

**William E. Leuchtenburg**

**President**

**American Historical  
Association**

**1991**



## William E. Leuchtenburg

The infectious enthusiasm, gentle humanism, and judicious scholarship of William E. Leuchtenburg have inspired students of American history for more than forty years. As a scholar, the 1991 president of the American Historical Association is known to historians as one of the leading authorities in the world on the United States in the twentieth century. As a teacher, Leuchtenburg has attracted legions of students at New York University, Smith College, and Harvard University, where he taught in his early years; at Columbia University where he was the De Witt Clinton Professor of History and taught for thirty years; and, since 1982, at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where he is the William Rand Kenan, Jr., Professor of History

Born in New York City to working-class German and Irish parents who grew up in poverty in the Hell's Kitchen district of Manhattan, Leuchtenburg spent his adolescent years in a small apartment on Gleane Street in Queens. The saying in his family for a good while has been "it's a long way from Gleane Street," as Leuchtenburg has been honored with not one but two endowed chairs and with distinguished senior fellowships, among them from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities and at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, the National Humanities Center, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He was

appointed to the Harmsworth Chair at Oxford University; has been invited to deliver prestigious lectures in this country and abroad, including at such venues as the U.S. Senate, the French Senate, and the U.S. Embassy in London (where he gave the inaugural Silver Jubilee Lecture in honor of the Queen); and has been elected to the presidency not only of the AHA but of both the Organization of American Historians and the Society of American Historians.

In 1939 Leuchtenburg left the borough of Queens for Ithaca, New York, where he made his way through Cornell University on State Regents scholarships and money from summer jobs, including one as a vendor of a Good Humor ice cream cart. After graduating as a European history major from Cornell, having been elected to Phi Beta Kappa in his junior year, he enrolled at Columbia University for an M.A. in International Administration and to begin studies toward the Ph.D. in American history under Henry Steele Commager. It was there that Leuchtenburg had to choose between potential careers—that of a political activist or a professional historian. Following stints in several political organizations, including an early civil rights lobby where he was the only white on the field staff, he returned to Columbia. He earned the Ph.D. in 1951, completing a doctoral dissertation that was published two years later by Harvard University Press as *Flood Control Politics*, the first of a series of books he would write.

More than two generations of Americans have learned about the 1920s and the Great Depression

from Leuchtenburg's *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-32*, published in 1958, and *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940*, published in 1963 and winner of the Bancroft Prize and of the Francis Parkman Prize of the Society of American Historians. Together, the two volumes have sold more than three quarters of a million copies and have been translated into Italian and Japanese. (Other of his writings have been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Hebrew, Chinese, Japanese, and Bengali.)

Leuchtenburg went on to explore post-World War II America in a number of books, including *The Great Age of Change* (1964), *A Troubled Feast* (1973), and *In The Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan*, a main selection of the History Book Club when it was first published in 1983, and contributed dozens of articles still cited decades later such as the pathbreaking "The New Deal and the Analogue of War." For some time, he has been working on a two-volume account for Oxford University Press of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Supreme Court Crisis of the 1930s, an interest in Constitutional history that lead him to co-teach a seminar with Benno Schmidt (now president of Yale University) at Columbia University Law School, and more recently, a highly popular course at Duke Law School with John Hope Franklin and Walter Dellinger. Yet another book will result from the Fleming Lectures in Southern History he gave in Baton Rouge last spring that are to be published by LSU Press as *Three "Southern" Presidents*.

“A world class teacher, he has got to be,” according to C.D. (“Dick”) Spangler, Jr., president of the University of North Carolina system, who made the declaration after faithfully auditing Leuchtenburg’s undergraduate classes on recent U.S. history. At Columbia University, students applauded “Leuchy,” their nickname for him, as a superb, impeccably organized lecturer with both a masterly style and a warm sense of humor that made his lectures “enlightening and exciting.” Among upper division undergraduates who took his course on the United States between the World Wars more than half judged it was the best course they had ever taken.

“Absolutely perfect...the model of what a university lecturer should be like,” the student-written (and often caustic) *Columbia Course Guide* declared.

“Unparalleled, every lecture a gem.”

This combination of erudition and compassion also drew thousands of graduate students to study under “Bill” Leuchtenburg (“WEL” or “the Big L” as he was known affectionately to some of these). His graduate lecture classes were enormous, and his seminars, too, were always filled. In his large, book-lined office on the fourth floor of Fayerweather Hall at Columbia, or more recently in Hamilton Hall at Chapel Hill, those who wrote doctoral dissertations under his direction learned the craft of history from a kind and generous but also intellectually demanding mentor.

Leuchtenburg’s specialty is modern American political history, but it is the measure of this scholar-teacher that he has also been ready to direct dissertations on women, on blacks, on Native

Americans, on homosexuals, on labor, on venereal disease, on conscription, and on foreign affairs.

As his doctoral students researched their dissertations, they learned the meaning of what they came to call "the Leuchtenburg Treatment," which many, the author of this essay among them, have transmitted to their own doctoral students. It meant insistence on the use of as many manuscript sources as possible, not simply at the central repositories but, to the disbelief of graduate students pressed for time and money, at collections large and small throughout the country, in keeping with the practice he himself still zealously pursues. "The Leuchtenburg Treatment" also meant the most rigorous editing this author has had since he worked as a newspaper reporter. To get back what one thought was a finished chapter of a dissertation from Leuchtenburg was to find each page covered with a myriad of pencilled notations, written in a peculiar backhanded scrawl, for improving content and style, including circles linking examples where one had resorted to the passive or had used the same word twice on the same page or even in the same chapter. It was like writing for both a scholar and a city editor. No wonder it took so long to write "a Leuchtenburg dissertation." But how worthwhile it was, and how many were published!

Without compiling a page as long as one in the Bronx telephone directory, it would be impossible to list the Leuchtenburg doctoral students whose dissertations have been published as books. But a roster of those who have published at least two books or their equivalent includes Jerold Auerbach, James L.

Baughman, Allan Brandt, William H. Chafe, John W. Chambers, Stanley Coben, John D'Emilio, Leonard Dinnerstein, Richard M. Fried, Cynthia Harrison, Susan Estabrook Kennedy, Aileen Kraditor, Christopher Lasch, Steven F. Lawson, Maeva Marcus, Jordon Schwarz, Barbara Sicherman, Harvard Sitkoff, Charles H. Trout, Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, Melvin I. Urofsky, Lawrence S. Wittner, and Howard Zinn. In addition, Leuchtenburg served as cosponsor of a great many more students such as David Burner, Robert Dallek, Otis L. Graham, Jr., Jacquelyn Hall, and Lawrence Levine; and in editing for the Contemporary American History Series of Columbia University Press the manuscripts of another two dozen scholars, he has supervised the publication of such seminal works as John Gaddis's study of the origins of the Cold War.

During well over four decades of teaching, Bill Leuchtenburg has remained a socially committed historian. A well-known picture shows him in March 1965 in Montgomery, Alabama, alongside Arthur Mann, John Higham, and John Hope Franklin under a banner "U.S. Historians" on the anti-segregation march led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and more recently he was seen on national television testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee against the nomination to the Supreme Court of Robert Bork. After serving as presidential election analyst for NBC, writing on several occasions for Huntley-Brinkley and John Chancellor, he has appeared on numerous news programs over the years on PBS, ABC, and CBS, as well as on BBC,



Norwegian television, and Canadian and Australian Broadcasting.

His sons by his first marriage to Jean McIntire are a source of immense pride to him. The youngest, Josh, is a lawyer in New York City; Chris is program director for a computer firm in Massachusetts; and the eldest, Tom, is an executive in the energy field in Washington. He has five grandchildren. His second wife, Jean Anne, director of publications at the National Humanities Center, joins him in his love of travel, of birdwatching, and of sports. (He is now serving as Senior Consultant for Ken Burns's next film epic, "Baseball.")

Writing and teaching history is truly the calling of this genial, warmhearted, sandy-haired, ruddy-faced man whose erudition and attentive enthusiasm have kindled the interest of so many persons in America's recent past. "Writing is its own justification," Leuchtenburg said to an interviewer not long ago, "the way a beautiful day is, or eating a peach. There is a feeling of joy when you have done something well, or hope that you have." He added, "There *are* days, of course, when the muse has gone on vacation." There have not been many such days for William E. Leuchtenburg, who has written so much and offered so much to his students, to the profession, and to America.

Respectfully submitted,  
John Whiteclay Chambers II  
Department of History  
Rutgers University

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