

trends the authors detest have shaken up the academic status order, leaving many representatives of the traditional disciplines feeling a bit besieged, fuddy-duddified, and out of the intellectual loop. There's precious little explicit vision in this book of what the humanities and social sciences properly *do*; what little there is suggests that they are, well, *ornamental* to academic life. Science has exclusive dominion over truth; the rest of it is mere culture, properly devoted to helping others (scientists included) to live a more genteel and cultivated life. Is it any wonder that postmodernists *et al.* resist this patronizing image of their function? Ultimately, Gross and Levitt shout in the faces of the hated relativists and deconstructionists, Science works!—as

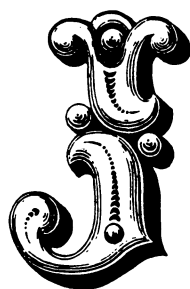
if that disposed of the matter. Indeed it does work. But the humanities and social sciences work too. If Richard Rorty (Gross's colleague at the University of Virginia) is right that the mark of success in these fields is the achievement of changes in the language and character of the conversation among intellectual elites, then Gross and Levitt's ignorant anti-science left has earned its prestige. The culture wars are now a permanent part of the social process and ideological work a major occupation. Let me welcome Gross and Levitt to the fray.

**Bennett M. Berger**

Department of Sociology,  
University of California at San Diego,  
San Diego, CA 92093

## An Actor in Recent History

**James B. Conant.** *Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age.* JAMES G. HERSHBERG. Knopf, New York, 1993. 950 pp. + plates. \$35.



James B. Conant, who entitled his autobiography *My Several Lives*, was a distinguished chemist, president of Harvard University from 1933 to 1953, Manhattan Project administrator and postwar science adviser, U.S. High Commissioner to occupied Germany and first ambassador to the Federal Republic, and educational statesman who contributed a major reassessment of the nation's high schools to a Sputnik-traumatized America. His life provides a window on the American establishment during a defining time in the country's history. It was an era of engagement in issues stemming from the war-forged nexus between U.S. science, universities, government, and the military; the postwar policy of global interventionism; the conflicts and controversies surrounding the Cold War abroad and at home; and the angst provoked by the awesome possibility of nuclear annihilation.

Hershberg's *James B. Conant* is both less than a full biography and more than a "life and times." After a brief treatment of Conant's early life and career Hershberg, beginning at about the time World War II broke out, weaves Conant's life into a tapestry that includes, among other things, the making of the atomic bomb and the decision to use it against Japan; early efforts at internationalization of atomic energy; the personalities and poli-

tics surrounding the decision to proceed to the "Super" (the H bomb); McCarthyism and the academy; the Cold War and the militarization of American science; the labyrinthine politics of occupied and divided Germany; and the tortuous hammering out of American policy vis-à-vis the Federal Republic and the place of Germany in a Cold War world.

This makes for a very long book, at first glance one that is far too long. Plenty of unnecessary description, background information, and detail could have been cut from its 755 pages (929 with notes). That having been said, the book would not be so interesting had it been written very differently. Conant was an archetype of the establishment intellectual/adviser, moving freely between the academy and Washington, mingling easily with power brokers in science, government, the military, and the media, and helping shape the society and state that emerged out of World War II and the Cold War. He was engaged with some of the most complex issues of his time, and he had complex opinions and views about them. Drawing on research in a prodigious number and variety of sources, including the papers of a large array of characters, 68 personal interviews, and a vast secondary literature, Hershberg presents his subject in

the thickness of the period's history.

Conant is difficult to write about. He was reticent to a fault about his personal life and feelings (he neglected to include his marriage in the first draft of his autobiography) and was frequently characterized as dour and cold. The inner man is a mystery. After living with Conant, as it were, for more than 10 years, Hershberg reports that to this day he does not know whether or not he likes him. In some respects liberal, in others conservative, Conant's general outlook defies categorization.

Who is the figure, then, who emerges from Hershberg's study? Conant was as responsible as anyone else for the atomic bomb's development and use. (In fact the Interim Committee's fateful recommendation that the first bomb be targeted on a "vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers' houses," quoted by Hershberg on p. 225, was Conant's suggestion.) But he never suffered a guilty conscience. To him war was the evil, winning it an awful necessity, and no one means toward that end more immoral than another. Yet he felt a great responsibility to ensure that the destructive force he helped unleash not blow up the world. To Conant the H bomb, too powerful to confine to military targets, was a genocidal instrument; he played a major role in moving the Atomic Energy Commission's General Advisory Committee, whose weapons subcommittee he chaired, to recommend against its development. (His role in the H bomb debate earned him the enmity of a group of right-wing scientists, who Hershberg believes likely were behind the failure of Conant's candidacy for president of the National Academy of Sciences.)

Conant initially believed that the Soviet



"Harvard's president in his Massachusetts Hall office after World War II. On Conant's desk, his souvenir from the Trinity test: a glass-encased fragment of ground zero." [From *James B. Conant*]

Union was an enemy that could be lived with, perceived its threat as political and ideological, and worked energetically for international atomic energy control. But he was so shaken by the Korean War that he helped found and headed the Committee on the Present Danger, a group that ostensibly was independent, nonpolitical, and nonpartisan but acted as an official propaganda arm of the government. It succeeded in arousing fear of a Soviet threat and rallying public



"Shortly after the two opposed each other in a secret Anglo-American dispute over atomic collaboration, Conant presented Winston Churchill with an honorary degree from Harvard in September 1943." [From *James B. Conant*]

support for universal military service and a vastly enlarged military budget.

Conant was deeply committed to academic values, opposed the corruption of pure science, and "fervently warned that the hungry wolf of military domination must not devour the lamb of basic research" (p. 558). But in alarming the public about the Soviet Union he helped create the climate that promoted the militarization of science he deplored.

He was a man who cherished academic freedom and the academy's independence from outside control. But the president of a premier institution of higher learning and acknowledged educational leader suffered a failure of nerve and left a tarnished record in responding to McCarthyism's assault on the nation's schools and colleges. Perhaps more from expediency (to make it easier to defend threatened non-Communist leftists and liberals) than from principle, Conant endorsed the position that

Communists should not be hired as teachers (fudging on the related and more complicated question of whether those already on the staff should be fired), and he came to advocate the summary dismissal of professors who refused to "name names" before congressional committees.

He was a committed democrat who championed public education, viewed equal educational opportunity as the key to social mobility, and chided Americans that their vaunted "belief in a society with the minimum of class distinction is contradicted every time we segregate Negroes or discriminate against those of Mexican, Japanese, or Jewish ancestry" (quoted on p. 403). But his response to racial injustice and inequality lacked energy. He counseled caution and careful planning, when it was the moral indignation and outright civil disobedience he decried that would prove to produce real results.

If there is a theme to this book it is that in everything he did Conant occupied the middle ground. His high principles and keen sense of social responsibility were tempered by the fact that he was cautious by disposition and moderate by conviction. This trait lends a remarkable consistency to his "several lives."

There is another important thread in Hershberg's narrative. Since early 1940, anticipating by a year Henry Luce's well-publicized idea of the "American Century," Conant foresaw a new world order, dominated by the United States. He believed that the nation was destined to exercise global political, military, and economic leadership. This view propelled the power elite as it guided America to global ascendancy from its triumph in World War II through its failure in Vietnam.

Readers who might want to know more about Conant the chemist (he was, after all, considered a likely candidate for a Nobel Prize) or be interested in a thorough assessment of Conant's 20-year Harvard presidency and his activities in educational reform will not be satisfied with this book. It is not a balanced treatment of Conant's career, nor does it contain many surprises. These observations are not intended to detract from Hershberg's impressive and substantial achievement. He has used the life of one strategically placed individual to illuminate the most important issues surrounding America's role and conduct in the nuclear age. His book will be invaluable to scholars assessing the impact and legacy of the group who acquired the epithet "wise men" now that the Cold War has receded.

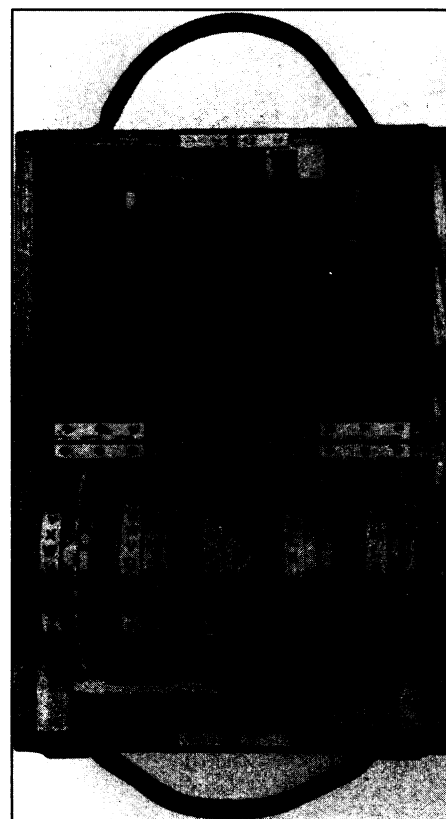
**Carol S. Gruber**  
Department of History,  
William Paterson College,  
Wayne, NJ 07470, USA

## Decryption Day by Day

**Codebreakers.** The Inside Story at Bletchley Park. F. H. HINSLEY and ALAN STRIPP, Eds. Oxford University Press, New York, 1993. xxii, 321 pp., illus., + plates. \$25 or £17.95.

Throughout the Second World War, in a now-famous collection of buildings and huts at Bletchley Park, north of London, a small group of dedicated military personnel and civilians decoded Axis radio signals that had been encrypted by several machines, including the "Enigma" cipher machine. That feat gave the Allies an incredible advantage for almost the entire duration of the war and no doubt affected the outcome of several campaigns. The participants in that drama were for many years sworn to an oath of secrecy, which only recently has been lifted. Although some details and a general history of Bletchley have been available from a number of books and journal articles, the present volume is unique in that it contains only first-person accounts, by a total of 29 persons who were all participants in the drama.

Several contributors to the volume note how remarkable it is that these secrets were kept successfully not only during the war but



"Box of five 28-letter wheels for early Marine Enigma (*Funkschlüssel C*, Mark II, used from July 1933), with separate A and Ä, U and Ü." [From *Codebreakers*]