Tragedy, Revisited . . . Again

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Ryan Irwin

Just as there can be no explanation in history without a story, so too there can be no story without a plot by which to make of it a story of a particular kind.

—Hayden White

As a historian, Williams wished for an America whose ideals, as he understood them, were never compromised by the behavior of the leadership. He never seems to have sensed that if he were cogent in his exploration of the motivating forces in the history of the republic, there was something foolish or perverse in his exhortations for Americans to take a different path.

—Bruce Kuklick

Being asked to say something original about an academic icon is never easy, especially when you’re the scholarly equivalent of a peon. To be honest, I have a hard time even imagining what a conversation between William Appleman Williams and me would look like. I would probably begin with some painfully awkward self-introduction, like “Hello, Professor Williams, my name is Ryan. I’m, umm, I’m an historian too.” It would be one of those halting exchanges that demand long, embarrassing pauses, and a follow-up like “Can I call you Bill?” In all candor, I have no idea what Professor Williams was like in real life, but I can visualize only one response. He would look at me dead in the eyes with a pipe in his teeth or a cigarette dangling from his lips—I don’t know if he actually smoked,
but he would do this for several, very dramatic moments—before responding finally, “No, no you may not. And Ryan... You’re not as good as you think you are.”

Perhaps my introduction would get better with practice, but I’d like to think the response would remain the same. The words just jump out whenever I hear his name. William Appleman Williams—this towering, semi-mythical intellectual with a singular message: “America, you may think that you’re a big deal, that you’re a beneficent and noble superpower, but in real life, the place where economics matter and politics are nasty, your leaders are just like everybody else—and by everybody else I’m talking about Europe.”

Admittedly, the thesis doesn’t pack as much raw emotional power as it probably did in the early sixties, but it still works. It taps into some underlying, semi-universal truth about life—the idea that the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves just aren’t true. And what makes Williams’s version of this argument all the more powerful, in my opinion, is that he then couples it with a rejoinder that suggests, in essence, that if we wanted to, if we just tried hard enough, we could in fact be our imagined versions of ourselves. The only thing stopping us is the ridiculous, unfounded notion that market expansion will solve all our problems. It’s just plain tragic.

This essay is supposed to provide a “graduate student perspective” on The Tragedy of American Diplomacy, celebrating the book’s fiftieth anniversary while commenting on its relevance to the contemporary field. In other words, I should try to say something that can pass for semi-intelligent, generationally aware commentary on this very famous thesis. I will take two swings and pass the bat feebly to my neighbor.

First, The Tragedy of American Diplomacy is unusual by today’s standards. The book reads more like a philosophical statement on America than a traditional monograph of U.S. foreign relations history. On the one hand, it is confident in a way that historians aren’t really allowed to be anymore. Just look at the chapter titles: “Imperial Anticolonialism,” “The Imperialism of Idealism” and “The Impotence of Nuclear Supremacy.” I won’t throw anyone in particular under the bus here, but I will say that I certainly don’t have that type of rhetorical creativity. Then there is the prose. “If it could be done, [Wilson] was confident that American economic power could take care of the United States—and the world” (91). If I tried to say something so unequivocal in a seminar paper today I would probably get a big fat question mark in the margins, followed by an exclamation like “evidence!” or “historiography!” The profession has changed.

People make this observation all the time, but Williams was a Richard Hofstadter-type historian; he talked not just to the historical profession but to America as a whole. His ideas were big and clean and provocative, and they were meant both to persuade us to change our views about our past and adjust your attitudes about our present. They hearken, ultimately, back to a time when historians could call their country “her” and have their peers—who happened to all be white Anglo-Saxon Protestant men—say something other than “Man, that guy’s a misogynistic meta-jerk.”

On the other hand—or maybe on the flip side of the same hand—it’s hard to miss the fact that The Tragedy of American Diplomacy has no footnotes. It is probably not a mistake that people—and here I am admittedly thinking of myself—typically reference Walter LaFeber, Lloyd Gardner, and Thomas McCormick when they want to discuss revisionism as a school of thought. Would William Appleman Williams be William Appleman Williams without the scholars who came after him (and provided the evidence-based case studies that gave his argument such lasting interpretive power)? I have no idea, but I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that much of the work since Tragedy—or at least during that period between the sixties and early nineties—was a fight over Williams’s footnotes. And the opposition admittedly landed some solid punches. For instance, can you really put Tragedy next to Melvyn Leffler’s A Preponderance of Power and walk away thinking that Williams nailed the “origins?” debate? Many of the arguments of the post-Tragedy era—call them post-revisionist or liberal realist or neo-strategical or whatever you want—resound because they capture something about the archival materials historians find when they visit College Park and other government archives. Even if we are ultimately talking about interpretive apples and oranges—you look at government elites, I look at Mexican farmers—historiography is a fruit basket. The oranges don’t technically have more intrinsic value than the apples.

Perhaps my introduction would take this point into the deep end of the pool. Stated plainly, and a little bit tentatively, The Tragedy of American Diplomacy is wrong. I would love to pitch this as some sort of hip post-9/11 statement, but when I explained my thinking to my friends they all said I was wrong. So maybe I’ll step back from the statement a little (wrong, after all, turns out to be the rhetorical equivalent of a slap in the face), and say instead that if you take sociologist Karl Mannheim even a little bit seriously—accepting his notion that modern societies can be ideologically grouped in terms of anarchism, conservativism, liberalism, and radicalism—then Williams’s work fits too cleanly into one category. He’s a semi-romantic radical’s radical (using Mannheim’s epistemological definitions, of course). Therefore, if you argue that Williams’s diagnosis was an accurate reflection of the historical record, that America was, in fact, driven by economic impulses that prevented it from being “good,” then you have essentially elevated one particular ideological roadmap to an objective reality.

Use whatever terminology you prefer—lumping, directional theorizing, mechanical plotting, synthetic thinking, or just plain old-fashioned storytelling—but, like the work of most of the great philosopher-historians, Williams’s analysis doesn’t jibe well with the teachings of our postmodern era. I don’t mean to deny the argumentative beauty of The Tragedy of American Diplomacy or conflate a term like “wrong” with “bad.” But the book has ideological blinders. It wants to change the world—it wants a better America.

So what’s wrong with that? Depending on your age and/or political proclivities, nothing and everything, I suppose. What would happen if the United States did isolate itself from the world and repent for the sins of the open door philosophy? Would the world be a
better place? Would America be a better place? I imagine half of us would say “Heck, yeah!” and the other half “Hell no!” and the point here isn’t so much that there is a right or wrong answer but that the answer itself says as much about you and me—where we grew up, what we believe, and how we think about our country—as it does America. You could ground this statement in all sorts of different scholarships, but it will always come back to the same point. The world is interconnected in strange, multi-directional, and unexpected ways, with nation-states functioning as merely one entity in a sea of overlapping, conflicting interests, and elite behavior, along with the imperatives that shape that behavior, looks a lot different when you are in the White House than when you are on the sidelines of a pleasant academic town like Madison, Wisconsin. It would be so easy, for instance, if we could say, with a straight face, that the current global financial meltdown is the result of the dynamics unveiled in Williams’s *Tragedy*. But on some level we all know better. I sat through a lecture recently where the speaker—Paul Solman from PBS’s “NewsHour”—started asking the audience to recall their mindsets as their home values skyrocketed in the early 2000s, and this little old lady, an archetypical grandmother, raised her hand right at the most dramatic moment of the discussion and stated with the matter-of-fact sincerity that stays with you late at night, “I wanted more.” My point is this: there are no grandmothers in Williams’s America. Only tragic leaders who make tragic decisions.

Which takes this story back to my initial, imagined exchange with Professor Williams. For I suppose if I were a bolder version of myself—someone more ensconced in the particularities of my millennial generation—the conversation wouldn’t end with me sulking over my own inadequacies. I would wait, like some academic version of John Cusack’s character in the movie *High Fidelity*, until my version of Professor Williams turned to walk away, and I would mutter just loud enough for him to actually hear me and with that Jon Stewartesque intonation that manages to be ironical, self-deprecating, and self-aware all at the same time, “Well, Professor, maybe you’re right, but you’re not as good as you think you are either. None of us are.” And I’ll mean it, not in a snarky, mean-spirited sort of way but in the philosophically honest way. Because all tragedies, ultimately, lie in the eye of the beholder. Then I suppose I’d snap back to reality. Because the next part—where I would run as fast as I could out of the room, watching my tenureless career crash down on my heels—wouldn’t be pretty.

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Notes:
2. I say this, of course, knowing full well that William Appleman Williams was responsible for the authorship of more than just *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* and that many of these other works had copious footnotes and abundant archival evidence. Think of this observation as more a metaphorical rumination than a literal statement.