

John Morton Blum

March 31, 2003

Allan M. Winkler

John Morton Blum, a prolific American historian, has over the course of a long career helped frame the way we think about the first half of the 20th century. Less well known to the public than some of his colleagues - such as C. Vann Woodward - in the Yale University History Department in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, he was just as influential role in shaping historical debate and in training a generation of students concerned with the questions that intrigued him. Over 80 years old but still thriving today, his legacy lives on.

John Blum is the reason I am a modern American historian. I was drifting into American history when I arrived at Yale in the fall of 1969, following two years in the Peace Corps, but I had no idea what I wanted to do. I had written my M.A. thesis at Columbia University on drinking on the American frontier, and it had been published in the *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, but I really knew little about the American past. I had taken one American history course at Harvard and another at Columbia, but that was it. My Peace Corps experience in the Philippines, in Southeast Asia at the height of the Vietnam War, made me want to know more about my own country and what it was trying to do. And so I found myself plunging into American history on my return to school.

I assumed I would work in the 19th century, for that was the only period I knew anything about. But in my very first week in New Haven, I stumbled into John Blum's office looking for advice and ended up enrolling in his reading colloquium on the 20th century. Only after the term began did I realize that I had read his elegant short book *The Republican Roosevelt* - about TR - when I took my one American history course at Harvard. That now seemed like a good omen.

I ended up loving the course, and the research seminar that followed in the spring. Many of my new graduate school friends were in both courses, and we formed close friendships, some of which continue to this day. Blum himself was a compact, dapper man who loved to talk to students and took me under his wing. Maybe it was the fact that we shared a common Harvard background. Maybe it was because I was several years older than most of the other incoming graduate students. Whatever the reasons, he spent hours talking to me in his office, drawing me out, and providing me with a personal sense of the larger profession.

This was particularly important, for my father, also a historian, had pointed me in this direction but I now needed other help with decisions I had to make on my own. Blum accepted the fact that I thought I was going to work in the 19th century - and probably with Vann Woodward, one of the nation's experts on race relations. But he quietly introduced me to the 20th century, and to the questions that concerned him, and gradually I found that they concerned me too.

Seminar sessions went quickly. Sometimes Blum launched into long monologues, about people he had known, projects he had completed, issues that troubled him in those turbulent years. We occasionally joked about comments we heard over and over particularly the injunction not to throw out the baby with the bath - as he counseled us to think carefully about what was important and what was not, rather than rejecting out of hand older ways of thinking about the past. All this came as we puzzled over the intellectual shifts taking place in the 1960s and 1970s as new techniques of doing social history spread throughout the discipline. In the seminar, we read lots of books - many of them his own - and I began for the first time to understand just what a historian does. Phrases of his have stayed with me over the years. I can't think or teach or write about Woodrow Wilson, the subject of a short biography he wrote, without recalling Wilson's "obdurate certitude" and its impact on political affairs.

John Blum also helped me learn how to write. He wasn't my first writing teacher, to be sure. As I was growing up, my father read all my papers and marked them up - just as I later did with my own children - and by the time I went off to college, I think I wrote pretty well. But Blum taught me elements of grammar I had never even thought about, and even more important, taught me a sense of style. I had no idea what a dangling participle was until he began to work over my prose. He helped me look for the special comment or quotation that could highlight an issue better than a long paragraph. And he taught me how to turn a phrase. I still go back to *The Republican Roosevelt* and marvel at its economy of prose. To this day I can remember him working over my topic sentences and forcing me to simplify and clarify what I wanted to say. He was a marvelous editor who prided himself on his astonishingly quick turnaround of drafts of papers and dissertation chapters, complete with suggestions for improving the writing that invariably made sense. At the end of my first year at Yale, I sent a paper I had written under his direction about a racially-motivated transit strike in Philadelphia during World War II off to the *Journal of American History* - the *JAH* - the preeminent publication in my field. I didn't tell him I was doing so, for he had suggested a less prestigious journal. When it was accepted and later published in the *JAH*, I decided that I was going to continue to study the 20th century and to work with John Blum.

Blum was at the same time a marvelous classroom teacher. He lectured to a class of several hundred students in his always-popular course on the United States in the 20th century. Indeed, this was the one course our current President could remember taking while at Yale, according to a story in *Newsweek* soon after his election. Blum asked me to serve as one of his teaching assistants and I was happy to comply. For the first time, I had a clearer sense of what I wanted to do in front of a class. I wanted to lecture as lucidly as he did. I marveled at his ability to speak clearly and crisply, in complete paragraphs, with but a few notes. Over the years, I had a chance to hear some lectures several times, and each time the lecture was different. Blum had a sense of timing, an ability to turn a phrase verbally that paralleled his ability in prose, and a sense of engagement with his students. His lecture about Theodore Roosevelt, based on his book, was a gem. I can still hear him describing TR taking off on horseback through Rock Creek Park, or charging up San Juan Hill in the Spanish American War, yelling,

"Gentlemen, the almighty God and the just cause are with you Gentlemen, charge!" Many years later, while lecturing about TR myself, I dressed up in a military uniform from the period and performed in character in front of my own students. I sent him a clipping about that performance, acknowledging its derivation, and remember him writing back that "imitation was the most sincere form of flattery." And of course he was right.

Over the years, I came to appreciate Blum's intellectual contributions to modern American history more and more. After his extended work on TR - he was one of the editors of the collected papers of Theodore Roosevelt - he turned his attention to FDR. He was part of the first generations of scholars - in a group that included such luminaries as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and William Leuchtenburg - to work on the Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers at the presidential library at Hyde Park, New York. Out of those efforts came Schlesinger's powerful 3-volume (but still incomplete) history of FDR and the New Deal, and Leuchtenburg's incisive one-volume assessment of Roosevelt in the New Deal years in the old Harper Torchbook series. Blum's contribution was a 3-volume analysis of economic policy that focused on Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau. One of FDR's closest advisors, and a friend and neighbor from Hyde Park, Morgenthau was involved in virtually every crucial New Deal decision. The massive publication, entitled *From the Morgenthau Diaries*, remains useful to this day. Just recently, while working on a legal project that dealt with industrial development during the Second World War, I found myself going back to Blum's work to figure out just how mobilization took place and was struck again by his ability to make economic policy both lively and clear.

Blum also made a powerful contribution to our understanding of World War II. Like my father, and most of the others of that generation, he had fought in the war. He regaled us with stories about his experiences, and I still remember him commenting on his reaction - and the reaction of others - to FDR's death. "Who the hell is President," he wondered, echoing the question voiced by people around the country, and around the globe. More important, he was one of the first scholars to begin writing about the American home front during the war. His book *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* was a brilliant assessment of the changes - and continuities - in the United States during the war and opened the way for much of the scholarship that followed. Blum had done some work with American propaganda while working on that book, and suggested that I might want to look more fully at the issue when I was casting around for a dissertation topic. I did, and it turned into my first book. And I had the satisfaction of watching him draw on - and acknowledge - some of my conclusions as he prepared his own work for publication.

Finally, John Blum provided me with a model of how to enjoy whatever I did. He once quoted one of his own teachers - Samuel Eliot Morison - as saying he hated to write but loved to revise. Blum seemed to me to enjoy both writing and revising, yet he also relished being in front of a class, and liked to be intimately involved in the life of the university. His sense of professional and institutional commitment, coupled with a personal warmth, have guided me throughout my own career. I can think of no better example.

