

Historians Rebuke Rostow For Role in Vietnam Policy

By William Greider
and Robert C. Maynard
Washington Post Staff Writers

Walt Whitman Rostow, an economic historian who advised two Presidents on U.S. policy in Vietnam, was publicly rebuked in various ways yesterday by some of his colleagues in the American Historical Association.

Rostow, who is now a professor at the University of Texas, was one of four panelists at an AHA convention session on "The United States and East Asia."

Before he could speak, a group of "radical historians" of the New Left got up and walked out denouncing him as an "accomplice of the war policy." Others who stayed to listen bombarded him with polite, but pointed questions and comments on the U.S. policy he helped formulate as a White House adviser to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

Barb From Schlesinger

Rostow responded confidently and in good humor, reasserting the basic themes of Communist Chinese expansion and U.S. self-interest that the government has used to justify its entry into the Vietnam war.

One sharp barb came from Rostow's fellow Kennedy adviser, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who as chairman of the panel discussion offered his own "unchairmanesque" comments. When Rostow referred to President Kennedy's concern about China and the U.S. commitment to Asia, Schlesinger interjected:

"I think it's imprudent of Walt to claim to know what President Kennedy would have done in this. He does not know. I do not know."

"Let me clarify," Rostow replied. "I was referring to Pres-



Marvin Gettleman urges historians to stage walkout.

ident Kennedy's remark to me in 1961."

"President Kennedy told me in 1961 that he thought we were overcommitted in Southeast Asia," Schlesinger retorted, a remark which won general applause.

Schlesinger himself, as well as Rostow, was a target of the "radical historians" who walked out to protest what they call "the court historians," scholars who have participated in forming U.S. foreign policy, then serve as academic "apologists" for it. Of an audience of more than 1,000, about 75 or 100 walked out.

Marvin Gettleman, a Brooklyn Polytechnic professor, was permitted to appear at the ros-

trum and appeal for others to walk out and join a demonstration outside the Justice Department "against national and international genocide." As they filed out of the meeting hall, several AHA members hoisted signs such as "Rostow—Planner of War" and "Should Historians Be Good Germans?"

Defends Policy

In his own remarks, Rostow suggested that American hesitation in Vietnam—rather than the imperialist urge described by his radical critics—may have aggravated the situation there. The military intervention, he argued, was in the interest of U.S. security because it prevented the dominance of Asia by China, just as belated American intervention prevented expansionist threats by Japan and Germany in World War II.

In Vietnam, Rostow said, "the American delay in reacting to the systematic violation of the Laos Accords—the period from October, 1962, to early 1965—may have misled them concerning the ultimate American response."

If the U.S. had withdrawn from its commitment, Rostow

contended, the process "would yield an unsettling of the whole world balance of power which would lead in a relatively short period of time to a larger war."

Rostow's assumption—about China's intentions, about the nature of the Vietnam conflict and the effect of U.S. withdrawal—were challenged both by fellow panelists and questioners in the audience.

John K. Fairbank, head of Harvard University's Far Eastern studies, found Rostow's view of China as Asian aggressor "very dubious." The nation, he said, is not like Japan was in World War II; it is inward-looking and there is "very little intent on the part of the people in Peking to be expansionist."

Fairbank argued that Rostow's emphasis on maintaining a balance-of-power in Asia does not take into account "the change within countries, orderly or revolutionary."

Schlesinger also said that if

U.S. policy were intended to forestall Chinese expansion, it should have tried to unify Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh, whose government might have provided stronger independence "rather than the inadequate, corrupt, wretched regimes we have supported in Saigon."

At another AHA panel discussion, a researcher investigating the controversial Alger Hiss case of the 1950s charged that the files of the FBI are closed to all researchers "except for conservative journalists."

Allen Weinstein of Smith College called on the association to work for free access to FBI files for all legitimate research.

He said much of the confusion over the Hiss case, a special interest of his, might be cleared up if he and other researchers had access to FBI files in the case.

Weinstein said sufficient time has elapsed to make it virtually impossible that the national security could be breached by researchers seeing the Hiss files.

Weinstein, presenting a paper on the Hiss case, said that there is some evidence that the FBI went beyond mere police work and became a partisan in pursuit of Hiss's conviction.

"The most intriguing of all of the stories concerning FBI complicity," Weinstein said, "comes from an American Weekly article by Win Brooks written in 1950, entitled 'How the FBI Trapped Hiss,' which Richard Nixon inserted into the record as an appendix to his own speech on the subject."

Weinstein said Brooks claimed to have discussed the case with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who provided him with a "14-page condensation" of FBI activity in the case.

He cited the Brooks story as one example of the FBI granting access to its files only to "conservative journalists." He cited as another example, the book, "FBI Story," by Don Whitehead.

Weinstein has concluded that chief witness against Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, told a number of untruths, but he said there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that Hiss was innocent.