberalism. If, he concluded, a group of right-wing students had occupied buildings at Columbia, the faculty would have demanded that the administration throw them out.”

In 1969 Hofstadter fled the “Claremont Avenue ghetto” for a Park Avenue apartment. He continued to write prolifically and at times brilliantly. In his book “The Progressive Historians,” an elegant reconsideration of Beard and company, he at last admitted ownership of the consensus theory, and of the ideal of “a vital kind of moral consensus that I would call comity.” Shaken by the riots that swept through the nation’s great cities, he was also a co-editor of an anthology of documents on “American Violence,” from a fatal dispute between the Puritans and the Pilgrims through the murders of Malcolm X and Robert F. Kennedy. “Today we are not only aware of our own violence; we are frightened of it,” he wrote in the introduction. “We are now quite ready to see that there is far more violence in our national heritage than our proud, sometimes smug, national self-image admits of.”

This appeared in 1970, the year Hofstadter died. He had been working on a projected three-volume study, “the big narrative history that was his greatest dream as a writer,” in the words of Alfred Kazin. In 1971 the first volume, “America in 1750: A Social Portrait,” was published in its unfinished state, and the roughness shows. But even had Hofstadter seen the project through, it seems unlikely he would have succeeded on the grand terms he envisioned, because — as always — he relied on synthesis and argument rather than original research. Narrative history ultimately belongs to “archive rats,” whose tedious hours spent with documents bring them closer to the events they write about, enabling them to touch the human pulse of the past.

But there is one magnificent section in this last book, an impassioned, indignant account of “white servitude” in the colonies. In pages written in the throes of mortal illness, Hofstadter described, with a directness new to his prose, the fates of indentured servants who braved the Atlantic crossing only to meet hardships as brutal as those they had escaped in the Old World. For the first time the patented irony is enriched by human sympathy. “For a great many the journey across the Atlantic proved to have been only an epitome of their journey through life,” he wrote. “And yet there must have seemed to be little at risk because there was so little at stake. They had so often left a scene of turbulence, crime, exploitation and misery that there could not have been much hope in most of them; and as they lay in their narrow bedsteads listening to the wash of the rank bilge water below them, sometimes racked with fever or lying in their own vomit, few could have expected very much from American life, and those who did were too often disappointed.”

In the end, disappointment was Hofstadter’s great overarching theme, which may partly explain why, as Brown points out, “there is no Hofstadter school” today. His account of the American past was finally tragic, and tragedy lies outside the comfortable boundaries of American thought. Still, writers survive through their own work, not that of their disciples.

And at his best, Hofstadter remains vitally alive and endlessly instructive. “To look back upon Hofstadter’s lost world of liberalism today — from the vista, that is, of a conservative age — is to recall its surprising fragility,” Brown writes.

At this moment, when so many seek to recover that lost world or to invent an updated version of it — a post 9/11 cold-war liberalism or a reconstituted “vital center” — Hofstadter’s case deserves a fresh look, for he knew very well just how fragile liberalism is, even if he sometimes mistook its prejudices for principles and its illusions for ideals.