

Spring 3-1-1997

James B. Conant: A Giant on Academe's Left, Right and Center, Book Review of James B. Conant, Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age by James G. Hershberg

Jeffrey O'Connell false

Thomas E. O'Connell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/elj>

 Part of the [Education Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jeffrey O'Connell false and Thomas E. O'Connell, *James B. Conant: A Giant on Academe's Left, Right and Center, Book Review of James B. Conant, Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age by James G. Hershberg*, 1997 BYU Educ. & L.J. 109 (1997).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/elj/vol1997/iss1/5>

.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by BYU Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Brigham Young University Education and Law Journal by an authorized editor of BYU Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact hunterlawlibrary@byu.edu.

JAMES B. CONANT: A GIANT ON ACADEME'S LEFT, RIGHT, AND CENTER

James B. Conant, Harvard to Hiroshima and the
Making of the Nuclear Age
by James G. Hershberg

Reviewed by Jeffrey O'Connell* and Thomas E. O'Connell**

Striking in James Hershberg's biography of James Bryant Conant is how radical Harvard's twenty-year President could be. Particularly with respect to egalitarian matters, Conant's extreme views can be seen in Hershberg's book; they seem akin to those of the Critical Legal Studies group (dubbed the "Crits"), Harvard Law School's radical faculty element which dominated the politics of Harvard Law School for several decades, long after Conant's departure.¹

Conant's earliest egalitarian proposals for Harvard were made in the 1920s when he was a chemistry professor. The proposals reflected a "crit-like" cynicism about the fairness of the way Harvard selected its students:

As a member of a special faculty committee to examine entrance policies, Conant favored opening up Harvard's admissions standards to permit a more national, and geographically and economically diverse, student body with enhanced opportunities for talented poorer applicants, especially from smaller towns in areas of the country with little representation in Cambridge, such as the South and West. Foreshadowing his policies

*. Samuel H. McCoy II Professor of Law and Class of 1948 Research Professor of Law, University of Virginia. B.A., Dartmouth College, 1951; J.D., Harvard University, 1954.

** . President Emeritus, Berkshire Community College (Massachusetts). B.A., Dartmouth College, 1950; M.P.A., Syracuse University, 1952; L.H.D., Williams College, 1970; Ed.D. University of Massachusetts, 1975.

1. For crisp, and relatively neutral, descriptions of the highly controversial Critical Legal Studies movement, along with citations to literature both pro and con, see BAILEY KUKLIN & JEFFREY STEMPEL, FOUNDATIONS OF THE LAW 74-76 (1994); WILLIAM ESKRIDGE & PHILIP FRICKEY, CASES AND MATERIALS ON LEGISLATION 326-30 (1988).

as university president, he lobbied vainly for a bolstered scholarship program, which was huffily rejected by President Lowell, who saw nothing wrong with the practice of making boys from low-income backgrounds earn their way through school.²

As President in 1933, Conant moved quickly to open Harvard. For example,

within months of his taking office, with the freshman scholarships he instituted for gifted students of limited means from the Middle West, Conant's social philosophy started to transform Harvard. From a college dedicated to educating the privileged sons of the Anglo-Saxon establishment so that they might man the stations already awarded them by birth, Harvard under Conant's stewardship shifted its orientation to "training an ambitious elite to accept the responsibilities which will go with the privileges and power they will eventually acquire." . . . Impatient with privileged sloth, Conant sympathized with the "meatballs" — the ambitious, lower-middle-class local students, the first- and second-generation ethnic immigrants who worked overtime to overcome prejudice (and quotas) so as to enter the establishment at Harvard and then, with their degrees, in the outside world.³

But Conant's more general egalitarian views came even closer to those of the "crits" as he expressed those views in an article which "went over like a lead balloon with Harvard's Brahmin hierarchy."⁴ The year was 1943 and the article, entitled "Wanted: American Radicals," appeared in the May *Atlantic Monthly*. Conant postulated a radical who, in the intellectual tradition of Jackson, Jefferson, Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman,

will be lusty in wielding the ax against the root of inherited privilege. To prevent the growth of a caste system, which he abhors, he will be resolute in his demand to confiscate (by constitutional methods) all property once a generation. He will demand really effective inheritance and gift taxes and the

2. JAMES G. HERSHBERG, JAMES B. CONANT, HARVARD TO HIROSHIMA AND THE MAKING OF THE NUCLEAR AGE 57 (1993).

3. Much later, in the mid-1950s, Conant was for universal military service for all 18-year olds with "absolutely no exemptions"—admittedly scarcely a position "crits" would have shared. *Id.* at 80, 542.

4. *Id.* at 175.

breaking up of trust funds and estates. And this point cannot be lightly pushed aside, for it is the kernel of his radical philosophy.⁵

As one might have expected, there was a furious reaction in an institution “whose endowment relied heavily on inherited wealth and trust funds.”⁶ Calmly and courageously, Conant stood his ground. He answered an eight-page critique from the Chairman of J. P. Morgan, Thomas W. Lamont,⁷ with his own seventeen-page rebuttal. He argued in detail “his case that America still did not live up to its promise of a fluid society bereft of caste and class barriers to advancement and was desperately in need of new measures to assure social mobility.”⁸ He said that “‘to be effective’ any new system of inheritance taxes would require elimination of loopholes to avoid them through trusts and gifts, prompting the astonished Lamont to scribble in the margin: ‘Sic! From the President of *Harvard!*’”⁹

The matter was viewed so gravely that the Harvard Corporation, the six-person board (including Conant himself, *ex officio*) which essentially serves as Harvard’s Board of Trustees, “started a quiet move to edge Conant out of the Harvard presidency.”¹⁰ This was during World War II when Conant was spending most of his time in Washington, D.C., on the highly secret effort to build an atomic bomb. He was particularly involved in recruiting able scientists from U.S. universities for that weapons project. Conant was able to resist the Corporation’s effort to oust him by relying on President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s¹¹ agreement that Conant’s work on the atomic bomb “necessitated clinging to the most prestigious post in the educational world.”¹²

While there is something intriguing and even attractive about a quintessentially establishment figure like the President of Harvard being as radical as his *Atlantic Monthly* article indicated, the paradox is a bit puzzling. Lamont’s “Sic! From the President of Harvard!” brings a smile, but from the standpoint of a loyal alumnus (who had promised to, and indeed did, fund the building of a new undergraduate library after the

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.*

7. *Harvard Graduate*, 1982.

8. HERSHBERG, *supra* note 2, at 176.

9. *Id.* at 176-177.

10. *Id.* at 177.

11. *Harvard Graduate*, 1904.

12. HERSHBERG, *supra* note 2, at 178. For a summary of Conant’s radicalism, *see id.* at 402.

war's end) the statement is understandable. Harvard's endowment, definitely the largest of any U.S. university, had been built largely on old money from family trusts and bequests—a continuing source of largesse since Conant's time. If Conant's hypothetical "American Radical" had his way, Harvard today would arguably be much weaker financially.

Not surprisingly, the Corporation thought Conant ought to be replaced. The real wonder is that he continued at the helm for another ten years. Unfortunately, that curious matter doesn't seem to have interested Hershberg.

A surprising thing about Hershberg's biography is how relatively little attention is paid to Harvard's presidency.¹³ From 1933 to 1953, Conant served as Harvard's President, but only six of twenty-eight chapters deal with him in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Admittedly, from 1939 to the end of his tenure at Harvard, Conant was much more preoccupied with Washington, D.C. than with Harvard Yard. Nevertheless, those six chapters reveal absorbing material about Conant as Harvard's President.

Still, Hershberg's perspective is exemplified by his description of remarks made by one of Conant's successors, Derek Bok. In describing those who spoke at Conant's funeral, he writes "Harvard's incumbent president, Derek C. Bok, paid a rather parochial tribute to Conant's emphasis on building a strong faculty."¹⁴ "Parochial"? Would Hershberg *not* expect Bok to place his emphasis on the second of Conant's two most important accomplishments at Harvard?¹⁵

Conant assumed the presidency in 1933. After twenty-three years of Abbott Lawrence Lowell's leadership, the campus had splendid new buildings but an increasingly mediocre faculty. At the outset of his presidency, Conant addressed the matter of faculty quality in tandem with opening up Harvard to able students who previously would never have been admitted. His approach was based on a trip he had made to Germany in 1925. As a professor, and as head of Harvard's chemistry department, he had long wondered why the best chemists in the world (particularly organic chemists) were coming from German universities, and why the most ground-breaking discoveries were being made by Germans. He went to Germany to find out. During his nine-month stay,

13. For example, Hershberg never tells us what job at Harvard was held by A. Calvert Smith. He is referred to as "[Conant's] closest Harvard associate," or as "a college classmate" or as a "Harvard adviser." There are seven references to him in the index. Smith was actually Secretary to the Harvard Corporation. HERSHBERG, *supra* note 2, at 120, 141, 945.

14. *Id.* at 754.

15. His other pivotal contribution to Harvard was the meritocratic student body referred to earlier.

he visited universities in Leipzig, Gottingen, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Wurzburg, Tubingen, and Berlin.

He observed that competition for teaching posts in German universities was intense, and subsequently instituted a similar system at Harvard. Graduates of German doctoral programs almost never stayed on as faculty members for more than a few years.¹⁶ Rather they were told to find a post in a lesser university, make their reputations, and then, after they had clearly demonstrated they were the best in their fields, they would be considered for return to the top-level universities as openings occurred. No one who was merely adequate was given a permanent position simply because he was well-regarded as a man, popular with students, or because he was already in place. He would have to meet cut-throat national competition in his specific field and demonstrate he was the very best. In German chemistry departments every ambitious young graduate student worked prodigiously on original research in order to make it to one of the top universities.

Conant was so excited about this model for Harvard that when he was up for consideration as president, he talked animatedly about it whenever he was interviewed. For example, Hershberg reports,

Never did Conant communicate his views with more passion . . . than he did to a visiting Corporation member on the wintry afternoon of January 24, 1933. . . . Making himself comfortable in the Conants' living room, Robert Homans sipped tea and munched toasted muffins smilingly delivered by Mrs. Conant as her husband spilled his convictions and frustrations.

"Go on," Homans prompted him, restraining his building sense of excitement.

When his guest stepped out into the brittle Cambridge winter, Conant was left with the "peculiarly subtle feeling" that he had met a kindred spirit who was impressed enough to make him a possible candidate. He surmised correctly.

"I think we've got the man," Homans enthused to his son that night. The next day he used more understated language to his fellow Corporation member [Wall Street Lawyer] Grenville Clark.¹⁷

16. There is an irony in Conant's ruling out others following his own pattern in remaining at Harvard as a faculty member after his student days, but his objection to the practice was sound.

17. HERSHBERG, *supra* note 2, at 70-71.

Once he became President

Conant let it be known immediately that he would be a much tougher, “hands-on” president than Lowell when it came to monitoring faculty actions and composition. Taking advantage of a rarely exercised privilege, he undertook to preside over every faculty meeting in the university—at least sixteen regular sessions every month—which was unheard of. Accustomed to debating matters of the medical school or law school or business school in relative privacy, some deans and professors appreciated the interest, but others resented being watched over so closely. At the law school, faculty members sometimes circumvented Conant’s intrusion by holding rump sessions before the formal meetings, then displaying a cheerful consensus on all issues.¹⁸

“To what do we owe this honor?” the surprised dean of the medical school is supposed to have asked his uninvited guest.

“To the fact that you have a new president.”¹⁹

With those meetings Conant introduced the German model as Harvard’s future. Gaining acceptance was not easy; he had to demonstrate how tough he could be time and time again. Hershberg tells in fascinating detail of some of his faculty wars. Ultimately, he succeeded. Harvard, as well as American universities generally, have never been the same since.

In addition to being remembered for opening Harvard to the most able students irrespective of their means, and for closing it to any but the most able faculty, Conant is also memorable for his stand on academic freedom. With respect to student and faculty criteria, Conant’s Harvard indirectly influenced other American colleges and universities by becoming a model. On the academic freedom front Conant’s efforts had *direct* impact off the Harvard campus, as well as becoming a force in his own state of Massachusetts and in the nation as a whole.

18. Note, though, that after the first law school meeting Conant presided over, he characterized the law faculty as “the most quarrelsome group of men I ever encountered.” JAMES B. CONANT, *MY SEPARATE LIVES: MEMOIRS OF A SOCIAL INVENTOR* 110 (1970).

19. HERSHBERG, *supra* note 2, at 79.

To appreciate Conant's liberalism and its effects on Harvard itself, it is important to examine what Harvard was like under his predecessor, President Lowell. Hershberg comments

Carefully attuned to his times and his class, Lowell was bigoted, racist, and priggish, though he denied all but the most rarefied cogitations and motives to explain his views. Unalterably opposed to the idea of women attending Harvard—he denied an honorary degree to Madame Curie on the basis of her gender—Lowell tolerated students and faculty from outside the Brahmin norm so long as they kept their religious, ethnic, political, and even sexual proclivities carefully masked. Lowell's microscopic supervision of faculty behavior to assure that it conformed to his morals reached extremes. When an aged professor's homosexuality was disclosed, Lowell not only summarily demanded his resignation but suggested that he get a gun and "destroy" himself. When a young tutor residing at an undergraduate dormitory desired to marry, he had to receive the president's approval, which was granted only on the condition that the prospective wife agree to entertain students. Though he bravely rejected calls for the dismissal of liberal professors like Harold Laski²⁰ and Zechariah Chafee, Lowell cemented his historical reputation for ingrained conservatism and defense of the status quo by heading the three-man commission that, in 1927, sanctioned the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, two Boston anarchist immigrants who had been convicted of murder.²¹

If Conant had been a leader in liberal causes as a faculty member, he probably would not have become president. For example,

Conant the hardworking chemist and nominal liberal eschewed active participation in these swirling local and national political controversies. And in a departure from the meritocratic ideals he touted so consistently, Conant went along with Lowell's attempt to impose quotas on Jewish undergraduates, the percentage of which had risen from 7.0 percent to 21.5 percent between 1900 and 1922.²²

20. In Laski's case, Lowell's well-publicized defense was largely vitiated by his informing Laski in confidence that he should not expect subsequent promotion from the university. 1 HOLMES-LASKI LETTERS 218, 230 (Mark DeWolfe Howe ed., 1953) (as quoted in HAROLD LASKI, *THE AMERICAN DEMOCRACY* 357 (1948)).

21. HERSHBERG, *supra* note 2, at 57.

22. *Id.* at 58.

As to being active on liberal matters, Conant was simply too busy as an extremely successful academic in the twenties. He wrote, in his almost uniformly dry-as-dust autobiography, “[l]ooking back, these seem to have been the best years of my life.”²³

But shortly after assuming the presidency,²⁴ Conant found himself involved in a matter that involved liberalism not just at Harvard but all educational institutions in Massachusetts. In 1935

he furthered his stature as a spokesman for academic freedom by leading a drive by Massachusetts educational leaders to oppose an effort by the state legislature to impose a mandatory teachers’ loyalty oath. “We do not believe this oath will be of the slightest service,” declared the presidents of Harvard, Radcliffe, MIT, Amherst, and other Massachusetts colleges in a public manifesto, since “no disloyal plotter or seditious conspirator, if any such indeed exist in our whole teaching force, would hesitate to take this oath and then violate it.” Passage of the oath would be a dangerous precedent, they argued, that might be a first step toward the kind of state-imposed regimentation of education then taking place “in Russia and certain European countries.”²⁵

However,

Once the Massachusetts legislature passed the teachers’ oath bill in June 1935, [Conant] rejected advice that Harvard refuse to cooperate with the noxious measure, and told the faculty that he would obey the statute’s provision that prohibited employing any teacher who failed to swear loyalty to the U.S. and Massachusetts constitutions. “I am taking the oath,” Conant wrote, “and hope that all members of the various faculties of this University will do likewise.”²⁶

23. *Id.* at 60. For Hershberg’s comments on that autobiography, see his Introduction, *id.* at 3-10.

24. “I tell my friends that 1933 was quite a year for Germany, America, and me—Hitler rose to power, Franklin Roosevelt took office, and I became president of Harvard.” HERSHBERG, *supra* note 2, at 64.

25. *Id.* at 88.

26. *Id.* at 89.

Conant explained his position in a letter to one of his five bosses on the Harvard Corporation.

To my mind it is out of the question for the President of a semi-public institution, as I regard Harvard to be, to defy in any way the well organized method of the people of the state of expressing their will, namely by a law passed by the legislature. There is no question that the law intended to put the burden on the President of an institution to see that all the teachers did sign the oath, and I was unwilling to and should be unwilling again to do anything except carry out the intent and spirit of such a law, even when I opposed it. (The question of taking a test case to court is, of course, an entirely different matter.)²⁷

Conant's qualifier in the last parenthesis is reminiscent of another Massachusetts' president dealing, as Conant repeatedly had to do, with precisely the same problem nearly forty years later.²⁸

Through his subsequent eighteen years as president, Conant periodically faced tough issues related to academic freedom. Several dealt directly with efforts on the part of persistent Massachusetts legislators to impose loyalty oaths on teachers in various categories.²⁹ Two conflicts, one at the beginning and one at the end of his presidency, illustrate the tangled web such issues constitute for a university president. At both ends, his words were often stronger than his actions.³⁰ "Behold the turtle," Harvard's president liked to advise listeners, "it only makes progress when it sticks its neck out."³¹ Likewise, Conant stated,

Our colleges and universities must not only guarantee the right of free inquiry, they must also see that the various points of view are represented so that a conflict of opinion really takes place. From such clashes fly the sparks that ignite the enthusiasm in the students which drives them seriously to examine the questions raised. We must have our share of thoughtful rebels on our faculties.³²

27. *Id.* at 90.

28. *See* Appendix *infra*.

29. HERSHBERG, *supra* note 2, at 414, 610.

30. For a summary of the down side of Conant's record on academic freedom, *see id.* at 607-08.

31. *Id.* at 89.

32. *Id.*

At Harvard's tercentenary celebration, which took place during revelations of Nazi dismantling of the great German universities he so admired,

Speaking in a firm, clear voice, Conant delivered a ringing avowal of the reverence that Harvard and America held for intellectual freedom, rebuking the rising totalitarian ethos but recognizing the almost primal human emotions that seemed to be fueling a global resurgence of barbarism. "A wave of anti-intellectualism is passing around the world . . ." he declared.³³

Yet, Hershberg points out that Conant's "fear of igniting controversy also tempered his inclination to take a bold stand against academic abuses in Germany."³⁴ Specifically, he refused in 1936 to have Harvard join Oxford, Cambridge, and many continental universities in boycotting Nazi dominated Heidelberg University's 550th anniversary celebration in the same year as Harvard's 300th anniversary. Hershberg's treatment of Conant's actions on intellectual and academic freedom issues is sensitive to Conant's need to be mindful of a university president's pragmatic considerations even when his instincts were to be with the liberals. He adds,

Privately, Conant conceded that his decision had been an expedient one; to snub Heidelberg would risk provoking a retaliatory boycott of Harvard's own fete, to which Heidelberg officials as well as several German scientists had already been invited, with the resultant publicity interfering with the planned fund-raising and self-congratulation. "What my views would have been if we had not been celebrating our Tercentenary, I cannot tell you," he admitted to Princeton's president, Harold Dodds, adding—in a turn of phrase that would suit many of his most controversial stands—that in accepting Heidelberg's invitation he may have been merely "rationalizing a situation into which circumstances forced us!"³⁵

At the end of his presidency, Conant led Harvard through the thickets of McCarthyism. By then he was generally "recognized as America's leading educator."³⁶ He was looked to for guidance on issues of academic

33. *Id.* at 98.

34. *Id.* at 96.

35. *Id.* at 96-97.

36. *Id.* at 585.

freedom when academic freedom was being affected by the Cold War. Again, he was the liberal academic limited by practical considerations (he liked to speak of the need for “tough-minded idealists”).³⁷ One specific issue underscores how he felt he had to deal with such problems. Hershberg starts his chapter on the years 1946-48 with the words,

A shock awaited some of James Conant’s friends when they glanced at the front pages of the morning papers on June 9, 1949. Harvard’s president, they learned, had signed a statement declaring that Communists should not be employed as teachers in the United States. “Conant, Eisenhower, 18 Educators Urge Ban on Communist Teachers,” blared the headline of Cambridge’s “Only Breakfast Table Daily,” the student-run *Harvard Crimson*.³⁸

Behind the story of the event, which Conant was forced to defend until the end of his presidency, was a pragmatic decision which he and his fellow presidents made behind closed doors for reasons which they could never use in their own defense. He argued before his fellow members of the Educational Policies Commission of the National Education Association “that in order for the educational establishment to protect itself against further state inquests, to preserve the right to study and teach controversial subjects, and to defend leftist faculty members and others who were not actually party members—it needed to throw a bone to the anti-Communists.”³⁹ Another commission member put the pragmatic question even more forcefully. “If we are going to be truly zealous for democracy, we better decide to be against something else.”⁴⁰

At a later meeting Conant explained, “[i]f you were willing to take the stand against members of the party, . . . you could [then] make a strong defense against anybody who is being persecuted as belonging to popular front or front organizations, which is a different thing.”⁴¹

Thus, the key vote was defended on what Conant himself seemed to acknowledge as two spurious grounds: fear of Communist teachers, and “the [Communist] party’s invariably deceitful and conspiratorial nature.”⁴²

37. *Id.* at 440.

38. *Id.* at 391.

39. *Id.* at 430.

40. *Id.* at 431.

41. *Id.* at 432.

42. *Id.* at 455.

Conant bore calmly the avalanche of criticism that came down on his head from around the country, from colleagues, and others in Cambridge. At Harvard, he asked a Corporation member to draft what turned out to be an “eloquent defense of Harvard’s tradition”⁴³ of academic freedom which was published in the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* and received with acclaim.

In discussing other aspects of Conant’s work at Harvard, Hershberg says very little about the task often seen as the private university president’s number one job: fund raising. His references are essentially to Conant’s distaste for the task, for example:

As ever, he hated the mundane chores of glad-handing, chit-chatting, and extracting pledges from football-addled alumni. Most of all he hated fund-raising. “Getting money for divinity, geography, a theatre, or a hockey rink sounds a lot easier than it is,” he carped. “When it comes time for actually writing out a check people can find a lot of excuses.”⁴⁴

Rather, “Conant enjoyed [and far preferred] a contentious but good-natured test of wits and ideas with alert undergraduates to glad-handing alumni at a football game or fund-raiser.”⁴⁵

Harvard’s well-known maxim “approvingly quoted” by Conant that “[e]ach tub at Harvard stands on its own bottom,”⁴⁶ referred to each Harvard school’s responsibility for its own fund raising. Did this mean that in Conant’s time the Harvard president’s responsibility for direct fund raising duties was not extensive? We doubt it. But he clearly looked to deans of individual schools to do a great deal of fund raising. Of course, Conant’s frequent speeches to alumni and others, often mentioned by Hershberg, constituted heavy *indirect* fund raising activities on his part. But that is different. Making speeches was easier for Conant than one-on-one solicitations, and Conant clearly loved the speechifying part of his job.⁴⁷

Conant’s way of handling fund raising chores certainly illustrates one of his principal virtues as an administrator: he was a superb delegator. If

43. *Id.* at 449.

44. *Id.* at 638-639.

45. *Id.* at 454-455.

46. *Id.* at 580.

47. While serving in various posts in Germany after he left Harvard, he made 500 speeches, most of them in German. *Id.* at 699. In his countless speeches to Harvard student groups in all parts of the university, Conant’s face “in person hauntingly sensitive and even beautiful, with his luminous, intense eyes and his smooth, boyish skin” shone with eagerness as he stepped quickly forward, seemingly to meet questions half-way. Personal Recollection of Jeffrey O’Connell.

Hershberg's book seems to downplay Conant as Harvard president, one does at least get a clear sense of how completely Conant relied on others to run Harvard day to day.⁴⁸ This pattern of delegation was necessary during the long spells, after 1939, when Conant was absent from Cambridge.⁴⁹ He was astute at picking top associates who would decide things essentially as he would have done had he been present and directly involved. And once he delegated, he would not meddle. One particularly revealing episode during World War II relates to permitting Radcliffe College women to take classes in the Harvard Yard. Hershberg's account reveals Conant's capacity for *near-total* delegation:

On the Friday before Christmas 1942, a cold, rainy, sleety afternoon, two Harvard administrators jostled through crowds of holiday shoppers on the sidewalks of midtown Manhattan to catch the five o'clock Merchants' Limited for Boston. The faculty dean, Paul H. Buck, and Calvert Smith had made the trip down to New York City from Cambridge just in order to ride back with the university's busy president, who had boarded the train in Washington and was making a rare visit to see his family. Ever since mid-1940, and especially since Pearl Harbor threw America into the war, Conant had delegated day-to-day responsibility for running the university to his underlings, especially Buck and the treasurer, Bill Claflin. On this occasion, Buck and Smith calculated that joining Conant on the Merchants' would be the only chance to steal a few hours to transact a historic piece of business: after more than three centuries of male exclusiveness and years of delicate negotiations, Harvard had reached a tentative agreement with Radcliffe College to merge classroom instruction. They came prepared for a laborious discussion that would probably eat up much of the trip.

48. When Thomas E. O'Connell, in the mid-fifties, served as Executive Assistant to John Dickey, President of Dartmouth College, he used to hear about Conant's style. Dickey, a Harvard Law School graduate, was a good friend of Conant's and he seemed to model himself on Conant as president. "On several occasions, lamenting the things he was expected by tradition to handle personally at Dartmouth (admittedly a much smaller institution than Harvard), Dickey would say with a rueful smile 'Harvard's president doesn't have to do this himself!'" Personal Recollection of Thomas E. O'Connell.

49. In its collective wisdom as an institution, Harvard seems to compensate for one president's shortcomings or over emphases in its selection of subsequent presidents. Conant spent more time away from Harvard than in Cambridge, but his successor, Derek Bok, established a firm policy of not accepting off-campus, non-Harvard assignments no matter how attractive, prestigious, or remunerative they might be. Conant was not a religious person, nor even one who was much interested in matters divine (he once referred to his own "cautious but optimistic theism." He even made an effort to close Harvard's Divinity School, but his successor, Nathan Pusey, was an "openly pious leader." HERSHBERG. *supra* note 2, at 58-83, 582, 583.

When they found Conant, however, he had his head buried in a book on foreign policy and seemed distracted. After dinner, as the train changed engines at New Haven, Buck had just begun laying out the terms of the arrangement when Conant interrupted. I have one important question, he said. Has Claflin approved it?

“Wholeheartedly,” replied Buck, “and so has Radcliffe’s treasurer.”

Good, the president nodded. “I have no questions, go ahead with it,” he told them, and dove back to his reading.⁵⁰

But there is a footnote: “[i]t took a while for the implications of the merger to sink in. Distracted by his war work, [Conant] was startled a couple of years later one day while walking through Harvard Yard with Buck. ‘Paul,’ he asked, ‘what are all these girls doing in the Yard?’”⁵¹

This review isn’t intended to treat in any detail the non-educational aspects, or even the non-Harvard aspects, of Hershberg’s biography. However, it may be worth focusing briefly on Conant’s other careers—or his other “lives,” to pick up the language of Conant’s own autobiography, *My Several Lives*. The focus is this: where in his various senior governmental positions was Conant far-sighted in his judgments about the long term? For the truth is that he was seldom clearly *wrong*. He did think the hydrogen bomb was unfeasible⁵² and that atomic submarines wouldn’t work.⁵³ (As to his participation in the decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan—well, the debate still rages about *that*.)

On the other hand, he was often prescient. For example, during the early days of World War II, as a key operative on weapons policies, he foresaw that Germany would not use chemical weapons, but that the real danger was beating the allies to a workable atomic bomb.⁵⁴ After the war, having played a central role in our development of the bomb, he foresaw that joint *operation* of nuclear weaponry production with the USSR would not work but that *inspection* of the others’ weapons was the best basis for agreements.⁵⁵ In 1946, he foresaw witch hunts on U.S. campuses

50. *Id.* at 172-173.

51. *Id.* at 808.

52. *Id.* at 382.

53. *Id.* at 356.

54. *Id.* at 201.

55. *Id.* at 358.

as an offshoot of the Cold War. Again in 1946, he saw the dangers of government-supported classified research in the sciences, saying that it was “highly inadvisable for universities which are dedicated to free investigation,” to conduct secret research projects in peacetime as they perform had done in wartime.⁵⁶ He advocated a containment policy against the USSR in his 1948 book *Education in a Divided World* and he predicted, in 1950, that by 1980 the Soviets’ “absurdities and static system would cause them to grind to a stop.” Also,

“ . . . He repeated that if we can hold what we have . . . and avoid war, then the competition between our dynamic free society and their static slave society should be all in our favor, or if not, we deserve to lose[!]” And, he added presciently, his guess off by only a decade, “By that time, Russia may Balkanize or Byzantinize itself.”⁵⁷

In short, Conant was a real statesman. Both at Harvard and in the larger world, he was a very useful, if often controversial, man, and James G. Hershberg has done a splendid job in bringing him to life.

56. *Id.* at 397.

57. *Id.* at 484, emphasis in original.