SUPA American History

Summer Reading 2021

Please complete the assignments in the order presented, and be prepared to discuss them the first week back in school.

Book

Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England by William Cronon (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983: 2003, 20th anniversary edition). You will be given a copy of this book in June. We will be focusing on this book the first few weeks of the school year and your first paper will be on this text. **When you read the book do not get caught up in minutiae Cronon offers to support his thesis.** Our focus will be on the "big picture" and how Cronon's interdisciplinary study augments our understanding of American Colonial history. **It is strongly suggested that you highlight and/or take notes as you read.** *Please **do not** read the afterword (pp. 171-185).*

Articles

You must also read the following articles (attached):

1.) "The Strange Death of Silas Deane" taken from *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* by James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle
2.) "The Problem With History Classes" by Michael Conway taken from *The Atlantic*- March 16, 2015
3.) "The Whitesplaining of History is Over" by Priya Satia taken from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*- March 28, 2018

The articles will also be posted on the SUPA American History 101 Google Classroom webpage (class code to join: **k7izyzp**) We will be discussing the articles on the **first day of class**.

The Strange Death of Silas Deane

The writing of history is one of the most familiar ways of organizing human knowledge. And yet, if familiarity has not always bred contempt, it has at least encouraged a good deal of misunderstanding. All of us meet history long before we have heard of any of the social science disciplines, at a tender age when tales of the past easily blend with heroic myths of the culture. In Golden Books, Abe Lincoln looms every bit as large as Paul Bunyan, while George Washington's cherry tree gets chopped down yearly with almost as much ritual as St. Nick's Christmas tree goes up. Despite this long familiarity, or perhaps because of it, most students absorb the required facts about the past without any real conception of what history is. Even worse, most think they do know and never get around to discovering what they missed.

"History is what happened in the past." That is the everyday view of the matter. It supposes that historians must return to the past through the surviving records and bring it back to the present to display as "what really happened." The everyday view recognizes that this task is often difficult. But historians are said to succeed if they bring back the facts without distorting them or forcing a new perspective on them. In effect, historians are seen as couriers between the past and present. Like all good couriers, they are expected simply to deliver messages without adding to them.

This everyday view of history is profoundly misleading. In order to demonstrate how it is misleading, we would like to examine in detail an event that "happened in the past"—the death of Silas Deane. Deane does not appear in most American history texts, and rightly so. He served as a distinctly second-rate diplomat for the United States during the years of the American Revolution. Yet the story of Deane's death is an excellent example of an event that cannot be understood merely by transporting it, courier-like, to the present. In short, it illustrates the important difference between "what happened in the past" and what history really is.

An Untimely Death

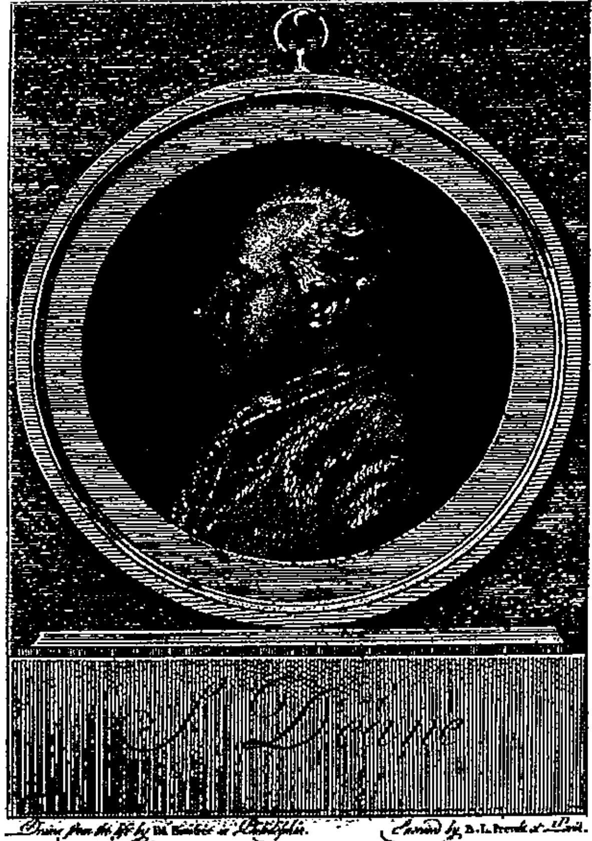
Silas Deane's career began with one of those rags-to-riches stories so much appreciated in American folklore. In fact, Deane might have made a lasting place for himself in the history texts, except that his career ended with an equally dramatic riches-to-rags story.

He began life as the son of a humble blacksmith in Groton, Connecticut. The blacksmith had aspirations for his boy and sent him to Yale College, where Silas was quick to take advantage of his opportunities. After studying law, Deane opened a practice near Hartford; he then continued his climb up the social ladder by marrying a well-to-do widow, whose inheritance included the business of her late husband, a merchant. Conveniently, Deane became a merchant. After his first wife died, he married the granddaughter of a former governor of Connecticut.

Not content to remain a prospering businessman, Deane entered politics. He served on Connecticut's Committee of Correspondence and later as a delegate to the first and second Continental Congresses, where he attracted the attention of prominent leaders, including Benjamin Franklin, Robert Morris, and John Jay. In 1776 Congress sent Deane to France as the first American to represent the united colonies abroad. His mission was to purchase badly needed military supplies for the Revolutionary cause. A few months later Benjamin Franklin and Arthur Lee joined him in an attempt to arrange a formal treaty of alliance with France. The American commissioners concluded the alliance in March 1778.

Deane worked hard to progress from the son of a blacksmith all the way to Minister Plenipotentiary from the United States to the Court of France. Most observers described him as ambitious: someone who thoroughly enjoyed fame, honor, and wealth. "You know his ambition—" wrote John Adams to one correspondent, "his desire of making a Fortune. . . . You also know his Art and Enterprise. Such Characters are often useful, altho always to be carefully watched and contracted, specially in such a government as ours." One man in particular suspected Deane enough to watch him: Arthur Lee, the third member of the American mission. Lee accused Deane of taking unfair advantage of his official position to make a private fortune—as much as £50,000, some said. Deane stoutly denied the accusations and Congress engaged in a heated debate over his conduct. In 1778 it voted to recall its Minister Plenipotentiary, although none of the charges had been conclusively proved.

Deane embroiled himself in further controversy in 1781, having written friends to recommend that America sue for peace and patch up the quarrel with England. His letters were intercepted, and copies of them turned up in a New York Tory newspaper just after Cornwallis surrendered to Washington at Yorktown. For Deane, the timing could not have been worse. With American victory complete, anyone advocating that the United States rejoin Britain was considered as much a traitor as Benedict Arnold. So Deane suddenly found himself adrift. He could not return to America, for no one would have him. Nor could he



"You know his ambition—his desire of making a Fortune. . . . You also know his Art and Enterprise. Such Characters are often useful, altho always to be carefully watched and contracted, specially in such a government as ours."—John Adams on Silas Deane

stay in France, where he had injudiciously accused Louis XVI of aiding the Americans for purely selfish reasons. Rejected on all sides, Deane took refuge in Flanders.

The next few years of his life were spent unhappily. Without friends and with little money, he continued in Flanders until 1783, when the controversy had died down enough for him to move to England. There he lived in obscurity, took to drink, and wound up boarding at the house of an unsavory prostitute. The only friend who remained faithful to him was Edward Bancroft, another

personal secretary during the Paris negotiations for the alliance. Although Bancroft's position as a secretary seemed innocent enough, members of the Continental Congress knew that Bancroft was also acting as a spy for the Americans, using his connections in England to secure information about the British ministry's war plans. With the war concluded, Bancroft was back in London. Out of kindness, he provided Deane with living money from time to time.

Finally, Deane decided he could no longer live in London and in 1789 booked passage on a ship sailing for the United States. When Thomas Jefferson heard the news, he wrote his friend James Madison: "Silas Deane is coming over to finish his days in America, not having one *sou* to subsist on elsewhere. He is a wretched monument of the consequences of a departure from right."

The rest of the sad story could be gotten from the obituaries. Deane boarded the *Boston Packet* in mid-September, and it sailed out of London down the estuary of the Thames. A storm came up, however, and on September 19 the ship lost both its anchors and beat a course for safer shelter, where it could wait out the storm. On September 22, while walking the quarter deck with the ship's captain, Deane suddenly "complain'd of a dizziness in his head, and an oppression at his stomach." The captain immediately put him to bed. Deane's condition worsened; twice he tried to say something, but no one was able to make out his words. A "drowsiness and insensibility continually incroached upon his faculties," and only four hours after the first signs of illness he breathed his last.

Such, in outline, was the rise and fall of the ambitious Silas Deane. The story itself seems pretty clear, although certainly people might interpret it in different ways. Thomas Jefferson thought Deane's unhappy career demonstrated "the consequences of a departure from right," whereas one English newspaper more sympathetically attributed his downfall to the mistake of "placing confidence in his [American] Compatriots, and doing them service before he had got his compensation, of which no well-bred Politician was before him ever guilty." Yet either way, the basic story remains the same—the same, that is, until the historian begins putting together a more complete account of Deane's life. Then some of the basic facts become clouded.

For example, a researcher familiar with the correspondence of Americans in Europe during 1789 would realize that a rumor had been making its way around London in the weeks following Deane's death. According to certain people, Deane had become depressed by his poverty, ill health, and low reputation, and consequently had committed suicide. John Cutting, a New England merchant and friend of Jefferson, wrote of the rumor that Deane "had predetermin'd to take a sufficient quantity of Laudanum [a form of opium] to ensure his dissolution" before the boat could sail for America. John Quincy Adams heard that "every probability" of the situation suggested Deane's death was "voluntary and self-administered." And Tom Paine, the famous pamphleteer, also reported the gossip: "Cutting told me he took poison."

At this point we face a substantial problem. Obviously, historians cannot rest content with the facts that come most easily to hand. They must search the odd corners of libraries and letter collections in order to put together a complete

they know to search one collection of letters rather than another? These questions point up the misconception at the heart of the everyday view of history. History is not "what happened in the past;" rather, it is *the act of selecting, analyzing, and writing about the past.* It is something that is done, that is constructed, rather than an inert body of data that lies scattered through the archives.

The distinction is important. It allows us to recognize the confusion in the question of whether a history of something is "complete." If history were merely "what happened in the past," there would never be a "complete" history of Silas Deane—or even a complete history of the last day of his life. The past holds an infinite number of facts about those last days, and they could never all be included in a historical account.

The truth is, no historian would *want* to include all the facts. Here, for example, is a list of items from the past which might form part of a history of Silas Deane. Which ones should be included?

Deane is sent to Paris to help conclude a treaty of alliance.
Arthur Lee accuses him of cheating his country to make a private profit.
Deane writes letters which make him unpopular in America.
He goes into exile and nearly starves.
Helped out by a gentleman friend, he buys passage on a ship for America as his last chance to redeem himself.
He takes ill and dies before the ship can leave; rumors suggest he may have committed suicide.

❧

Ben Franklin and Arthur Lee are members of the delegation to Paris.
Edward Bancroft is Deane's private secretary and an American spy.
Men who know Deane say he is talented but ambitious, and ought to be watched.

❧

Before Deane leaves, he visits an American artist, John Trumbull.
The *Boston Packet* is delayed for several days by a storm.
On the last day of his life, Deane gets out of bed in the morning.
He puts on his clothes and buckles his shoes.
He eats breakfast.
When he takes ill, he tries to speak twice.
He is buried several days later.

Even this short list of facts demonstrates the impossibility of including all of them. For behind each one lie hundreds more. You might mention that Deane put on his clothes and ate breakfast, but consider also: What color were his clothes? When did he get up that morning? What did he have for breakfast? When did he leave the table? All these things "happened in the past," but only a

It may be objected that we are placing too much emphasis on this process of selection. Surely, a certain amount of good judgment will suggest which facts are important. Who needs to know what color Deane's clothes were or when he got up from the breakfast table?

Admittedly this objection has some merit, as the list of facts about Deane demonstrates. The list is divided into three groups, roughly according to the way common sense might rank them in importance. The first group contains facts which every historian would be likely to include. The second group contains less important information, which could either be included or left out. (It might be useful, for instance, to know who Arthur Lee and Edward Bancroft were, but not essential.) The last group contains information that appears either too detailed or else unnecessary. Deane may have visited John Trumbull, but then, he surely visited other people as well—why include any of that? Knowing that the *Boston Packet* was delayed by a storm reveals little about Silas Deane. And readers will assume without being told that Deane rose in the morning, put on his clothes, and had breakfast.

But if common sense helps to select evidence, it also produces a good deal of pedestrian history. The fact is, the straightforward account of Silas Deane we have just presented has actually managed to miss the most fascinating parts of the story.

Fortunately, one enterprising historian named Julian Boyd was not satisfied with the traditional account of the matter. He examined the known facts of Deane's career and put them together in ways common sense had not suggested. Take, for example, two items on our list: (1) Deane was down on his luck and left in desperation for America; and (2) he visited John Trumbull. One fact is from the "important" items on the list and the other from items that seem incidental. How do they fit together?

To answer that, we have to know the source of information about the visit to Trumbull's, which *is* the letter from John Cutting informing Jefferson of Deane's rumored suicide.

> A subscription had been made here chiefly by Americans to defray the expense of getting [Deane] out of this country. . . . Dr. Bancroft with great humanity and equal discretion undertook the management of the *man* and his *business*. Accordingly his passage was engaged, comfortable cloaths and stores for his voyage were laid in, and apparently without much reluctance he embarked. . . . I happen'd to see him a few days since at the lodging of Mr. Trumbull and thought I had never seen him look-better.

We are now in a better position to see how our two items fit together. And as Julian Boyd has pointed out, they don't fit. According to the first, Deane was depressed, dejected, almost starving. According to the second, he had "never looked better." An alert historian begins to get nervous when he sees contradictions like that, so he hunts around a little more. And finds, among the collection of papers published by the Connecticut and New York historical societies, that Deane had been writing letters of his own.

One went to his brother-in-law in America, who had agreed to help pay Deane's transportation over and to receive him when he arrived—something that nobody had been willing to do for years. Other letters reveal that Deane had plans for what he would do when he finally returned home. He had seen models in England of the new steam engines, which he hoped might operate gristmills in America. He had talked to friends about getting a canal built from Lake Champlain in New York to the St. Lawrence River, in order to promote trade. These were not offhand dreams. As early as 1785, Deane had been at work drumming up support for his canal project. He had even laboriously calculated the cost of the canal's construction ("Suppose a labourer to dig and remove six feet deep and eight feet square in one day. . . . 2,933 days of labour will dig one mile in length, twenty feet wide and eight feet deep. . . . ") Obviously, Deane looked forward to a promising future.

Lastly, Deane appeared to believe that the controversy surrounding his French mission had finally abated. As he wrote an American friend,

> It is now almost ten years since I have solicited for an impartial inquiry [into the dispute over my conduct]. . . . that justice might be done to my fortune and my character. . . . You can sufficiently imagine, without my attempting to describe, what I must have suffered on every account during so long a period of anxiety and distress. I hope that it is now drawing to a close.

Other letters went to George Washington and John Jay, reiterating Deane's innocence.

All this makes the two items on our list even more puzzling. If Deane was depressed and discouraged, why was he so enthusiastic about coming back to build canals and gristmills? If he really believed that his time of "anxiety and distress" was "drawing to a close," why did he commit suicide? Of course, Deane might have been subject to dramatic shifts in mood. Perhaps hope for the future alternated with despair about his chances for success. Perhaps a sudden fit of depression caused him to take his life.

But another piece of "unimportant" information, way down on our third list, makes this hypothesis difficult to accept. After Deane's ship left London, it was delayed offshore for more than a week. Suppose Deane did decide to commit suicide by taking an overdose of laudanum. Where did he get the drug? Surely not by walking up to the ship's surgeon and asking for it. He must have purchased it in London, before he left. Yet he remained on shipboard for more than a week. If Deane bought the laudanum during a temporary "fit" of depression, why did he wait a week before taking it? And if his depression was not just a sudden fit, how do we explain the optimistic letters to America?

This close look at three apparently unrelated facts indicates that perhaps Deane's story has more to it than meets the eye. It would be well, then, to reserve judgment about our first reconstruction of Silas Deane's career, and try to find as much information about the man as possible—regardless of whether it seems relevant at first. That means investigating not only Deane himself but also his friends and associates, like Ben Franklin, Arthur Lee, and Edward

Bancroft. Since it is impossible in this prologue to look closely at all of Deane's acquaintances, for purpose of example we will take only one: his friend Bancroft.

Silas Deane's Friend

Edward Bancroft was born in Westfield, Massachusetts, where his stepfather presided over a respectable tavern, the *Bunch of Grapes*. Bancroft was a clever fellow, and his father soon apprenticed him to a physician. Like many boys before him, Edward did not fancy his position and so ran away to sea. Unlike many boys, he managed to make the most of his situation. His ship landed in the Barbadoes, and there Bancroft signed on as the surgeon for a plantation in Surinam. The plantation owner, Paul Wentworth, liked the young man and let him use his private library for study. In addition, Bancroft met another doctor who taught him much about the area's exotic tropical plants and animals. When Bancroft returned to New England in 1766 and continued on to London the following year, he knew enough about Surinam's wildlife to publish a book entitled *An Essay on the Natural History of Guiana in South America*. It was well received by knowledgeable scholars and among other things, established that an electric eel's shock was caused by electricity, a fact not previously recognized.

A young American bright enough to publish a book at age twenty-five and to experiment with electric eels attracted the attention of another electrical experimenter then in London, Ben Franklin. Franklin befriended Bancroft and introduced him to many influential colleagues, not only learned philosophers but also the politicians with whom Franklin worked as colonial agent for Pennsylvania. A second trip to Surinam produced more research on plants used in making color dyes; research so successful that Bancroft soon found himself elected to the prestigious Royal Society of Medicine. At the same time, Franklin led Bancroft into the political arena, both public and private. On the public side, Bancroft published a favorable review of Thomas Jefferson's pamphlet, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America;* privately, he joined Franklin and other investors in an attempt to gain a charter for land along the banks of the Ohio River.

Up to this point it has been possible to sketch Bancroft's career without once mentioning the name of Silas Deane. Common sense would suggest that the information about Bancroft's early travels, his scientific studies, his friends in Surinam, tell us little about Deane, and that the story ought to begin with a certain letter Bancroft received from Deane in June 1776. (Common sense is again wrong, but we must wait a little to discover why.)

The letter, which came to Bancroft in 1776, informed him that his old friend Silas Deane was coming to France as a merchant engaged in private business. Would Bancroft be interested in crossing over from England to meet Deane at Calais to catch up on news for old time's sake? An invitation like that would very likely have attracted Bancroft's curiosity. He did know Deane, who had been his meeting? Bancroft may have guessed the rest, or he may have known it from other contacts; in any case, he wrote his "old friend" that he would make all possible haste for Calais.

The truth of the matter, as we know, was that Deane had come to France to secure military supplies for the colonies. Franklin, who was back in Philadelphia, had suggested to Congress's Committee of Secret Correspondence that Deane contact Bancroft as a good source of information about British war plans. Bancroft could easily continue his friendship with English officials, because he did not have the reputation of being a hot-headed American patriot. So Deane met Bancroft at Calais in July and the two concluded their arrangements. Bancroft would be Deane's "private secretary" when needed in Paris and a spy for the Americans when in England.

It turned out that Deane's arrangement worked well—perhaps a little too well. Legally, Deane was permitted to collect a commission on all the supplies he purchased for Congress, but he went beyond that. He and Bancroft used their official connections in France to conduct a highly profitable private trade of their own. Deane, for instance, sometimes sent ships from France without declaring whether they were loaded with private or public goods. Then if the ships arrived safely, he would declare that the cargo was private, his own. But if the English navy captured the goods on the high seas, he labeled it government merchandise and the public absorbed the loss.

Deane used Bancroft to take advantage of his official position in other ways. Both men speculated in the London insurance markets, which were the eighteenth-century equivalent of gambling parlors. Anyone who wished could take out "insurance" against a particular event which might happen in the future. An insurer, for example, might quote odds on the chances of France going to war with England within the year. The insured would pay whatever premium he wished, say £1,000, and if France did go to war, and the odds had been five-to-one against it, the insured would receive £5,000. Wagers were made on almost any public event: which armies would win which battles, which politicians would fall from power, and even on whether a particular lord would die before the year was out.

Obviously, someone who had access to inside information—someone who knew in advance, for instance, that France was going to war with England—could win a fortune. That was exactly what Bancroft and Deane decided to do. Deane was in charge of concluding the French alliance, and he knew that if he succeeded Britain would be forced to declare war on France. Bancroft hurried across to London as soon as the treaty had been concluded and took out the proper insurance before the news went public. The profits shared by the two men from this and other similar ventures amounted to approximately £10,000. Like most gamblers, however, Deane also lost wagers. In the end, he netted little for his troubles.

Historians know these facts because they now have access to the papers of Deane, Bancroft, and others. Acquaintances of the two men lacked this advantage, but they suspected shady dealings anyway. Arthur Lee publicly accused

that Lee was doing the same thing.) And the moralistic John Adams found Bancroft's conduct distasteful. Bancroft, according to Adams, was

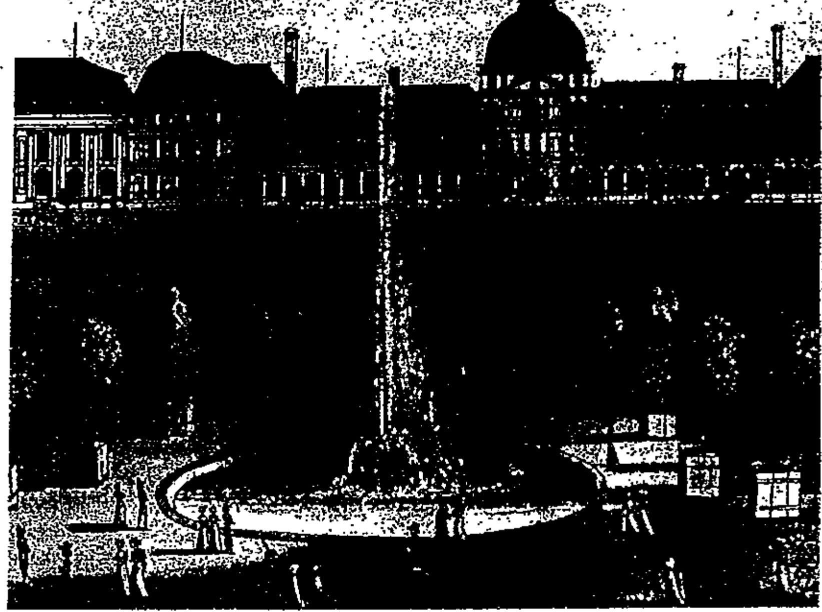
> a meddler in stocks as well as reviews, and frequently went into the alley, and into the deepest and darkest retirements and recesses of the brokers and jobbers . . . and found amusement as well, perhaps, as profit, by listening to all the news and anecdotes, true or false, that were there whispered or more boldly pronounced. . . . This man had with him in France, a woman with whom he lives, and who by the French was called La Femme de Monsieur Bancroft. At tables he would season his foods with such enormous quantities of cayenne pepper which assisted by generous burgundy would set his tongue a running in the most licentious way both at table and after dinner. . . .

Yet for all Bancroft's dubious habits, and for all the suspicions of men like Lee and Adams, there was one thing that almost no one at the time suspected, and that not even historians discovered until the records of certain British officials were opened to the public more than a century later. Edward Bancroft was a double agent.

At the end of July 1776, after he had arranged to be Deane's secretary, Bancroft returned to England and met with Paul Wentworth, his friend from Surinam, who was then working in London for Britain's intelligence organization. Immediately Wentworth realized how valuable Bancroft would be as a spy and introduced him to two secretaries of state. They in turn persuaded Bancroft to submit reports on the American negotiations in France. For his services, he received a lifetime pension of £200 a year—a figure the British were only too happy to pay for such good information. So quick was Bancroft's reporting that the secretaries of state knew about the American mission to France even before the United States Congress could confirm that Deane had arrived safely!

Eventually, Bancroft discovered that he could pass his information directly to the British ambassador at the French court. To do so, he wrote innocent letters on the subject of "gallantry" and signed them "B. Edwards." On the same paper would go another note written in invisible ink, to appear only when the letter was dipped in a special developer held by Lord Stormont, the British ambassador. Bancroft left his letters every Tuesday morning in a sealed bottle in a hole near the trunk of a tree on the south terrace of the Tuileries, the royal palace. Lord Stormont's secretary would put any return information near another tree on the same terrace. With this system in operation Stormont could receive intelligence without having to wait for it to filter back from England.

Did any Americans suspect Bancroft of double dealing? Arthur Lee once claimed he had evidence to charge Bancroft with treason, but he never produced it. In any case, Lee had a reputation for suspecting everybody of everything. Franklin, for his part, shared lodgings with Deane and Bancroft during their stays in Paris. He had reason to guess that someone close to the American mission was leaking secrets—especially when Lord Stormont and the British newspapers made embarrassingly accurate accusations about French aid. The French wished to keep their assistance secret in order to avoid war with England



***The Tuileries**, much as it appeared when Bancroft and Lord Stormont used the south terrace as a drop for their secret correspondence. The royal palace overlooks a magnificent formal garden which, as a modern observer has noted, "seems so large, so full of surprising hidden corners and unexpected stairways, that its strict ground plan—sixteen carefully spaced and shaped gardens of trees, separated by arrow-straight walks—is not immediately discernable."*

France fighting, so he did little to stop the leaks. "If I was sure," he remarked, "that my *valet de place* was a spy, as he probably is, I think I should not discharge him for that, if in other respects I liked him." So the French would tell Franklin he *really* ought to guard his papers more closely, and Franklin would say yes, yes, he really would have to do something about that; and the secrets continued to leak. Perhaps Franklin suspected Deane and Bancroft of playing the London insurance markets, but there is no evidence that he knew Bancroft was a double agent.

What about Deane, who was closer to Bancroft than anyone else? We have no proof that he shared the double agent's secret, but his alliance with Bancroft in other intrigues tells against him. Furthermore, one published leak pointed to

tigate. As Julian Boyd has pointed out, Deane immediately directed suspicion toward a man he knew perfectly well was not a spy. We can only conclude he did so to help throw suspicion away from Bancroft. Very likely, if Bancroft was willing to help Deane play his games with the London insurers, Deane was willing to assist Bancroft in his game with British intelligence.

Of the two, Bancroft seems to have made out better. While Deane suffered reproach and exile for his conduct, Bancroft returned to England still respected by both the Americans and the British. Not that he had been without narrow escapes. Some of the British ministry (the king especially) did not trust him, and he once came close to being hung for treason when his superiors rightly suspected that he had associated with John the Painter, an unbalanced fanatic who tried to set England's navy ablaze. But Bancroft left for Paris at the first opportunity, waited until the storm blew over, and returned to London at the end of the war with his lifetime pension raised to £1,000 a year. At the time of Deane's death, he was doing more of his scientific experiments, in hopes that Parliament would grant him a profitable monopoly on a new process for making dyes.

Deane's Death: A Second Look

So we finally arrive, the long way around, back where the story began: September 1789 and Deane's death. But now we have at hand a much larger store of information out of which to construct a narrative. Since writing history involves the acts of analyzing and selecting, let us review the results of our investigation.

We know that Deane was indeed engaged in dubious private ventures; ventures Congress would have condemned as unethical. We also have reason to suspect that Deane knew Bancroft was a spy for the British. Combining that evidence with what we already know about Deane's death, we might theorize that Deane committed suicide because, underneath all his claims to innocence, he knew he was guilty as Congress charged. The additional evidence, in other words, reveals a possible new motive for Deane's suicide.

Yet this theory presents definite problems. In the first place, Deane never admitted any wrongdoing to anyone—not in all the letters he wrote, not in any of his surviving papers. That does not mean he was innocent, nor even that he believed himself innocent. But often it is easier for a person to lie to himself than to his friends. Perhaps Deane actually convinced himself that he was blameless; that he had a right to make a little extra money from his influential position; that he did no more than anyone would in his situation. Certainly his personal papers point to that conclusion. And if Deane believed himself innocent—correctly or not—would he have any obvious motive for suicide? Furthermore, the theory does not explain the puzzle that started this investigation. If Deane felt guilty enough about his conduct to commit suicide, why did that guilt increase ten years after the fact? If he did feel suddenly guilty, why wait a week aboard ship before taking the fatal dose of laudanum? For that matter, why

No, things still do not set quite right, so we must question the theory. What proof do we have that Deane committed suicide? Rumors about London. Tom Paine heard it from Cutting, the merchant. And Cutting reports in his letter to Jefferson that Deane's suicide was "the suspicion of Dr. Bancroft." How do we know the circumstances of Deane's death? The captain made a report, but for some reason it was not preserved. The one account that did survive was written by Bancroft, at the request of a friend. Then there were the anonymous obituaries in the newspapers. Who wrote them? Very likely Bancroft composed at least one; certainly, he was known as Silas Deane's closest friend and would have been consulted by any interested parties. There are a lot of strings here, which, when pulled hard enough, all run back to the affable Dr. Bancroft. What do we know about *his* situation in 1789?

We know Bancroft is dependent upon a pension of £1,000 a year, given him for his faithful service as a British spy. We know he is hoping Parliament will grant him a monopoly for making color dyes. Suddenly his old associate Deane, who has been leading a dissolute life in London, decides to return to America, vindicate himself to his former friends, and start a new life. Put yourself in Bancroft's place. Would you be just a little nervous about that idea? Here is a man down on his luck, now picking up and going to America to clear his reputation. What would Deane do to clear it? Tell everything he knew about his life in Paris? Submit his record books to Congress, as he had been asked to do so many years before? If Deane knew Bancroft was a double agent, would he say so? And if Deane's records mentioned the affair of John the Painter (as indeed they did), what would happen if knowledge of Bancroft's role in the plot reached England? Ten years earlier, Bancroft would have been hung. True, memories had faded, but even if he were spared death, would Parliament grant a monopoly on color dyes to a known traitor? Would Parliament continue the £1,000 pension? It was one thing to have Deane living in London, where Bancroft could watch him; it would be quite another to have him all the way across the Atlantic Ocean, ready to tell—who knows what?

Admit it: if you were Bancroft, wouldn't you be just a little nervous?

We are forced to consider, however reluctantly, that Deane was not expecting to die as he walked the deck of the *Boston Packet*. Yet if Bancroft did murder Deane, how? He was not aboard ship when death came and had not seen Deane for more than a week. That is a good alibi, but then, Bancroft was a clever man. We know (once again from the letters of John Cutting) that Bancroft was the person who "with great humanity and equal discretion undertook the management of the *man* and the *business*" of getting Deane ready to leave for America. Bancroft himself wrote Jefferson that he had been visiting Deane often "to assist him with advice, medicins, and money for his subsistence." If Deane were a laudanum addict, as Bancroft hinted to Cutting, might not the good doctor who helped with "medicins" also have procured the laudanum? And having done that, might he not easily slip some other deadly chemical into the mixture, knowing full well that Deane would not use it until he was on shipboard and safely off to America? That is only conjecture. We have no direct evidence to

But there is one other fact we do know for sure; and in light of our latest theory, it is an interesting one. Undeniably, Edward Bancroft was an expert on poisons.

He did not advertise that knowledge, of course; few people in London at the time of Deane's death would have been likely to remember the fact. But twenty years earlier, the historian may recall, Bancroft wrote a book on the natural history of Guiana. At that time, he not only investigated electric eels and color dyes, but also the poisons of the area, particularly curare (or "Woowara" as Bancroft called it). He investigated it so well, in fact, that when he returned to England he brought samples of curare with him which (he announced in the book) he had deposited with the publishers so that any gentleman of "unimpeachable" character might use the samples for scientific study.

Furthermore, Bancroft seemed to be a remarkably good observer not only of the poisons but also of those who used them. His book described in ample detail the natives' ability to prepare poisons

> which, given in the smallest quantities, produce a very slow but inevitable death, particularly a composition which resembles wheat-flour, which they sometimes use to revenge past injuries, that have been long neglected, and are thought forgotten. On these occasions they always feign an insensibility of the injury which they intend to revenge, and even repay it with services and acts of friendship, until they have destroyed all distrust and apprehension of danger in the destined victim of the vengeance. When this is effected, they meet at some festival, and engage him to drink with them, drinking first themselves to obviate suspicion, and afterwards secretly dropping the poison, ready concealed under their nails, which are usually long, into the drink.

Twenty years later Bancroft was busy at work with the color dyes he had brought back from Surinam. Had he, by any chance, also held onto any of those poisons?

Unless new evidence comes to light, we will probably never know for sure. Historians are generally forced to deal with probabilities, not certainties, and we leave you to draw your own conclusions about the death of Silas Deane.

What does seem certain is that whatever "really happened" to Deane 200 years ago cannot be determined today without the active participation of the

An excerpt from An Essay on the Natural History of Guiana in South America, *by*

historian. Being courier to the past is not enough. For better or worse, historians inescapably leave an imprint as they go about their business: asking interesting questions about apparently dull facts, seeing connections between subjects that had not seemed related before, shifting and rearranging evidence until it assumes a coherent pattern. The past is not history; only the raw material of it. How those raw materials come to be fashioned and shaped is the central concern of the rest of this book.

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EDUCATION

The Problem With History Classes

Single-perspective narratives do students a gross disservice.

MICHAEL CONWAY MARCH 16, 2015

WIKIMEDIA/THE ATLANTIC

Before the release of *Selma,* I wonder how many people ever reflected on President Lyndon B. Johnson's attitude toward the 1965 marches in Selma. I wonder if anybody thought that conventional wisdom afforded him either too much or too little credit for the Voting Rights Act. I imagine that Johnson's legacy was not on the average American's radar until *Selma* ripped it into the public consciousness.

The movie compelled many Americans to reconsider their perceptions of Johnson. The curators of his legacy lambasted the film for portraying the 35th president as a prickly antagonist to Martin Luther King Jr., asserting that the film unfairly reduces Johnson to an irascible politician who was forced by King into advancing the Voting Rights Act. Joseph A. Califano Jr., Johnson's top assistant for domestic affairs from 1965 to 1969, wrote in the *Washington Post* that Selma distorts these facts so considerably that the movie "should be ruled out this Christmas and during the ensuing awards seasons." *Selma* director Ava DuVernay fired back, tweeting that the "notion that Selma was LBJ's idea is jaw dropping."

How can subjects such as this remain dormant for long periods of time, only to be awakened by a critically acclaimed film? Califano is not the first, nor will he be the last, to mount a defense of a historical figure who is shortchanged by a movie. After the 2012 release of *Lincoln,* U.S. Representative Joe Courtney, a Democrat from Connecticut, wrote to Steven Spielberg to complain that the film erroneously

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Rob Wilson, a member of parliament, to call for a debate in the British House of Commons, claiming that its director, Phyllida Lloyd, painted an "intrusive and unfair" picture of the former prime minister.

RECOMMENDED READING

Who Should Decide How Students Learn About America's Past?

Homeroom: My Daughter Doesn't Use Social Media—But She's Being Cyberbullied

ABBY FREIREICH AND BRIAN PLATZER

Homeroom: My Kid's School Is Full of Cheats

ABBY FREIREICH AND BRIAN PLATZER

These partisans have not been hiding; they are only drawn into the public realm when fear is evoked. It is this same anxiety that's emerged in Oklahoma because of the new Advanced Placement U.S. History guidelines. In a later interview, Califano captured the root of that anxiety: "Many, many of our young people get their view of history from films and television," he said. "It's important for people who make movies that claim to be historically accurate to be accurate." When the established memory of figures and events from the past is challenged, both the defenders and opponents of that memory will fight to influence the young.

The passion and urgency with which these battles are fought reflect the misguided way history is taught in schools. Currently, most students learn history as a set narrative—a process that reinforces the mistaken idea that the past can be synthesized into a single, standardized chronicle of several hundred pages. This teaching pretends that there is a uniform collective story, which is akin to saying everyone remembers events the same. Yet, history is anything but agreeable. It is not a collection of facts deemed to be "official" by scholars on high. It is a collection of historians exchanging different, often conflicting analyses. And rather than vainly seeking to transcend the inevitable clash of memories, American students would be better served by descending into the bog of conflict and learning the many "histories" that compose the American national story.

Califano is explicitly worried that future Americans will remember Lyndon B. Johnson differently than he does. Oklahoma state Representative Dan Fisher, a Republican, appears worried that future Americans will have a different understanding of their country's past than he does, too. Fisher recently introduced a bill that would have defunded AP U.S. History in the state, claiming that the College Board, which runs the AP program, published a revised framework that harps on "what is bad about America" and fails to teach "American exceptionalism." (The controversial effort garnered a good deal of criticism, and

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Perhaps Fisher offers the nation an opportunity to divorce, once and for all, memory from history. History may be an attempt to memorialize and preserve the past, but it is not memory; memories can serve as primary sources, but they do not stand alone as history. A history is essentially a collection of memories, analyzed and reduced into meaningful conclusions—but that collection depends on the memories chosen.

Memories make for a risky foundation: As events recede further into the past, the facts are distorted or augmented by entirely new details—something the NBC news anchor Brian Williams learned to devastating effect. An individual who marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge probably remembers the events in Selma differently than someone who helped Johnson advance legislation in Washington. Both people construct unique memories while informing perfectly valid histories. Just as there is a plurality of memories, so, too, is there a plurality of histories.

Scholars who read a diverse set of historians who are all focused on the same specific period or event are engaging in historiography. I didn't encounter historiography until college, and it had the same effect on my opinion of textbooks that *The Jungle* had on consumers of pork. This approach exposes textbooks as nothing more than a compilation of histories that the authors deemed to be most relevant and useful.

In historiography, the barrier between historian and student is dropped, exposing a conflict-ridden landscape. A diplomatic historian approaches an event from the perspective of the most influential statesmen (who are most often white males), analyzing the context, motives, and consequences of their decisions. A cultural historian peels back the objects, sights, and sounds of a period to uncover humanity's underlying emotions and anxieties. A Marxist historian adopts the lens of class conflict to explain the progression of events. There are intellectual historians, social historians, and gender historians, among many others. Historians studying the same topic will draw different interpretations—sometimes radically so, depending on the sources they draw from. Fisher's bill captures high schools' inability to accept the absence of a single "history" and the co-existence of "histories."

In a recent analysis for *The Atlantic* about the controversies surrounding the AP framework and other history curricula, Jacoba Urist points out that history is "about explaining and interpreting past events analytically." If students are really to learn and master these analytical tools, then it is absolutely essential that they read a diverse set of historians and learn how brilliant men and women who are scrutinizing the same topic can reach different conclusions. Rather than constructing a curriculum based on the muddled consensus of boards, legislatures, and think tanks, schools should teach students history through historiography. The shortcomings of one historian become apparent after reading the work of another one on the list. Will every perspective be afforded its due? Probably not. But the students will be better equipped to recognize weaknesses in an argument and resist the allure of a simplified national narrative.

Although, as Urist notes, the AP course is "designed to teach students to think like

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aiming to allow educators flexibility in how to teach; it makes no reference to historiographical conflicts. Historiography was an epiphany for me because I had never before come face-to-face with how historians think and reason—how they construct an argument, what sources animate that approach, and how their position responds to other historians.

When I took AP U.S. History, I jumbled these diverse histories into one indistinct narrative. Although the test involved open-ended essay questions, I was taught that graders were looking for a firm thesis—forcing students to adopt a side. The AP test also, unsurprisingly, rewards students who cite a wealth of supporting details. By the time I took the test in 2009, I was a master at "checking boxes," weighing political factors equally against those involving socioeconomics and ensuring that previously neglected populations like women and ethnic minorities received their due. I did not know that I was pulling ideas from different historiographical traditions. I still subscribed to the idea of a prevailing national narrative and served as an unwitting sponsor of synthesis, oblivious to the academic battles that made such synthesis impossible.

Few examples illustrate the relevance of disputed memory like the controversies surrounding the erection of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. Maya Lin's winning design contrasted with the rest of the capital, its black granite—devoid of ornamentation, save the names of every fallen soldier—clinging close to the earth rather than soaring above it. The design prompted a wave of opposition. Tom Carhart, a Pentagon lawyer and Vietnam War veteran, called the proposed memorial a "black gash of shame." "Black walls, the universal color of sorrow and dishonor. Hidden in a hole, as if in shame," he argued, encapsulating the revulsion felt by many Vietnam vets. "Is this really how America would memorialize our offering?"

Like Califano on Johnson and Fisher on American exceptionalism, Carhart was distressed that the lasting national memory of the Vietnam War might be self-loathing. No doubt mindful of the American public's hostility to soldiers during the war, Carhart likely found the proposed monument threatening. It was ultimately constructed as designed with a few concessions: A flagpole was built atop the wall and a statue of three American soldiers was added next to it. The memories had collided—and they continued to collide.

Although there may be an inclination to seek to establish order where there is chaos, that urge must be resisted in teaching history. Public controversies over memory are hardly new. Students must be prepared to confront divisiveness, not conditioned to shoehorn agreement into situations where none is possible. Historiography is potentially freeing for the next generation of students. When conflict is accepted rather than resisted, it becomes possible for different conceptions of American history to co-exist. There is no longer a need to appoint a victor.

More importantly, the historiographical approach avoids pursuing truth for the sake of satisfying a national myth. Fisher's demand for a curriculum that covers "American exceptionalism," a term that often risks masking the horrors of

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government the world has ever seen; many of them also held fellow humans in bondage. This paradox is only a problem if the goal is to view the founding fathers as faultless, perfect individuals. If multiple histories are embraced, no one needs to fear that one history will be lost.

Lionization and demonization are best left to the heroes and villains of fairy tales. History is not indoctrination. It is a wrestling match. For too long, the emphasis has been on pinning the opponent. It is time to shift the focus to the struggle itself. Conflict does not necessarily demand a resolution. Disagreements among highly educated, well-informed people will continue. Why should history ignore this reality? There is no better way to use the past to inform the present than by accepting the impossibility of a definitive history—and by ensuring that current students are equipped to grapple with the contested memories in their midst.

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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

THE REVIEW

The Whitesplaining of History Is Over

By Priya Satia

MARCH 28, 2018

ISTOCK

hen the academy was the exclusive playground of white men, it produced the theories of race,

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Whome. In recent decades, women and people of color have been critical to producing new knowledge breaking down those long-dominant narratives. Sociological research confirms that greater diversity improves scholarship.

Yet the struggle to diversify the academy remains an uphill battle; institutional biases are deeply ingrained, and change evokes nostalgia for times past. Both of these obstacles were fully in evidence at a recent Applied History conference at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Although history is a discipline with a growing number of nonwhite faculty members, and a healthy percentage of female scholars — indeed, women constitute more than a third of the faculty in Stanford's own history department, across the bike lane from the Hoover Institution — the Hoover conference was made up of 30 white men (and one woman, who chaired a panel). These white men gathered to discuss the supposed fact that the "majority of academic historians have tended to shy away from questions of contemporary interest, especially to policy makers." "Previous generations were less shy of such questions," the conference website claimed.

Has the current generation of historians in fact abdicated its responsibility to consider questions of contemporary interest? Most historians would find this claim silly; history is always about questions of contemporary interest, always "applied." So how has the new, more diverse generation of historians produced work with policy implications?

The Harvard historian Caroline Elkins won a Pulitzer Prize in 2006 for fully exposing the violence of British decolonization in Kenya, puncturing longstanding myths about peaceful withdrawal. Her work has resulted in successful civil lawsuits against the British government by Kenyan survivors.

Catherine Hall of University College London chairs a group of historians assembling a database of British slave owners. In showing how slave ownership has skewed racial and class relations in Britain for centuries, their work opens up a range of international and domestic policy possibilities for righting historical wrongs.

The problem is not that historians are irrelevant, but that they cast a critical light on the political order.

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Stanford's first president, David Starr Jordan, was a key promoter of eugenicist theories of race. Now, Allyson Hobbs, an African-American historian at Stanford, has written an award-winning history of racial passing showing both the constructed nature of racial identity and the arbitrary nature of racial laws — with implications for policies about social identification and race today.

Another Stanford historian, Ana Raquel Minian, who grew up in Mexico, has utterly punctured myths about welfare-scrounging Mexican immigration to the United States in the 20th century — a burning political issue with pressing policy implications right now, which Professor Minian has discussed in various public venues.

RECOMMENDED READING

THE REVIEW
'If We Don't Adapt, We Will Wither Away'

STATE POLITICS
The Academic Concept Conservative Lawmakers Love to Hate

Also at Stanford, the eminent historian of science and colonialism Londa Schiebinger has led international governmental efforts to address the fact that medical treatments and other technologies developed without attention to differing effects on men and women have historically posed enormous health risks—and market costs.

These are just a handful of examples from my immediate field and home department. All over the academy, historians are producing work relevant to policy and easily accessible to policy makers. Many work hard to share their work with the public.

The problem is not that historians don't produce policy-relevant research but that their work tends to cast a critical light on the current political order, and policy makers therefore often willfully ignore it.

Many historians have shown that the Second Amendment was about the right to arms for military, not civilian, purposes, but policy makers like Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida ignore that research. Indeed, a group of distinguished historians including Lois Schwoerer and Jack Rakove filed an amicus brief on the Second Amendment

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The resulting decision held up a dangerously expansive — and historically inaccurate — understanding of the amendment.

Historians also warned us about the dangers of the Iraq War. In particular, the Middle East scholar Juan Cole, from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, acquired an enormous following through his blog by laying out the case against the war. But such discouraging views were not heeded by an administration so bent on war that it not only ignored history but faked it — cooking up a fable of weapons of mass destruction.

Given the proclivities of policy makers, the historian's real role is, in fact, to speak to the public, so that people may exert pressure on their elected representatives.

This idea is itself born of the imperial past. When a British missionary in India named Edward Thompson joined British forces in an earlier invasion of Iraq — as an army chaplain during World War I — the experience disillusioned him profoundly. He sought to atone by correcting the British public's understanding of the colonial enterprise. So, this white man wrote a history of the massive Indian Rebellion of 1857, which Britons had long portrayed as a diabolical attack on an entirely benevolent British presence. His account acknowledged the real political protest the rebels expressed and the British violence that provoked their own. It was 1925, and Thompson's book became part of public debate about the increasingly powerful Indian nationalist movement.

Thompson developed a passionate faith in the historian's craft as the most effective means of truth-telling against the state. His son, the historian and political activist E.P. Thompson, grew up "expecting governments to be mendacious and imperialist and expecting that one's stance ought to be hostile to government." He looked to the historic libertarian tradition of working-class people for ways to check the excesses of the "secret state" in the Cold War era that shaped his life. He realized that modern democracy, simply by virtue of its insistent demand for openness, tends to foster an almost paranoid official secrecy and that the historian is the archetype of the active citizen. Thus emerged our 20th-century understanding of the historian as a *critic* of government.

Of course, there are many other sources of the idea of the historian-as-critic; I offer this "great white man" version ironically. E.P. himself pushed back against the "Great Man" version of

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professor emerita at the Institute for Advanced Study, pointed out the gendered nature of his work, the way working-class men stood in for both men and women. Another field was born. And so on, inclusivity breeding inclusivity, by degrees, in fits and starts.

To be sure, historians have, in some ways, ceded our claim to policy expertise to other kinds of scholars: economists, political scientists, sociologists. This is partly the result of new dogmas equating expertise and quantitative analysis. It is also part of an intrinsically antihistorical, universalist approach to understanding political change, which imagines that what worked in Country A will work in Country B regardless of history and context — that, for instance, the forces that drove the industrial revolution in 18th-century Britain will do the same in a different place centuries later, or that, since the defeat of Hitler gave rise to a liberal democracy in West Germany, removal of dictators will always and necessarily do so. Recent history is littered with evidence of the folly of such logic.

Historical interpretation is crucial to contemporary issues like gun control, immigration, and the "war on terror." Historians must continue to assert their expertise on such matters against the monopolistic claims of social scientists — and against those who would prefer a cloistered group of white men to remonopolize that role.

Priya Satia is a professor of history at Stanford University and the author of Empire of Guns: The Violent Making of the Industrial Revolution *(Penguin, 2018).*

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OPINION

Priya Satia

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