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Response to Forum 31 (2021) on the Importance of the Scholarship of Ernest May

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[Included below are two responses to the recent H-Diplo/ISSF Forum on the Importance of the Scholarship of Ernest May, along with an introductory note by Forum Commissioning Editor and Chair Philip Zelikow – Diane Labrosse, H-Diplo managing editor].

Introductory Note by Philip Zelikow, University of Virginia

On December 17, 2021, *H-Diplo* published a Forum on “the Importance of the Scholarship of Ernest May.”¹ I chaired the Forum and introduced the subject. The contributing essays were penned by Anne Karalekas, Francis Gavin, Daniel Sargent, and Niall Ferguson.

Drawing on material from his important biographical work on Henry Kissinger, Ferguson focused his essay on the relationship of Ernest May with Kissinger.² Though they worked in different departments, May and Kissinger were colleagues at Harvard from 1954 until Kissinger joined the Nixon administration in 1969. They were friendly colleagues. Though May was not politically aligned in the 1968 election campaign, in 1968-1969 he and Kissinger made up half of a study group on presidential transition that offered suggestions for effective organization of the national security process.³

In his essay for the forum, Ferguson connected two episodes. One was May’s critical review of Kissinger’s book, *Diplomacy*, which was published in the *New York Times* 1994. The other was May’s participation, in 1970, in a Harvard delegation that met with Kissinger at the White House to convey their dismay about US military operations in Cambodia. At the time, May was the Dean of Harvard College, the arts and sciences core of the university.

Ernest May’s widow, Susan Wood, and his son, John May, were pleased to read the forum on May’s scholarship. They asked *H-Diplo* if they could post a response to the Ferguson essay; their two brief comments follow.

¹ <https://issforum.org/forums/31>

² Niall Ferguson, *Kissinger—1923-1968: The Idealist* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

³ Harvard’s newly created Institute of Politics formed a Study Group on Presidential Transition with Phillip Areeda, Kissinger, Frank Lindsay, and May. For more on the group’s work and advice, see Ferguson, *The Idealist*, 809, 845-50. Areeda, a law professor, had served in the Eisenhower White House. Lindsay, a former OSS agent, government official, and defense executive, was directly acquainted with Richard Nixon. Lindsay and May were longtime friends.

Response by Susan Wood

My husband, Ernest May, passed away in June 2009, nearly 13 years ago. I was very pleased that his work retained sufficient resonance to merit a Forum on H-Diplo. The contributions by Philip Zelikow, who organized and chaired the Forum, Anne Karalekas, Frank Gavin, and especially Daniel Sargent were thoughtful and informative.¹ I am truly thankful to all of them.

Their essays stand in stark contrast to that of Niall Ferguson, which does not discuss Ernest's scholarship, presents ill-founded conjecture as fact, and turns on the denigration of my husband's career and character. At issue is the 1994 *New York Times* book review of Henry Kissinger's *Diplomacy* that my husband authored, with great reluctance.² Most H-Diplo readers will be familiar with Kissinger's book and Ernest's response. The exchange that followed has also been widely discussed and sides have been taken.³ One would think that this episode had been fully litigated, but evidently this is not the case.

Ferguson links this 1994 controversy to a break in relations that he dates to May 8, 1970, when my husband joined a group of Harvard professors who met at the White House with Kissinger in order to convey their profound alarm about the Nixon administration's invasion of Cambodia. Ernest's particular contribution to the meeting, as Ferguson accurately recounts, was to stress that the administration's action was "tearing the country apart domestically" and that this would have long-term consequences for foreign policy. Whatever the temporary gains, the harm being done outweighed them. According to Ferguson, Dr. Kissinger was not persuaded.

Ferguson considers it "remarkable" that after this difficult meeting, my husband assumed that relations with Kissinger would remain cordial. He relates that when Ernest, his friend and former White House official Francis Bator, and two others wrote a further critique of the administration, my husband sent an advance copy to Dr. Kissinger with a personal note expressing their continued affection.

Nor were such expressions kept secret. At the time, for example, Bator publicly characterized Kissinger's conciliatory response at the White House meeting as professionally appropriate and well-judged: "[Kissinger] behaved," Bator said, "with great grace and dignity and courage under intense emotional pressure from his peer group."⁴ Ferguson quotes other parts of this article, but not this.

This omission is important, because Ferguson uses this May 1970 meeting to set up an unsupported premise of undying resentment on the part of Ernest which he sums up in two sentences: "Strength of character can be hateful to the weak. Fame is insufferable to the obscure." Ferguson writes that Ernest was among the authors of a set of advisory reports for the 1968-1969 presidential transition that helped place Dr. Kissinger on the path to Secretary of State. According to Ferguson, Ernest could "...hardly have watched the ascent of his former colleague and collaborator without some inner pang—especially at a time when the lot of a Harvard dean was essentially to accede to the demands of the student radicals." Noting that "May was a shy self-effacing man. He can never have aspired to high executive office," he adds,

¹ <https://issforum.org/forums/31>.

² Ernest R. May, "The 'Great Man' Theory of Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, April 3, 1994; Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

³ Kissinger Replies to Ernest May," *New York Times*, April 24, 1994; May, "Kissinger's 'Diplomacy,'" *New York Times*, May 1, 1994.

⁴ Mike Kinsley, "Twelve Professors Visit Washington," *Harvard Crimson*, June 11, 1970.

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“still, it cannot have been easy,” for Ernest to watch Kissinger rise so high. Readers can judge for themselves whether the claim is credible. John May, Ernest’s son, briefly discusses his recollections of the deanship period in his essay below.

As for the review itself, Ernest had hoped that *Diplomacy* would be an outstanding contribution to the field of diplomatic history. He was deeply disappointed that it fell short as a work of history. Readers of the rest of the forum will understand why he would have felt so strongly about this particular history. Kissinger, writing a book that could have been exceptionally influential, was employing the sorts of flawed historical analogies that my husband had devoted forty years of work to rebut. A private man who did not seek controversy, Ernest took pains to be balanced in his assessment. But he was not one to give credit where it was not due.

Susan B. Wood is Ernest May’s widow. She is retired and lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Response by John May

Alongside three excellent essays by Anne Karalekas, Francis J. Gavin, and Daniel Sargent and an excellent introduction by Philip Zelikow in the H-Diplo/ISSF forum on the importance of Ernest May's scholarship is a very odd essay by Niall Ferguson. While the other contributors discuss the scholarship of my father, the only work Ferguson considers (up until some cursory comments in the final few paragraphs) is my father's May's 1994 *New York Times* book review of Henry Kissinger's *Diplomacy*.⁸

Ferguson's essay is even more surprising as it contains an attack my father's character. I was particularly surprised because the only time I ever met Professor Ferguson was shortly after my father's death at an informal tribute hosted by Harvard's Kennedy School. At that event, Ferguson made some remarks extolling my father's writings and said he would be recommending that his students "read more Ernie May." I knew that the admiration ran in both directions because my father had been very pleased when Ferguson joined the Harvard faculty.

Ferguson's main argument is that my father's criticism of Kissinger's book is not valid. He asserts without evidence that my father, whom he sums up as "shy and self-effacing," criticized Kissinger not because he had valid concerns about the book but because he was jealous of Kissinger's fame and high office, while "the lot of a Harvard dean was essentially to accede to the demands of the student radicals."

These conjectures are of course entirely unsupported and unsupportable. I recall the time when by father became Dean. I was a high school student at the time. Harvard President Nathan Pusey arranged to meet him in a place where they would not be overheard (a park bench near some jackhammers) and begged him to take the position, saying that the future of a great university was at stake. Pusey knew the job would require many of my father's qualities: strong principles, determination, and coolness under fire. My father reluctantly agreed to take the position because of his loyalty to Harvard. He knew it would be a difficult and mostly thankless job and I am sure it turned out to be even more difficult than he expected.

He was often followed and harassed by students when he walked across campus. He was held hostage in his office overnight by a large group of students. University Hall, where he worked, was taken over by students. Each time the *Harvard Crimson* ran his picture, it was always of him grimly holding a bullhorn outside of University Hall. At least one building in Harvard Yard was set on fire, causing concern that those who had occupied it might perish. The police would let him know when they expected rioting in Harvard Square. And the faculty, particularly in the sciences, may have been more radical than the students. It was a very tense time. Despite all of that, neither he nor anyone else in the University's administration viewed his role as "essentially to accede to the demands of the student radicals," and I am sure that nobody who knew him then would have described his performance that way.

Before and after being Dean he carried out many other assignments for the University such as fundraising, serving as Senior Tutor in Kirkland House, and being Chair of a somewhat non-collegial History Department, all because he truly loved Harvard and considered it his duty to serve. I think he believed he had the ideal job – he loved teaching, he was enthusiastic about his students, he really enjoyed the company of his peers, and he considered Widener the greatest research library in the world. He didn't even consider retirement until he turned 80.

I never knew my father to envy anyone and I cannot imagine he envied Kissinger. We rarely discussed Kissinger, but he often expressed his great admiration of and appreciation for other friends who went on to public service, including John Dunlop, Archibald Cox, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Even in his most unguarded moments, my father never gave me

⁸ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994); Ernest R. May, "The 'Great Man' Theory of Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, April 3, 1994.

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any reason to believe he desired a high-profile appointment in government. Perhaps he sensed that my mother, sisters, and I were not keen to move to Washington. The feeling I got from our conversations was that he felt he already spent too much time traveling to D.C. and fulfilling other commitments that took him away from his research.

I know that when he was asked to review Kissinger's book, he accepted the assignment very reluctantly. Once he committed to doing so, I believe he simply felt that he had a professional obligation to offer the *Times'* readers his honest opinion of the book.

John E. May is Ernest May's son. He attended Harvard as an undergraduate and graduated in 1976.