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## PREDECESSORS

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# William F. Marina as Teacher and Historian

## *Some Early Impressions*

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JOSEPH R. STROMBERG

### A Historian in a Time of Troubles

When I set off for Florida Atlantic University (FAU) at Boca Raton in late August 1968, it was a time of divisive political and social issues—a systemic crisis of legitimacy—symbolized by the Vietnam War, the civil rights revolution, the New Left, Students for a Democratic Society, the counterculture, and much else. It was, in other words, the '60s. FAU (informally known to its first few classes as “Find Another University”) was a new school, not fully formed, although showing some signs of wishing to settle into the bureaucratic Cold War liberal mode of Clark Kerr’s “multiversity.” Its early lack of rigid form made the place interesting for a while. Unimpressed by the behaviorist political scientists with whom I had spoken, I settled on history as a major. Once in classes, I found Dr. William F. Marina by far the most interesting teacher.

As we gradually learned, Bill was local—a native of Miami who had earned his B.A. at the University of Miami. His Ph.D. (just completed) was in American studies at the University of Denver (1968). He had taught at the University of Texas at Arlington from 1962 to 1964 before coming to FAU, where he remained until his retirement in 2003. While teaching in Texas, he had witnessed the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. For many years, Bill gave an occasional seminar on

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historical method that centered on the Kennedy assassination as an historical problem. (On this matter, Bill was never a revisionist.)

Bill's dissertation, "Opponents of Empire: An Interpretation of American Anti-Imperialism, 1898–1921," was based on archival research in the papers of the Anti-Imperialist League and dealt with the Antis' limitations as well as their insights and strengths. Had it been published, the dissertation would have been a worthy addition to the historical literature on turn-of-the-twentieth-century American empire building as well as a useful corrective to such contemporary treatments as Robert L. Beisner's *Twelve Against Empire* (1968) and E. Berkeley Tompkins's *Anti-Imperialism in the United States: The Great Debate, 1890–1920* (1970).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it still ought to be published.

## Left and Right

As of the late 1960s, Bill was generally committed to the interpretive framework provided by the New Left (Wisconsin school) of American diplomatic history and opposed the Cold War as a front for American empire. At this time, he seemed to question private ownership of large-scale means of production. Given such views, certain Cold War liberals on the faculty tried to get him fired. Interestingly, Bill was capable of reaching across the political spectrum to the John Birchers, for example, or indeed to anyone who might see that empire was the main issue confronting Americans in Vietnam and elsewhere. He reminded the local Birchers of their own links to the right-wing anti-imperial critique of Gareth Garrett, whose little book on empire, *The People's Pottage* ([1953] 1965), the Birch Society kept in print.

In class, we found that this New Leftist had some surprisingly conservative tendencies. The names "Oswald Spengler," "Jacob Burckhardt," and "Robert Nisbet" came up fairly often. Bill appreciated Spengler's ([1926] 1979/1980) insights into comparative history and differing world outlooks (*weltanschauungen*), obscured though they were by Spengler's Prussian bombast. And Bill expressed great interest in a reworking of natural law, perhaps on the basis of modern biology. Here he recommended *Robots, Men, and Minds* (1967) by general systems theorist Ludwig von Bertalanffy as well as the work of Gandhian philosopher Raghavan Iyer (1979). (This reworking of natural law was part of a trend away from Cold War liberal reliance on Big Science and, more remotely, away from John Dewey's notion of an evolving truth periodically renewed by two processes: democracy and science.) With Bill, there was a touch of elite theory as well, centering on his long-running dialogue with his friend Nathaniel Weyl, former Communist and Cold War conservative (who eventually mellowed enough to support the nuclear freeze proposal of the early 1980s). Between Bill's reliance on the writings of William Appleman Williams ("dean" of the Wisconsin

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1. Marina's dissertation is not mentioned in Robert L. Beisner and Kurt Hanson's two-volume collected work *American Foreign Relations since 1600: A Guide to the Literature* (2003).

school) and insurgent sociologist C. Wright Mills and his willingness nonetheless to question certain left-wing assumptions, what we were seeing was an emergent Left/Right synthesis similar to what Norman Mailer had already begun to call “Left conservatism” in 1968.

At the podium, Bill could stick to the assigned readings but often did not. His classroom method consisted of what looked at first like very creative free association—an apparently formless presentation punctuated by Socratic questions. Behind the facade of stream of historical consciousness, however, was an organized historical mind, as those of us who kept up soon realized. In his particular areas, Bill was a walking bibliography. “Oh, that’s on page 51 of So-and-So,” he would say. Students thought he was showing off, but he simply had a good memory for sources he frequently consulted. He could encourage students to focus on the heart of an historical problem—to ask the right questions—and direct them to the most useful sources.

### Empire and Synthesis

In classes and seminars, Bill had us reading Williams (*The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* [1962]) and *The Contours of American History* [(1961) 1966]), Mills ([1959] 1970), Gabriel Kolko (1963, 1965), and Barrington Moore Jr. (1966)—so far a tribe of writers chiefly influenced by Marx—but also Page Smith (1964), Walter Prescott Webb (1938), and Henry Adams. Sometimes we read an “Establishment” work such as Foster Rhea Dulles’s *America’s Rise to World Power* (1954), which functioned as a kind of straw man. Bill’s minor in Chinese civilization served him well as a basis of contrast and comparison with ideas, structures, and events elsewhere. Webb’s work on the American frontier and *The Great Frontier* (1952) underscored the continuity of American expansion—something that Williams also stressed. At the level of ideas, the readings revealed the continuity between nineteenth-century landed expansion and early-twentieth-century Open Door imperialism (Beard and Smith 1934), as partly bridged by the Turner thesis (1893). We came out of our classes fairly well informed about the place of the brothers Brooks and Henry Adams in the history of American letters, about the relation between the work of Charles A. Beard and Williams, and about many other useful things.

The Kolko readings led to an amusing incident involving William F. Buckley Jr., who spoke at Miami Dade Community College sometime in 1969. Some of us drove down to see the New Right guru. Buckley had gone on a bit about the evils of Progressive Era regulatory statism, and during the Q&A one of Bill’s students posed a question based on Kolko’s thesis that big business had been a major force favoring regulation in those years. Buckley seemed neither interested nor amused.

The texts for Bill’s graduate seminar on historical method in 1971 were Nisbet’s *Social Change and History* (1969), Mills’s *Sociological Imagination* ([1959] 1970), and Ludwig von Mises’s *Theory and History* (1958)—certainly an unexpected combination.

The central themes of Bill's classes and seminars were empire, centralization, corporatism (the dark side of American reform), frontier processes, and expansion: a framework for history as the study of organized power over time. Bill had an interesting analysis of the links between radical egalitarianism, state power, and empire. He was firmly convinced of the close relation between history and sociology done properly.

The main theme was always *empire*, taken in two senses: first, as powerful, centralized, and irresponsible government at home (empire) and, second, as use of that government to impose direct or indirect rule on other peoples and states abroad (imperialism). The costs of empire and the feedback loop between empire's domestic and foreign aspects were always in view. This twofold definition had good liberal—and especially republican—antecedents and could be found in the writings of many American Revolutionists and as late as the work of Alexander H. Stephens (1868/1870). To this classically American liberal-republican discussion, Bill brought an important dimension: an Iberian, Cuban, and Latin American perspective. This view gave his anti-imperialism a definite edge and a genuinely internationalist aspect. His frequent praise for Miami congressman Dante Fascell's personal diplomacy grew out of a conviction that the Cold War State Department, left to its own devices, could never improve U.S. relations with Latin America (see Marina 1996).

### Libertarianism Lightly Worn

As a self-defined "libertarian conservative" of the school of *National Review's* Frank Meyer, I was ready for much of this teaching. All I needed to do was to quit believing in the Cold War. Williams and the other historians I was now reading provided the cure. Other straws in the wind led me to the work of Murray Rothbard, in particular *Man, Economy, and State* (1962). This newest gospel appeared to solve all the problems of theory and history and to make certain right-wing insights—those that still seemed valid to me—"fit" with their New Left counterparts. Armed with this prematurely complete outlook, I pushed Rothbard's writings on Bill, and he obligingly read them and even reread Mises, whom he had read earlier and rejected. (Another student, John Patton, just back from Vietnam, played a role in this ideological ferment.) Although I can't take all the credit (or blame), there was a convergence, and Bill identified thereafter with the broader libertarian movement without ever giving up his early concerns with empire, corporate power, and so forth. (Only a few years ago, he was praising the anticorporate writings of David C. Kortén [2001].) One result of this convergence was my M.A. thesis (1971) on the Old Right critics of the Cold War, which Bill directed.

There was always some distance between Bill and various inner libertarian cadres, who found him too free form and unpredictable. He was wary of the strict Rothbardians, and they were wary of him. I well remember Bill, standing on the sidelines at a very early Libertarian Scholars Conference, around 1972 in New York, muttering darkly, "These people want power." He had not begun in economics, after all, nor did he bring history to bear as a mere source of confirming illustration in aid of

economic theory. Perhaps as historian David Beito has said, Bill is “best described as a decentralist” (2009). He was not a strict party man, despite some years spent with the Florida Libertarian Party. Further, his historical commitments puzzled some people. I remember Rothbard’s grumbling at another conference in the later 1970s, “Why’s Marina always going on about China?” The answer of course was that for comparative historical sociology a detailed knowledge of Chinese history was perhaps more useful than repeated study of Karl Wittfogel’s rather flawed book *Oriental Despotism* (1957).

## Writings

Bill’s writings were many and varied. For my money, his best work includes “Turner, the Safety Valve, and Social Revolution” (1966); *American Statesmen on Slavery and the Negro* (1971), written with Nathaniel Weyl; “The ‘E’ Factors in History” (1974); “Surviving in the Interstices” (1975); “The American Revolution and the Minority Myth” (1976);<sup>2</sup> “Egalitarianism and Empire” (1979); and “The Truths of the Defeated: Alexander H. Stephens’s Reflections on the Course of the American Republic” (Marina and Stromberg 1984).<sup>3</sup> Two later pieces, “The Dutch-American Guerrillas in the American Revolution” (1985a) and “Weapons, Technology, and Legitimacy: The Second Amendment in Global Perspective” (1985b), applied insights from republican theory and guerrilla warfare to Second Amendment questions.

I have saved the best for last. The two essays just named grew out of Bill’s research into ideological and military-political aspects of the American Revolution, best developed in his long essay “Revolution and Social Change: The American Revolution as a People’s War” (1978). In this essay, Bill’s themes and interests came together nicely, making the article a prime example of his approach to history. He cites Nisbet, Moore, Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), Crane Brinton (1965), Thomas S. Kuhn, Perez Zagorin, and Rowland Berthoff and John M. Murrin (1973), among others. Here we find a search for strong historical generalizations and patterns (historical sociology)—with “lawlike” relationships but not necessarily strict, positivist “laws” of history—organized around the theme of “people’s war,” which (in his view) Americans undertook long before anyone had heard of Michael Collins, Tom Barry, Mao Zedong, Ché Guevara, or Võ Nguyen Giap. Most important, this approach put the revolution back in the American Revolution, while specifying the ideas and values to which different elements in the revolutionary coalition subscribed and relating these actors and ideas to their institutional and material context.

In treating these ideas, Bill contrasted “equalitarians” and egalitarians with one another on the American side and contrasted both of them with the shapers of “feudal

2. Marina and Rothbard battled neoconservative sociologist Irving Kristol at the 1974 Mont Pèlerin Society meeting in Gstaad over Kristol’s claim that the American Revolution enjoyed only minority support. Both Rothbard and Marina were working on the revolution at the time and strongly believed otherwise.

3. Because of our extensive discussions of Stephens, Bill listed me as coauthor of this article.

reaction” and mercantilism on the British side, setting them all in sociological context. A decentralized military effort was most consistent with the ideas of the first American group, whereas radical egalitarians (relatively few in number) would have favored a *levée en masse* of the type later seen in the French Revolution. Our “people’s war” as actually undertaken from 1775 on had profound effects on the course and results of the American Revolution. Bill also understood the importance of the work of New Zealand historian J. G. A. Pocock (1975) on the transatlantic republican tradition and noted the limitations of Bernard Bailyn’s (1967) work on eighteenth-century American ideology. (Bailyn perhaps completed Cold War liberalism’s “end of ideology” by deporting uncomfortable American ideas to the eighteenth century and then ascribing them to republican “paranoia.”) Republican theory as transmitted to the English-speaking world already incorporated the image of the armed proprietor serving in militia as the ideal defender of liberty and the society in which it existed. If people’s war was the key to revolutionary success, then the famous French alliance was unnecessary and irrelevant and reflected the empire-building proclivities of one wing of the revolutionary coalition. The provocative “Revolution and Social Change” was meant to become a book, which indeed it should have. (Bill did return to these themes, however, in “Did the Constitution Betray the Revolution? No: The Constitution as a Resolution of Revolutionary Debates” [1987].)

Bill’s political-economic analysis, shaped by the influences I have noted (New Left, Austrian economics, and so forth), allowed him to distinguish conceptually between historically occurring forms of state and market interaction and to use the terms *mercantilism* to name a system in which state interests dominated allied capitalist groups and *corporate syndicalism* to refer to a system in which corporate interests dominate the state. All of this analysis he illustrated with a “billiard ball” model borrowed from Williams (Marina 1979, 142–143; Williams 1962, 71–72). (The same analysis reappeared, somewhat amplified, in *A History of Florida* [Tebeau and Marina 1999, 540–44].) American politics wavered between the two alternatives but normally came to rest within corporate syndicalism.

In *The History of Florida*, Bill developed a case against sovereign immunity and in favor of citizen lawsuits as a means of controlling leviathan. The case of Florida’s water supply suggested that the market itself currently did not (or could not?) coordinate some issues of a systemic nature. Given his republican proclivities, Bill would have been fairly immune to the claim that the “best possible” solution is to “privatize” water by handing over the resources to large corporations. He did favor realistic water pricing to encourage conservation (Marina 1999, 554–57).

## Hail and Farewell

Bill Marina was a man of considerable talents and accomplishments. Late in life he took over the standard *History of Florida* written by his University of Miami mentor Charlton W. Tebeau and brought it up to date—characteristically with material on

corporate syndicalism at the state level (Marina 1999). For a decade or more, Bill was the sparkplug of the Florida Historical Society, although, like many a good Floridian academic, he retired to North Carolina. (One tires of beaches and longs for mountains.) He leaves behind a significant number of unpublished papers that ought to see the light of day—for example, his paper on the origins and development of the frontier thesis as traced through the connections between the Italian agrarian determinist Achille Loria and American historians Frederick Jackson Turner and Lindley M. Keasbey.

Just as he had opposed the war in Vietnam, Bill became an active critic of George W. Bush's foreign policy. Much of this work was published by the Independent Institute. He often said that what Americans needed was an *anti-imperial* movement, not a mere "antiwar" movement. The empire was the main show; the wars were its by-products. With so many irons in the fire—including administrative work at FAU, foundation activities, cooperation with the Universidad Francisco Marroquín in Guatemala, construction projects, development of the unitary truss system for cheaper housing, engagement with distance learning, and much else—Bill never wrote the big book on empire that we all knew was in him, which is much to be regretted.

Bill Marina (1936–2009) was an able and committed historian. A generalist in an age of specialists, he nonetheless knew many specific areas of research in great detail. As a teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend, he is and will be missed.

For more on William F. Marina, see the Web sites of the Marina-Huerta Foundation (<http://www.m-hfoundation.org/>; motto: "Decentralization is Beautiful") and the Independent Institute (<http://www.independent.org>). See also David Beito, "William Marina R.I.P.," *The Beacon Blog* (Independent Institute), July 7, 2009, at <http://www.independent.org/blog/?p=2663>.

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