

The ferocious strains in our national past

American Violence

A Documentary History.
Edited by Richard Hofstadter
and Michael Wallace.

478 pp. New York:
Alfred A. Knopf. \$10.

By ARTHUR
SCHLESINGER JR.

The present not seldom requires us to take a fresh look at the past; and the turbulence of American society over the last several years has unquestionably forced historians to confront points about the American experience long neglected in our written history and rarely acknowledged in our national self-image. The problem of conflict, indeed, was studiously minimized during the "consensus history" enthusiasm of the nineteen-fifties; and violence hardly existed as an academic subject at all until H. R. Graham and T. R. Gurr put together their report on "Historical and Comparative Perspectives" for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in 1969. Now Richard Hofstadter, professor of American history at Columbia, in collaboration with one of his students, Michael Wallace, has collected an invaluable series of documents illustrating varieties of American violence.

Though the documents are intelligently selected and many of them are hard to come by, the particular interest of this work lies in Mr. Hofstadter's long introductory essay entitled "Reflections on Violence in the United States." This brilliant piece contains all the qualities that have made Richard Hofstadter the most distinguished American historian of his generation — the speculative richness of mind, the precision and subtlety of analysis, the wit and grace of style, the range of methodological weaponry brought to bear on a tangled front of fact, the equipoise, so delicately and fruitfully maintained, between the felt pressures of the present and the professional standards of the historian.

"The rediscovery of our violence," Mr. Hofstadter begins, "will undoubtedly be one of the most important intellectual

legacies of the 1960's." He points out how little we really know about violence in America and outlines a valuable agenda for future scholarship in the field. But, in his concern with contemporary disorders, Mr. Hofstadter does not succumb to current fashions in self-accusation; "The United States, even with its considerable record of violence, appears not as some mutant monster among the peoples of the world but rather as a full-fledged and somewhat boisterous member of the fellowship of human frailty."

All the violence ever committed on American soil, he reminds the New Left, "could be tucked away in a small corner" amid the crimes of Stalin or Hitler. He finds our habits of violence less striking than our ability, in face of these habits, to persuade ourselves that we are a marvelously well-behaved and law-abiding nation. Our addiction to violence, in short, has damaged neither our psychological self-esteem nor, save for the Civil War, our political continuity.

It is this phenomenon which especially fascinates Mr. Hofstadter — the coexistence in the United States of near-Latin-American levels of civil violence with near-Scandinavian levels of political stability. One reason for this, he suggests, is that American violence has ordinarily taken the form of action by one group of citizens against another group rather than of insurrectionary challenges against the legitimacy of the state. Moreover, "most" American violence "has been initiated with a 'conservative' bias" — unleashed by "the top dogs or the middle dogs" against ethnic or religious or ideological minorities. Indeed, his conclusion is that "ethnic, religious, and racial mixture—above all the last of these—are the fundamental determinants of American violence."

Or at least this has been true of the violence of the past. Mr. Hofstadter perceives significant differences in our contemporary violence, particularly the "rising mystique of violence on the left." He says little about the causes of this change except to suggest that ours "is an age that cannot wait" and that the young, in their "robust political romanticism," are more interested in self-expression than in persuasion.

The cult of the deed seems to Mr. Hofstadter entirely self-defeating: "the new prophets of violence are almost certain to become its chief victims if it becomes general and uncontrolled." While limited and lo-

calized violence, he concedes, can be effective in calling attention to the reality of grievances, "most of the social reforms in American history," he adds, "have been brought about without violence, or with only a marginal and inessential use of it, by reformers who were prepared to carry on a long-term campaign of education and propaganda."

Violence can explode in such a diversity of forms that its classification poses difficulties. The editors of this work were confessedly arbitrary in picking their categories; and their anthology of violence is arranged in eight parts — political; economic; racial; religious and ethnic; anti-radical and police; personal; assassination and political terrorism; and vigilantism. There are some surprising omissions — the Dorr War in Rhode Island, for example, the Anti-Rent War along the Hudson, the Green Corn Rebellion in Oklahoma, the Molly Maguires of the Pennsylvania coal fields (cursorily dismissed in the introduction as "Molly McGuires") and, in our own day, the Weathermen, the Black Panthers and the Minute Men. Still, the choice is wide and imaginative; and the Americans who read this book will emerge with a chastened sense of the more ferocious strains in the national past.

One of Mr. Hofstadter's great strengths as a historian is his refusal ever to become the prisoner of theory, even his own. His mind has always been unusually sensitive to new ideas and new evidence; and it is appropriate that the man whose elucidation of the "common climate of American opinion" in "The American Political Tradition" (1948) helped inaugurate the vogue for consensus history should now direct attention to the part violence has played in shaping American development. One also notes here an important shift in judgment from "Anti-intellectualism in American Life" (1963). There he argued that "the decline of the gentleman" and the rise of democracy and the common man were the chief sources of intolerance in American history.

In "American Violence" he repeatedly—and, I think, more correctly—emphasizes the primary role in repression of those who already have "position and power." These reconsiderations are characteristic of the openness of mind and heart that has made Richard Hofstadter so influential a teacher of American history and so luminous and exciting a guide to the American experience. ■