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The American Future: a History

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Now that the dust has settled on the presidential race, it?s easier to assess Simon Schama?s ambitious project of last autumn: *The American Future: A History*. The book (and the accompanying television series) departs from his previous work in several ways. First, Schama steps confidently into the terrain of journalism, punctuating his familiar historical storytelling with the voices of politicians, public officials, farmers and even military officers whom he?s interviewed on his travels across America. Second, he experiments with memoir: Schama first visited the United States in 1964, on an assignment for a Cambridge student magazine that took him to the Democratic convention, and we learn a good deal about his (mostly euphoric) relationship with his adopted home. Finally, he dives into contemporary politics: *The American Future* looks to capture America at a crossroads, and handicaps the presidential race between Obama and John McCain. (Which was reaching its climax when the book and the TV series appeared last year.) It?s not hard to see that Schama is hoping for an Obama win, but the publication schedule forces him to hedge his bets on which American Future might come to pass. The result is an uneven and at times disorienting analysis. This is history on the hoof: the approach is exhilarating, but the result is a blur.

About that title. Surely Schama must have imagined the ruffled feathers of professional historians: most of us are already pathetically jealous of the telly dons, and now we have to endure their narration of events that haven?t even happened yet. The book isn?t quite as outrageous as it sounds. Schama does peer into the

future, too much for the taste of many historians, but the title points to a more subtle ambition. He?s interested in the idea of the future in American history, and especially in the attempts of diverse Americans to imagine the gradual improvement of their national enterprise. This is a promising topic that suits his impressionistic approach to history: the book guides readers through familiar and obscure debates between rival boosters of American progress: between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, for example, who had very different ideas about how the nation should develop; between the Confederate general Robert E. Lee and Union general Montgomery Meigs, former roommates and West Point graduates who saw the United States (and the role of the armed forces) from opposing sides; and, in the book?s final section, between Americans who saw very different possibilities for the American West. The stories (and perhaps even the juxtapositions) will be familiar to historians, but Schama does a fine job of cataloguing and arranging them for a wider public. Throughout the book, he undermines the idea of American history as one-dimensional or impervious to change, and he argues that the richness of historical experience in the United States provides reasons for optimism even during the current crisis.

The American Future pursues its subject across four themes. The first is ?American War?, and challenges our contemporary prejudices about the U.S. military as crudely imperialist by insisting upon a ?nation-building? ethic among the American armed forces. Schama traces this back to the founding of the officer college of West Point and the achievements of the Army?s Corps of Engineers in the 19th century. He takes a shine to Montgomery Meigs because Meigs?s career defies our expectations: in an era when the Army was principally involved in suppressing Indian rebellions or gobbling up parts of Mexico, Meigs was devising schemes to improve the Washington water supply and to raise a new dome above the Capitol. During his finest hour, as the Union quartermaster during the Civil War, Meigs looked to defeat the South through the careful management of resources and communications rather than the senseless slaughter of the battlefield: he played his part in facilitating the carnage at Antietam or Gettysburg, but Schama emphasises his logistical brilliance and recovers a sharper, more nimble understanding of the purpose of military power.

The second section, on ?American Fervour?, argues that the European stereotype of the United States as a land of religious zealotry is wrong: in fact, Americans created a society in which religious freedom allowed for intense piety and faith without great danger to either the social fabric or the course of government. (Whatever your suspicions of Schama?s presentism in this project, you have to allow that this line doesn?t follow the recent, rather shrill anxiety about the impact of the religious right on American life.) He approaches the topic of immigration and American identity with a similar purpose. While he concedes that nativism and xenophobia are embedded in American history, he suggests that a broader and more inclusive understanding of American citizenship has always fought for the public?s attention. This third section has some of the best history in the book: I particularly enjoyed Schama?s delicate handling of Crèvecoeur?s *Letters from an American Farmer*, written in the shadow of the political heartbreak of the American Revolution (Crèvecoeur?s family were loyalists) and fraught with romanticism and tragedy about American belonging. Schama restores German migrants to their rightful place as one of the most important groups in the history of American immigration. And, with an eye on present-day debates, he neatly inverts warnings of the ?Mexican threat? in the Southwest by considering the ?first immigration problem in Texas?: in the 1820s, when Texas was still a part of Mexico, it was Anglo-American settlers ? who had been invited to assist the new Mexican nation in strengthening its northern periphery ? who undermined traditions and brought political chaos.

The final section ? on ?American Plenty? ? is less coherent, spinning two rather different tales (Indian removal and the problem of water use in the West) around a single theme of (over)consumption. Schama only looks at southeastern Indians, mostly the Cherokees, and he?s beholden to the idea of Andrew Jackson as villain-in-chief. Schama wants us to see Jackson and the federal government as crudely expansionist, eager to displace Indians and to secure a moving frontier of white homesteaders. The reality is more complicated. In the late 1820s, Jackson was merely the latest politician to recycle the idea that Indians might be more successfully brought to ?civilization? if they were removed from antagonistic settlers in the East. In spite of Schama?s finger pointing, the key determinant of the climactic 1830 debate over removal may have been state politics. Jackson, a man of considerable bluster and menace, was nonetheless confronted by a

basic ambiguity in American politics that remained largely unresolved before the 20th century: where did the powers of the federal government end, and those of the state governments begin? Southern states were especially anxious about slavery, but they also complained about the federal tariff and Washington?s attempts to control Indian policy. Jackson?s decision to expel the southeastern Indians in 1829?30 ? the fulfillment of a campaign promise in 1828 ? owed more to his sense that the East should be white than that Indians would have no place in a western future. More immediately, he bowed to southern legislators who might otherwise create trouble for the federal government both in Washington and at home. (This was, after all, the season in which South Carolina briefly asserted the right to nullify federal laws.)

Perhaps Schama realised that this material didn?t work as well as the stories about the hydraulic West, because the TV series simply drops the removal angle and focuses on water. In both the book and the TV show, Schama follows the career of John Wesley Powell, the soldier and geographer who undertook a daring exploration of the Colorado River in 1869 (becoming the first white American to glimpse the Grand Canyon from within its towering walls) and mapped out the possibilities and pitfalls of western settlement. Powell got to know the Southwest the hard way, by trying to survive the worst that the region?s climate and geography could throw at him, and he concluded that large-scale settlement would not succeed unless it closely tracked the available water supply. This verdict proved unpopular with the promoters of an agricultural and real estate bonanza for the region, who insisted that the ingenuity of man would overcome details like aridity and flimsy topsoil.

The optimists won out, as they always do, and Schama follows the course of their dreams through the 20th century in the Southwest and the Plains states. We witness the famous Dust Bowl of the 1930s, the result of a brief agricultural boom of intensive farming that had ignored the warnings of Powell and other Cassandras. After a few years of plenty, devastating windstorms simply blew away the soil and created a social disaster. Then we?re introduced to the massive irrigation and hydroelectric schemes of the New Deal era, which tamed the Colorado River and made Sunbelt cities like Las Vegas possible. Finally, Schama spends time in present-day southern California and Nevada, talking to farmers and water managers about what happens next. Water levels in Lake Mead, the enormous reservoir that gradually filled up in the late 1930s behind the new Hoover Dam, have fallen by more than a hundred feet over the past decade. While the miraculous water management of the New Deal has allowed agriculture and urbanisation to sprawl over the past seven decades, the record drought of recent years suggests that John Wesley Powell was right all along.

But Schama doesn?t quite see things this way. In spite of his evidence, he thinks that Las Vegas and, more generally, the political system that has facilitated this unchecked consumption can still turn things around: that rejected versions of the American future can now usurp their erstwhile conquerors. Here?s where the book?s multiple identities ? history, memoir, campaign-trail souvenir ? undermine its impact. The big idea that Schama wants to sell is that America is endlessly inventive and unusually good at remaking itself. As Schama puts it cheerfully in his final pages: ?The Hamiltonians have done you wrong for the last eight years? Well you know where to go for redress.? But does American history actually work like this? Where, for example, is the redress for what Schama describes as the ?monstrous crime? of Indian removal? And can we take much comfort from the history of the West when viewing the impending water crisis in the Sunbelt?

The problem is familiar to anyone who?s tried to write history with a political edge: at some point, you need to determine where the descriptive mode ends and where your prescriptions begin. Does the history of the ?American future? suggest that the United States always rights itself, or that the nation?s history *may* provide solutions for today?s Americans if they listen to the wisdom of the past? In other words, is a revived future an historical inevitability, or a possibility (slim? likely?) that might be secured through a better understanding of the 19th and 20th centuries? Should the historian try to show his hand, and nudge readers towards instructive examples that will secure the better tomorrow?

Schama walks this line awkwardly, and the publication of this book in the middle of an election campaign hardly helps him to write clearly about the present. Schama says at the start of the book that Barack Obama?s victory in the Iowa primary in January 2008 is the moment ?when American democracy came back from the dead?, which suggests that national renewal might be secured by an Obama victory. But the

book and the TV series flirt with the idea that *both* candidates have embraced a different trajectory for the nation; even John McCain, whom the book correctly criticizes for drifting rightwards on environmental issues during the campaign, speaks feelingly about the problems of water management (intercut with shots of a parched Lake Mead) during Schama?s TV show on ?American Plenty?. Would a McCain victory have disproved Schama?s thesis? Does Obama?s triumph confirm it? Why not just wait until the election is over, or preferably for a few years after that, and then try to assess its place in the broader argument about America?s ability to generate ?rejuvenating alternatives? in troubled times? Patience may be a virtue for historians, but it?s the enemy of television schedulers and publishers. *The American Future* reads like a book that was rushed out, alternately squeezed and stretched to fit the timetable and the circumstances of an election campaign. With no victor available, Schama falls into the strange position of sensing change no matter who succeeds George W. Bush.

I?d never seen Schama?s TV programmes before *The American Future*, and I was surprised by just how much of him you get to watch during the hour-long episodes. His thoughtfulness is too often used as a substitute for his thoughts, with wordless postcards of a pensive Schama gazing into space, or framed in silhouette on a sand-dune horizon at sunset, or regarding his reflection in a pool. The book, by comparison, is more restrained. Some of the memoir sections ? especially his recollection of that exciting 1964 trip to the Democratic convention in Atlantic City ? serve to integrate the historical examples with Schama?s own faith in the American future. Others, including his account of dinner at 10 Downing Street last year with President Bush, are more distracting, and sometimes teeth-grinding. Schama is at his best when he looks for new ways to present familiar stories, but his historical instincts are now so closely bound up with his celebrity that it?s probably churlish to seek a separation of the two.

It seems more reasonable to ask him to keep track of his scholarly discoveries and borrowings, and in this *The American Future* is a disappointment. The book has no notes, only a shortish bibliography for each of the sections with a handful of primary sources. I wondered throughout the book whether a particular insight or argument was based solely on the findings of other historians or on Schama?s own engagement with an archive or document. Occasionally, he praises a historian and draws attention to his dependence on a secondary account: William McLoughlin, for example, is his major (only?) authority on the Cherokee story. But mostly we?re left in the dark about how Schama has pieced his stories together. This isn?t just a question of professional etiquette: selfishly, historians will read some of the stronger sections of the book and lament that they can?t easily follow Schama?s paper trail. (The portions on Montgomery Meigs are a good example.) When Penguin appends hundreds of endnotes to David Reynolds?s *America, Empire of Liberty* ? also pitched at a general audience ? it?s hard to argue that scholarly apparatus is a casualty of commercial publishing.

At his best, Schama has a knack for storytelling that makes you forget both his excesses and his corner-cutting. For readers new to American history, this book provides something considerably better than a bland survey or a basic introduction to the timeworn narrative. But if some of the historical sections are impressively crafted, the political tilt ? and especially Schama?s belief in America?s capacity for self-renewal ? is less convincing. Do we need another book assuring us that Americans will always come up with ?rejuvenating alternatives? in times of crisis? More pertinently, do Schama?s own stories support this conclusion?

The concluding section on water management in the Southwest offers a good place to test Schama?s faith. He excitedly recounts his meeting with Pat Mulroy, the tough-as-nails manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority (and a German immigrant!) who has been doing her best for nearly 20 years to square the circle of Las Vegas: a desert city that keeps getting bigger. Schama notes Mulroy?s achievements in persuading Nevadans to recycle their water, or to sacrifice some of the greenery around their houses and golf courses, and he presents Mulroy as another custodian of the American Future: people like her ?represent the most hopeful course ... dominated by neither the raw power of the market nor the overbearing and remote authority of federal government.? (In fact, Mulroy put herself forward for the job of interior secretary in the Obama administration, and may have been a little disappointed that Schama?s attention didn?t advance her claim.) But what gets lost here is the underlying absurdity of the situation: although Mulroy may have

succeeded in cutting the city?s consumption during the past ten years or so, Las Vegas continues to be the fastest-growing city in America even as the Colorado River withers in a decade-long drought.

What Schama doesn?t tell you: the Southern Nevada Water Agency is currently laying another pipe to connect Lake Mead to the city; the existing ?straws? are expected to run dry in the very near future, with fateful effects on the city?s water supplies, so the new pipe (which will drill into the lake at a much lower level) may postpone nature?s reckoning for a little longer. But the long-term prognosis is catastrophic. Last year, the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at UC San Diego warned of a 50% chance that the lake would be effectively exhausted by 2021. This would mean not only that taps would run dry in Las Vegas, but that lights might go out in Los Angeles: the Hoover Dam won?t count for much when it abuts an empty lakebed. (The report pointed out that the dam would stop generating power several years before the water runs out, which would be bad news for Las Vegas and most of southern California.) Meanwhile, Nevada continues to tout its peculiar brand of profligate conservationism: another hotel and casino complex agrees to plant cactuses rather than lawns beneath its vast, air-conditioned suites; another fountain, pirate ride or miniature Venice on the Strip owes its happy existence to ?recycled? water; Mulroy?s Water Agency invites homeowners on its website to embrace ?water efficiency? in return for ?an instant rebate to be used toward the purchase of a new pool cover?.

American exceptionalism, the idea that different rules apply to the United States than to the other nations of the world, is often seen by outsiders as an ugly and crude prejudice. Schama, who has spent half his life in the United States, astutely recognises that exceptionalism can?t be dismissed so easily. American history isn?t simply an exercise in collective self-delusion, but an excited (and sometimes overheated) recognition of America?s unusual circumstances, historical and geographical. Since the 18th century, the United States has been able to offer a standard of living that was simply unavailable to people in other parts of the world, and to sustain its growing population and power even as other nations have risen and fallen in prominence. The key to understanding the American future is to determine whether this unparalleled national success depends more on American ideas or on human and environmental factors that are themselves historically contingent. If America runs out of oil or water, or simply fails to keep up with the progress of China, will it still be able to claim a special status in the modern world?

Schama is clear on this: as he says in his television series, when Americans run out of a natural resource, they can draw upon their endless resourcefulness. But here Schama leaves history behind and becomes a partisan for the American future. There?s a real prospect that the environmental, economic and political challenges of the coming decades will force upon the United States an unprecedented recognition of the limits of its power. I?m not sure that their history has prepared most Americans for this moment, or that a bright faith in the possibilities of the American past will illuminate the uncertain future that lies ahead.

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