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

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Introduction by Philip Zelikow, University of Virginia

For a half-century, from 1959 until his death in 2009, Ernest May was in the front rank of historians studying the interactions of the United States with the world. He left an enormous and fascinatingly readable body of work and touched many lives. That is perhaps why this forum stimulated such a remarkable and contrasting set of substantial essays.

Anne Karalekas provides a fine introduction to May's work. Frank Gavin offers both a skeptical and admiring perspective on it, as his own scholarly development brought him to different facets of May's work. Daniel Sargent offers an exceptionally thoughtful and in-depth analysis that places May in the context of the historical and theoretical debates of his time. But he also situates May as a perceptive and prescient commentator on America's awkward adjustments to its changing place in the world, which coincided so much with May's lifetime.

Sargent introduces the relationship of May and former secretary of state Henry Kissinger. Niall Ferguson adds a quite substantial essay from a very different angle: focusing on that relationship, and on the intersection of professional, and academic lives -- in May's confrontations with Kissinger on two important occasions in both men's lives.

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Ernest May was born in Texas in 1928 and raised in Fort Worth. He started straddling cultures in childhood. His father was a trial lawyer, active in local politics. His mother, Rachel Garza, was reportedly the first Tejana ever to earn a graduate degree at the University of Texas (in 1923), which is where the two had met.

When May was 4 years old, his mother was killed in an automobile accident. His father never got over his grief and May was raised with help from his maternal grandmother, sometimes traveling to Mexico to spend time with branches of the Garza family. He would say that historical grievance was always alive in his family, since one side was refighting the Civil War and the other side was refighting the Mexican War.

Lean and crewcut, often solitary and bookish, May raced through school in Fort Worth. He started college at the relatively new university, UCLA, while still 16. He earned his BA degree in three years. He earned his Ph.D. in three more, when he was 22. Sargent's essay comments on the scale of this early work.

A great influence on May in these years was a UCLA historian, John Caughey (pronounced 'Coy'). Caughey was a historian of the American West. He ran a famous seminar for advanced undergraduates and graduate students in which he helped the best papers get published -- May appears to have written at least three of these (that were published), before moving on to his own interests in America's relations with the world.

May's doctoral dissertation was on William Jennings Bryan's tenure as secretary of state in the first year of the Great War (1914-1915). It was a mature work, 434 typed pages before the bibliography, and is still well regarded by those who study Bryan. He takes Bryan and his ideas seriously, critically but seriously, in the years before, as May sadly put it, "the Great Commoner became a sour, pathetic old man whose speeches echoed in empty halls to a chorus of faint, derisive laughter."¹

As May was finishing his thesis and falling in love with Caughey's daughter, Nancy, to whom he became engaged, Caughey was at the center of one of the great controversies involving McCarthyism and universities. California had adopted a loyalty oath requirement. Caughey refused to take the oath, not because of radical political views, but because

¹ Ernest R. May, "Bryan and the World War, 1914-1915," Ph.D. thesis in History, June 1951, 433.

he regarded the requirement of such a patriotic oath as an infringement of academic freedom. In 1950, UCLA fired Caughey, who then became a lead plaintiff with other professors challenging their dismissals.

May happily married into his adviser's now more controversial family. Caughey, though no longer his official adviser, signed the 1951 thesis anyway, writing in his name as "chairman" above the six still-employed professors who signed it more formally. Having won his lawsuit, Caughey was reinstated at UCLA a few years later. By then, May had already gone off to war for his country.

May was a Navy officer, serving with the fleet on a ship ferrying soldiers and supplies into the Korean cauldron, trying to learn Russian in his spare time. Gifted with languages, he was comfortable researching sources in Spanish, French, and German but, to his regret, he never had time to master Russian.²

The Navy decided this young officer might be better employed as a historian working for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and transferred him back to Washington. The experience there was formative. Among other things, such as a lifelong bemusement with then-joint chiefs of staff (JCS) chairman Arthur Radford and then-secretary of state John Foster Dulles, May left the Pentagon with a continuing, probing wariness about the inner world of civil-military relations, along with collegial friendships among the remarkable group of historians then involved in the renowned official histories of World War II and other projects.³

Coming out of the Navy in 1954, May had career options in the Foreign Service or in academia. He had offers from both Princeton and Harvard. His World War I manuscript, building on his thesis, was already well advanced. Key people at Harvard, like William Langer, had perhaps read some chapters and May had just published an article from it (on the relation of U.S. policy to Japan's entry into World War I) in a top journal.⁴ May chose academia and Harvard, and taught there for the rest of his life.

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² Typically, May quickly put his time working on Russian and Russia to use. May, "The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Far Eastern War, 1941-1945," *Pacific Historical Review* 24:2 (1955): 153-74; May, "The Far Eastern Policy of the United States in the Period of the Russo-Japanese War: A Russian View," *American Historical Review* 62:2 (1957): 345-51.

³ May's 1955 article on "the development of political consultation in the United States" was refined into just one part of his second book, *The Ultimate Decision: The President as Commander-in-Chief* (New York: George Braziller, 1960). May wrote about half of the essays for this book and solicited still-valuable essays on Lincoln (by T. Harry Williams) and on Franklin D. Roosevelt (by William Emerson).

There is a straight line from this interest in the inner world of civil-military relations into the projects mentioned in the essays, such as the "May Group" in the 1960s; May's work on the U.S.-Soviet arms race official history project in the 1970s and 1980s; on to the 1990 monograph on "Cold War and Defense" covering 1945-1950 (New York: Praeger, edited by Ronald Haycock and Keith Neilson); his subsequent short book, *Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68* (New York: Bedford, 1993), and then his later work with me on the Kennedy tapes. May and Philip Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Norton rev. ed., 2002, orig. 1997), related to the wider Presidential Recordings Project volumes discussed further in Gavin's essay.

May's last major work, his landmark study of the fall of France, mentioned in all the essays, translates this careful reconstruction of the inner worlds of civil-military relations to European history, focused on Germany, France, and Britain. He complemented that emphasis with a hard look at intelligence methods and assessments, and the way they added to or subtracted from insight among his characters. *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2000).

⁴ May, "American Policy and Japan's Entrance into World War I," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 40:2 (1953): 279-90.

May was often called a “diplomatic” historian, but in his case the adjective can mislead. With Caughey, he co-authored a massive, detailed college text covering the whole history of the United States. The two men then promptly partnered with the pioneering Black historian, John Hope Franklin, to produce an important and controversial version of this text written for younger grades.⁵ May’s methods were usually grounded in a broad analysis of prevailing culture, social trends, public or press opinion, the character of institutions, economic interests, and the precarious balance of politicized factions.

May’s deepest interests were to understand the formation of personal and popular beliefs. In April 1995, I attended a memorable Harvard forum discussing former secretary of defense Robert McNamara’s just-published memoir about the Vietnam War. McNamara watched as May went to the lectern. May commented with his usual courtesy about the value of the book. He then said:

His [McNamara’s] reconstruction of what happened in the 60’s is, I think, quite clinical and rational. And he looks back and explains the mistakes that were made in judgment and policy. I don’t think that the book succeeds in recreating the frame of mind in which those decisions were made.

You take the episode that he was describing here [about Laos in 1961], which is described in some detail in the book: the transition from the Eisenhower to the Kennedy administrations. Here are the best and the brightest, not only of the Kennedy administration but of the Eisenhower administration. And they sit there and they believe, they say to each other and they believe, that the fate at least of southeast Asia, and perhaps of the civilized world, hinges on what happens in *Laos* -- a landlocked country of three million, in hamlets populated by people devoted primarily to singing songs, making love, and raising opium.

And there is a *theology* around this, a set of beliefs which are not recaptured in the book. And it’s a little bit like -- if you’ll forgive my saying so -- it’s a little bit like a Crusader’s memoir written by someone who can’t remember *why* he particularly *cared* about the fate of Jerusalem.⁶

May’s methods were sometimes more those of the microhistorian, an approach which the history discipline usually associates with social or cultural history, and which can overlap with anthropology. But May applied those tools to the reconstruction of pivotal political episodes.

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May’s first major work of history was an international history of *The World War and American Isolation, 1914-1917*. Karalekas and Sargent discuss the book’s reception and impact.

The book is centered on the narrative of American insistence on neutral rights and the position on German U-Boat warfare. May analyzed relevant domestic debates in Britain and Germany, as well as the United States. When May wrote, this ‘neutral rights/U-Boat’ narrative was *the* narrative to explain why the war widened in April 1917 to include

⁵ John W. Caughey and Ernest R. May, *A History of the United States* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1964); Caughey, John Hope Franklin, and May, *Land of the Free: A History of the United States* (New York: Benziger, 1966). On the controversy surrounding how this latter text, very widely distributed, was created and received, see Elaine Lewinnek, “Social Studies Controversies in 1960s Los Angeles: *Land of the Free*, Public Memory, and the Rise of the New Right,” *Pacific Historical Review* 84:1 (2015): 48-84.

⁶ May’s remarks can be viewed on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQ-QpaWFTu4>.

the United States. Within the context of *that* narrative, “close analysis cannot find the point,” May wrote, “at which [President Woodrow Wilson] might have turned back or taken another road.”⁷

May then, like all other scholars at that time, centered his account on the American choices on the ‘neutral rights/U-Boat war’ issues. The orthodox interpretation defended Wilson on grounds that were pro-Ally or extolled various ideals, and blamed the Germans. The revisionist account blamed Wilson’s personal pathologies, foreign manipulation, and/or Wall Street and its allies. The newly fashionable “realist” approach, which was all the rage in the 1950s when May was forming his book, held that Wilson was besotted by moralism and legalism and should, on more hard-headed grounds, have either led America into the war sooner, or kept America out altogether. Sargent’s essay nicely situates May in the context of these debates.

Using a much richer assembly of evidence, May judged that Wilson had struck the right balance and that his calculations were neither particularly pro-Ally nor foolishly utopian. In many ways, May’s Wilson was not unrealistic. His policy “conformed to [Chancellor Otto von] Bismarck’s rule: it assumed any contingency more than six months away to be out of calculation. Dealing with both Britain and Germany, Wilson concerned himself with the immediate interests of his country.” He had another calculation: He was trying to keep a divided and very fractious country reasonably united.⁸

May did call out a moral element: Wilson’s wish, given the horror of that world war, to involve America to help make the postwar world more peaceful. This ideal did, though, implicate “the welfare and happiness of generations yet to come.” On the neutral rights/U-Boat issue, Wilson’s “mixed firmness and patience offered the only hope in the long run of keeping the peace.” May found it “hard, indeed, to find fault with Wilson’s statesmanship.There was no way out.”⁹

This analysis, and May’s book, holds up quite well today for the first half of his story, in 1914-15. It holds up less well for the second half, in 1916-17. His account of the ‘neutral rights/U-Boat’ story is still good. But, during the 2000s, not long before May’s death, he and I rethought that question of whether there had been “another road.” In the context of another project, we noticed growing evidence about the plausibility of another narrative, about a peace process to end the war in 1916-17. We had only begun working on this when May died in 2009.

This other narrative had received peripheral notice from historians, partly because it did not arise out of the American-centered ‘neutral rights/U-Boat’ story. The peace moves grew out of debates in Britain and Germany, about which the Americans knew relatively little, but in which Wilson and his adviser, Edward House, came to play a key role because both sides looked to Wilson to mediate an end to the war.

In the 1950s, and in most cases to the present day, May and other scholars did not realize this alternative narrative was plausible. May had some suggestive German evidence, which he handled well. But the orthodox Anglo-American account after World War I parroted the wartime line that these German moves were propaganda, undertaken in bad

⁷ May, *The World War and American Isolation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), vii.

⁸ May, *The World War and American Isolation*, 425.

⁹ May, *The World War and American Isolation*, 436-37. One of the reasons for May’s sharp treatment of the historical material in Kissinger’s book on *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), a dispute detailed so richly in Ferguson’s essay, was because it seemed to May that, in service of his ‘realist’ viewpoint, Kissinger was just restating tired stereotypes, about Wilson for example, that May and other scholars had addressed at length, decades earlier.

faith, and which in any case had no chance. That account was untrue, but it held sway for a century because relevant evidence was unavailable or not studied. That story, and Wilson's failure *there*, is now visible.¹⁰

As his World War I book came out, May decided he should respond even more clearly and strongly to the hugely influential "realists" of the early 1950s, represented by Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, and Robert Osgood. The arguments of these "realists" seemed enormously appealing to Americans in the stressful post-World War II and early Cold War world.¹¹

"In differing ways," May explained much later, "these realists of the early 1950s argued that the United States had been handicapped in international politics by both its institutions and its ideology. Democratic institutions gave public opinion and domestic politics excessive influence in foreign policy, they said. This licensed sentimentality, moralism, and legalism to take precedence over the national interest." May was "attracted but not entirely convinced."¹²

He decided to redouble his focus on America's rise to world power, which he analyzed in an international context. This motive drove two books. The first, *Imperial Democracy* (1961), was about the American rise from the 1880s through the Spanish-American war of 1898. It analyzed the rising interest of the American public in foreign affairs, the interplay between this public debate and actual policy, the Spanish side of the crisis that culminated in the 1898 war, the European effort to prevent that war, and the changing reputation of the United States in the world. Though many other

¹⁰ The postwar accounts had carefully veiled the British and French desperation, including the imminent bankruptcy in dollars which alone, if the war had not widened to include America, would have curtailed the Allied war effort in the first half of 1917. Among the many things veiled, or concealed entirely, were French President Raymond Poincaré's interest in an early and mediated peace and the wrenching secret British peace debates of 1916-17, which precipitated the December 1916 fall of the Asquith government in Britain.

The postwar accounts were facilitated by widespread ignorance about the true financial situation, Wilson's role in cutting off American credits to the Allies, and the concealment of some crucial American evidence, much of it in House's papers, for instance about what the Germans were offering. Practically all the relevant British evidence was still secret or in private hands. Fragments of the new material began coming out in the 1970s and 1980s. My book, *The Road Less Traveled: The Secret Struggle to End the Great War, 1916-17* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2021), refers only briefly, in the notes, to the past evidentiary and interpretive problems. A fine recent work also unearthing the true British situation (and building on work by other scholars, like Martin Farr), and that also elaborates more fully on that part of the problematical historiography, is Daniel Larsen, *Plotting for Peace: American Peacemakers, British Codebreakers, and Britain at War, 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Readers seeking a more up-to-date picture of the German side can turn to Holger Afflerbach, *Auf Messers Schneide: Wie das Deutsche Reich der Ersten Weltkrieg verlor* (München: C.H. Beck, 2018).

The powerful British peace faction was frustrated by complex domestic developments and maladroit American moves. The Germans went back to the U-Boat option only after much of their government concluded that, after five months of pleading, their secret compromise peace move with Wilson had failed (though their Chancellor did not agree, and kept trying to the end). Most of the German leaders had also mistakenly concluded, relying in part on false statements from House and from Secretary of State Robert Lansing that this failure was due to Wilson's timidity or his pro-Allied leanings.

¹¹ The influence of these 'realist' thinkers in post-World War II America is nicely portrayed in Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2021), chapter 1, 7-34.

¹² May, "Introduction to the New Edition," *American Imperialism: A Speculative Essay* (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 1991 ed., orig. ed. 1967), v. May had in mind Hans Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest* (New York: Knopf, 1951); George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951); and Robert Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in American Foreign Policy: The Great Transformation of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

studies have come out in the last sixty years, none has surpassed May's treatment of these topics, with two exceptions – his analysis of President McKinley and the choices concerning the Philippines.¹³

May's overall analysis in *Imperial Democracy* both agreed and disagreed with aspects of the “realist” interpretation of these events. Sargent's essay provides further details. May's deeper conclusion, though, was that there was nothing unique about the United States in this sense. All the countries involved in the war, and most certainly Spain, were just as susceptible to this sort of “realist” critique. The ideal that was implicit in that critique, of dispassionate or ‘objective’ or apolitical policies aligned with “national” interest, was what seemed unreal.

May's sequel, *American Imperialism: A Speculative Essay* (1967), develops that theme in a different way. The book is misleadingly titled. It is actually about the formation of personal and popular beliefs, specifically on the currents that seem to form public and elite opinion. May had already published his seminal 1962 essay on the “axiomatic” character of so many policy beliefs, which is discussed further in the essays by Karalekas and Sargent.¹⁴

American Imperialism was devoted to a puzzle: Why American elite and public opinion, which seemed mainly “anti-colonialist” at the beginning of the 1898 war, turned in favor of acquiring colonies, and then soon changed again, as “the American elite once again became unitedly anti-colonialist.” May developed a brilliant and methodologically sophisticated analysis of how public, press, and elite opinion formed in that era. He then called out how – for a time – consensus broke down and opened the way for popular colonial choices, but the anti-colonialist consensus soon reformed.

May was not trying to defend a ‘great aberration’ thesis. It was a variant of that: instead of going back to the past, Americans returned to anti-colonialist practice in the different context of much greater engagement in world politics and self-conscious comparisons with the behavior of other countries. Americans believed that their country was now a great power, active in the world, but of a different kind, one facet being that the U.S. was distinctively anti-colonialist. Though that self-regard was mocked then and later, it mattered.¹⁵

¹³ See May's “Introduction to the New Edition,” *American Imperialism* (cited in note 12), xii-xxxii for his 1991 appraisal of the literature in the first thirty years after *Imperial Democracy* had come out. May believed that, even as a dissertation, John Offner's fine work had superseded his treatment of McKinley's diplomacy on the coming of the war with Spain, treating McKinley as a quite serious actor in his own right, and not as the kind of driftwood that May had originally portrayed, a portrait that then had reflected the conventional wisdom about McKinley. Offner's later book was *An Unwanted War: The Diplomacy of the United States and Spain over Cuba, 1895-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). But the overall conclusion of Offner's book, with its portrait of domestic circumstances and Spanish choices, is consistent with May's original argument that McKinley “led his country unwillingly toward a war that he did not want for a cause in which he did not believe.” *Imperial Democracy*, 159.

On the choices about the Philippines in 1898-99, McKinley was again a much more interesting character and this time had more agency. As more evidence is examined, his series of choices and the circumstances surrounding them have recently become clearer. See my article, “Why Did America Cross the Pacific? Reconstructing the U.S. Decision to Take the Philippines, 1898-99,” *Texas National Security Review* 1:1 (2017): 36-66.

¹⁴ May, “The Nature of Foreign Policy: The Calculated versus the Axiomatic,” *Daedalus* 91:4 (1962): 653-667.

¹⁵ May, “Introduction to the New Edition,” xxx. In his essay, Sargent explores how May's arguments related to the “Wisconsin school” and its successors, which emphasize the continuity of American empire-building.

By the mid-1960s, during his first decade at Harvard, May had formulated the main trajectories of scholarship that he would pursue during his next forty years. The course of those trajectories, which are developed wonderfully in the essays that follow by Karalekas, Gavin, Sargent, and Ferguson, are as follows.

May contended that good historical scholarship tended to belie “realist” and “neo-realist” theories, either as generalizations about how and why governments actually behave as they do, or as prescriptions for how policymakers realistically could or should behave in practice.

May was devoted to raising consciousness about how policy beliefs – about reality, about values, or about prospective actions – form and turn into axioms. The opportunity to help students improve the quality of their thought was one of the pulls that drew May to splitting his teaching with the Harvard Kennedy School, working with friends like Richard Neustadt and Graham Allison.

In the formation of axioms, the pernicious role of historical analogies loomed front and center. This is a point which all of the essays develop further. Historical reasoning is the most common form of reasoning in public affairs.¹⁶ These interests connected to May’s abiding interest in intelligence analysis and assessments of governments. They also related to his interest in the philosophy of history and the behaviorist facets of other disciplines.

Finally, May never abandoned his emphasis on using international methods to reconstruct international stories.¹⁷ To May, this cross-national empathy was a cardinal principle of professional practice for would-be policymakers.¹⁸ Such empathy was one of the habits we found most praiseworthy in our analysis of President John F. Kennedy.¹⁹

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May did have some views about the wider purposes of his scholarship and career. In his last published work, he joined with me to muse about a possible direction for some unifying “capital-P” Policy for the United States. Writing in 2008, we found that “Since 1990, the United States has brought to a bewildered, confused, globalizing world a bewildering,

¹⁶ For several years in the 1990s I co-taught with May and Richard Neustadt, then just with May, the Harvard courses on “The Uses of History” and on “Assessing Other Governments.” May and I also co-led the program on intelligence analysis, openly funded by the CIA as an unclassified executive program, that Harvard conducted during those years for intelligence community participants.

¹⁷ This cross-national, multilingual research emphasis was not new with May. The older colleague he joined at Harvard, William Langer, had often done the same. It was one of the striking features May had in common among his most valued later colleagues at Harvard, such as Dorothy Borg, Akira Iriye, William Kirby, or Charles Maier.

¹⁸ The essays do not mention an especially ambitious application of this international method. In the mid-1990s, May organized an extraordinary research project on the Suez crisis. Recruiting a large group of graduate students and scholars with various linguistic backgrounds and skills, he organized a historical lab project that broke the crisis into three temporal phases. Then, for each of those phases, he commissioned the reconstruction of the crisis, in that phase, from six different national perspectives – in each case requiring maximum use of primary sources and avoiding, as much as possible, the taint of later knowledge about others, or what would happen. These eighteen structured papers were then critically reviewed in two major international conferences. The work, with necessary updates and revisions, was eventually published. Although May did not write a word of it, he is on the title page because he was its creator and architect. Philip Zelikow, Ernest R. May, and the Harvard Suez Team, *Suez Deconstructed: An Interactive Study in Crisis, War, and Peacemaking* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2018).

¹⁹ The origins of this habit, in Kennedy’s case, are quite clearly traced in Fredrik Logevall, *JFK: Coming of Age in the American Century, 1917-1956* (New York: Random House, 2020).

confusing mélange of policy ideas. Our politicians and officials talk about terror, democracy, proliferation, trade, the environment, growth and dozens of other topics. They strike a hundred notes, but make no melody.”²⁰

This cacophony was common in American history. We (it was mainly May who drafted this) commented on the small number of such “big-P” Policies across American history and how they had developed. May had been noodling on a short history of American foreign relations. He was struck by how often the main changes of direction were usually a reaction to a foreign action of some kind, its sources poorly understood.

We thought a main driver of world history in the twenty-first century had become friction between varied global developments and the backlash of national and communal self-assertion. Amid those conflicts, we thought Americans might unify around commitment to “an open, civilized world.” “Open” seemed clear enough, contrasting with ‘closed.’ By “civilized,” we used that much-derided concept in the same sense as in many cultures, implying a society mindful of at least some common norms or rules.

Deep in Sargent’s essay, he makes an insightful observation about the radicalism of May’s conception of American political development, which is worth quoting at length.

Unlike the critical historians of the New Left, [May] did not invoke transcendent normative commitments to condemn the national security state invented in the early years of the Cold War as a tragic choice, far less as a tragic destiny. But his insistence on contingency, on the specificity of the historical conjuncture, on recognition that events might have turned out differently led him towards conclusions that were, in some ways, more radical than theirs. History, Ernest May insisted, is always within our power to make; with sufficient imagination, which the study of history cultivates, we should be able to summon the capacity to set aside solutions and even institutions that have fulfilled their intended purposes and devise, in their place, novel solutions for the problems that vex us in our times.

In his final essay, suggesting commitment to an open, civilized world, it was May who contributed the concluding thought. With it, he reemphasized his insistence that history is always within our power to make. “Agreement to seek an open, civilized world,” he wrote, “would gather Americans around an agenda animated by the most venerable American political tradition of them all: hope and confidence in a future that can be molded by the will of free people everywhere.”²¹

Participants:

Philip Zelikow is the White Burkett Miller Professor of History at the University of Virginia. A former career diplomat, he worked on international policy problems in the five administrations from Reagan through Obama. In 2003-04 he was the executive director of the 911 Commission.

Niall Ferguson, MA, D.Phil, FRSE, is the Milbank Family Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and a senior faculty fellow of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard. He is the author of sixteen books, including *Kissinger, 1923-1968: The Idealist* (Penguin Press, 2015), which won the Council on Foreign Relations Arthur Ross Prize.

²⁰ May and Zelikow, “An Open, Civilized World,” *The American Interest*, Autumn (September/October) 2008, 16.

²¹ May and Zelikow, “An Open, Civilized World,” 29.

Francis J. Gavin is the Giovanni Agnelli Distinguished Professor and the inaugural director of the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs at SAIS-Johns Hopkins University. He is also the chair of the editorial board of the Texas National Security Review. His writings include *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958-1971* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Cornell University Press, 2012) and *Covid-19 and World Order* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020) co-edited with Hal Brands. His latest book is *Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy* (Brookings Institution Press, 2020).

Anne Karalekas is a Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center Applied History Project. With a career in history and in business, she is currently writing the first full-scale biography of Robert A. Lovett, the statesman and financier, and is the author of the first published history of the Central Intelligence Agency, released by the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities. She studied with Ernest May. In the private sector, she has held management and executive positions with McKinsey & Co., the Washington Post, and the Microsoft Corporation.

Daniel Sargent is associate professor in the Department of History and in the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, where he is co-director of the Institute of International Studies. He is the author of *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (Oxford, 2015). He is a graduate of Harvard University, where he studied under Ernest R. May.

Essay by Anne Karalekas, Harvard University

In January 1959 Samuel Flagg Bemis reviewed Ernest R. May's first book, *The World War and American Isolation, 1914-1917* in the *New York Times*. The opening sentence read:

“In this book Ernest R. May has given us the most thorough study yet presented of American politics and diplomacy vis-à-vis the European War, 1914-1917, and of the politics and diplomacy of the opposing European belligerents vis-à-vis the potential of American neutrality and intervention.”¹

The appraisal from the dean of American diplomatic historians was more than a promising debut for the twenty-nine-year-old Harvard University assistant professor of history. It symbolized a generational hand-off.

Bemis, a proselytizer of multi-archival research, applauded May's use of new material from German archives, which had been captured during World War II, and from published Russian archives for the 1914-1917 period, as well as existing American sources and special studies published in Europe and the United States.² May's statement of purpose in the book's preface was spare and pellucid:

“American and European history are usually treated as separate subjects. So are diplomatic history and political history. But these barriers become increasingly artificial after 1914. American questions rise as major issues in Europe, and European questions in the United States.... In Britain and Germany questions of American policy became key issues in domestic struggles for power. Rational discussion dissolved into partisan passion.”³

He had found his voice. Later that year he received tenure at Harvard. The following year, Bemis, Sterling Professor of Diplomatic History and Inter-American Relations at Yale, having reached retirement age, stepped down.

For nearly five decades May's books, monographs, articles, and teaching brought new dimensions to the field of international relations. His bibliography is a sweeping expanse in terms of geography – Japan, China, the Americas, Europe and the Soviet Union; time – from early nineteenth century America to the tragic start of the twenty-first century; and substance – major historical events, domestic politics, the press and public opinion, national security, decision making, intelligence history and organization, the uses of history, and more. In the mid-60's and later, he chaired the May Group, a faculty and graduate student seminar that explored the relationship between bureaucracy, politics, and policy, out of which Graham T. Allison's seminal study, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, developed.⁴

He accomplished all this, in addition to his contributions to government studies, notably as co-author of the *History of the Strategic Arms Competition* for the Department of Defense and as senior advisor for the *9/11 Commission Report* as

¹ Bemis also described May's bibliographic essay as “the best summary of the historical sources and the secondary works which I know of for the large subject of his study.” Samuel Flagg Bemis, “Maneuvers for Peace Before the Yanks Went Over There,” *New York Times Book Review*, January 29, 1959, 3.

² Bemis, “Maneuvers for Peace,” 3.

³ May, *The World War and American Isolation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), vii.

⁴ The original edition of *Essence* was published by Little, Brown in 1971. Allison, in partnership with Philip Zelikow, rewrote the book for a revised edition published by Longman in 1999.

well as consultant to defense and intelligence officials on matters of policy and advocate for opening government sources to scholars.

The scope of his work intersected with its unifying purpose – to understand how and why policymakers make decisions. He rejected the static theories of isolationism, realism, idealism, and neorealism. In 1962 he began exploring the theoretical underpinnings of decision-making with “The Nature of Foreign Policy: The Calculated versus the Axiomatic,” comparing the Eisenhower administration’s involvement in the Suez crisis, which was based on means-ends calculations, with the consequences of the Truman administration’s posture on Korea, which was based on presumptions derived from historical examples.⁵ His final work, *History and Neorealism*, published posthumously in 2010, for which he was a co-editor and contributor, used historical case studies to challenge the balance of power interpretation of great power behavior by analyzing the shape-shifting influences of ideology, domestic politics, leadership, and economic and social constraints.⁶

Throughout his work, the subjects that animated him turned on the relationship between individual choices and uncontrollable, anonymous forces, producing outcomes that might have ended differently. He described the Cold War as “... a collection of Petrie dishes” for studying this dynamic, which provided the connective tissue for his work on the use of history in policymaking.⁷ The fluidity of his writing gave expression to mutability. His analysis drew on the multiple exogenous factors bearing on issues and the granular level of detail required to unravel and reconstruct agency, structure, and contingency as well as consideration of the counterfactual. Nothing was preordained: Presidential ambitions produced the Monroe Doctrine. International politics constrained American policymakers in World War I. Convictions about the events of the 1930’s were a controlling force in American foreign policy during and after World War II. General George Marshall’s strength of character was a decisive factor in debates over China policy early in the Cold War. Failure of imagination in the French military in 1940 and among U.S government officials in 2001 had catastrophic consequences.

Integral to his work were his assessments of key officials, which were drawn from their backgrounds and life experiences, to create an understanding of the perceptions and beliefs that informed their choices. Similarly, he examined the origins and development of institutions and organizations whose imperatives produced both incentives and constraints.

In *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power* May delineates the complexities of decision-making in Washington, London, and Madrid in the years 1894-1899. British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain, and Spanish Prime Minister Antonio Cánovas Castillo and their governments command equal attention with Presidents Grover Cleveland and William McKinley and the deliberations within and around the U.S. government. May’s sharp profiles of Salisbury and Chamberlain, leaders of a country that was sitting atop a global empire, fix the point of origin for the trajectory of Europe’s lagging recognition of the United States’ great power status. In 1895 the initial reaction of two statesmen of distinction and most of their cabinet colleagues to the United States’ assertion of its right under the Monroe Doctrine to arbitrate Venezuela’s competing territorial claim with Britain began

⁵ May, “The Nature of Foreign Policy: The Calculated versus the Axiomatic” *Daedalus* 91:4 (Fall 1962): 653-667.

⁶ May, Richard Rosencrance, and Zara Steiner, eds. *History and Neorealism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), May’s chapter, “The United States’ Underuse of Military Power,” is at 228-245.

⁷ May, “1947-48: When Marshall Kept the U.S. out of War with China,” *Journal of Military History*, 66 (2002): 1001-1010, quotation, 1003.

with the equivalent of a diplomatic shrug and later escalated to “... shock and dismay,” following President Grover Cleveland’s bellicose address to Congress.⁸

Of Salisbury, May wrote, “He was probably the ablest diplomatist in public life anywhere in the world, and he headed the most talented government that England had had for a generation.”⁹ Chamberlain, in turn, had married an American and had spent a summer in Washington negotiating a fisheries treaty. And “... despite his monocle and the habitual orchid in his coat lapel, was a political tactician with few equals in imagination and energy.”¹⁰ Yet their accumulated experience with the United States in previous diplomatic engagements and their assessment of newly appointed U.S. Secretary of State Richard Olney reinforced the widely shared presumption of the period; “... America still remained for most Englishmen a metaphysical conception, like Thomas Arnold’s Roman Republic or Stubbs’s Anglo-Saxons.”¹¹

The profiles also served the artistry of May’s narrative. Salisbury and Chamberlain appear early in *Imperial Democracy* and personify the perception gap between the view prevailing not only in England but also in France, Russia, and Spain: America as an inchoate entity versus the reality of a coming-of-age power, the theme which he develops in succeeding chapters.

The role of domestic politics –factionalism, public opinion, Congress, the press, and elected officials – figures prominently in May’s work and is dominant in *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine*.¹² May’s analysis of Russian, French, and English policy toward Spain and Spanish America concluded that Europe did not pose a threat to the United States in Latin America; policymakers understood this; and the Monroe Doctrine was not the result of definitions of national interest. Rather, the aspirations of John Quincy Adams, John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, and William Crawford in the upcoming Presidential election of 1824 drove the policy decision.

The profiles of the contenders, their personal history, experience, and interests, play out against a period when the absence of a party system placed control of Presidential elections with state legislatures, requiring intense efforts by candidates to gain local support.¹³ Secretary of State Adams is a key figure as both assertive cabinet member and calculating Presidential aspirant. Adams’ privileged background, political and diplomatic experience, and powerful intellect lead to May’s assessment that “All in all, therefore, Adams had spent most of his mature life abroad... This fact did not make Adams any less sure that he understood what had been in progress and what it signified.”¹⁴ In contrast, President James Monroe’s life experience had trimmed his expectations. May judges that “Despite the eminence he had attained, Monroe had behind him a career marked more by frustration than success.”¹⁵ With the motivation to conclude

⁸ May, *Imperial Democracy, The Emergence of America as a Great Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), 43-48, quotation, 48.

⁹ May, *Imperial Democracy*, 43.

¹⁰ May, *Imperial Democracy*, 43

¹¹ May, *Imperial Democracy*, 47.

¹² May, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

¹³ May, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine*, 12-64; 132-189; Appendix A, “Evidence Concerning Presidential Preferences of Members of the House and Senate in Winter of 1823-1824,” one of several extensive data compilations.

¹⁴ May, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine*, 26.

¹⁵ May, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine* 13.

his time in office without damaging his reputation, Monroe's caution and Adams's drive for the presidency were reinforcing in the policy process.

Within the profession May's conclusions about the much studied, near sacrosanct subject were controversial, made more so with the book's final chapter on the implications of the determinants of the Monroe Doctrine for the broader study of foreign policy and decision-making.¹⁶ Also reflecting the work of the May Group, he advanced two hypotheses. The first is that foreign policy decisions can be better understood as a process of bargaining encounters among principals whose perspectives and ambitions differ rather than as debates on the advantages and disadvantages of different policies.¹⁷ The second is that political structure is important in determining incentives for policymakers, "... depending on how the government is organized, how secure in office the policymakers are, and where they see the sources and threats to their own tenure or advancement" with different controlling factors across the spectrum from the authoritarian to the democratic.¹⁸ Governments did not fit into a single model, and the relative influence of national interest, internal forces and external forces varied. Thus, the decisions surrounding the Monroe Doctrine were the clear expression of a democracy. He argued that historians, analysts, and policymakers should keep these factors in mind not only for interpreting governments' past actions but also for considering how they may act in the future.

Three years earlier he had written "*Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*. His initial theory of the case was that policymakers often drew on history – especially lived and observed history – to shape their decisions, frequently using it poorly.¹⁹ President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw the dangers of post-World War I isolationism in the close of World War II; President Harry Truman saw Adolf Hitler in Joseph Stalin; presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson saw Munich in Vietnam. These formative misperceptions set policy decisions in motion.²⁰ Pushing the boundaries of academic tradition, May argued that historical analysis, including more rigorous use of examples and comparisons, or analogues, could help policymakers gain insight into current problems.²¹ Controversy also greeted this book, even as it left his commitment to use the past to illuminate the present undiminished.²²

For the book's epigraph, May selected a quotation by T.S. Eliot, "There is more to understand. Hold fast to that as the way to freedom," and he pursued that dictum with "Uses of History," a course for mid-career professionals, which he and his Harvard Kennedy School colleague, Richard Neustadt, taught together for more than ten years. Domestic and foreign policy case studies, ranging from Social Security reform in 1983 to the arms control initiative in 1977, illustrated the ways in which the discipline of history can cut through the noise and fog of complex issues and clarify choices. Their

¹⁶ For example, see the blistering review by Harry Ammon, a Monroe scholar, "The Monroe Doctrine: Domestic Politics or National Decision?" *Diplomatic History*, vol. 5 (1981): 53-70 and May's reply in the same issue, "Response to Harry Ammon," 71-73.

¹⁷ May, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine*, 255.

¹⁸ May, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine*, 258.

¹⁹ May, "*Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973),

²⁰ May, "*Lessons of the Past*, 3-121.

²¹ May, "*Lessons of the Past*, 125-90.

²² For an example of the rejection of May's premise and mild outrage, see Keith Eagles, "Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy," *Canadian Historical Review* 57 (1976): 91-92.

work became *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*, a foundational volume for applied history.²³ The book is instructive in the literal definition of the word, urging those who aspired to leadership to approach problems by acknowledging their preconceptions, separating the known from the unclear and presumed, analyzing likenesses and differences between relevant past and present events, and developing suggestive analogues. Essential to the analysis is understanding the history of the issue, the perspectives and experiences of the participants, and the imperatives of the institutions responsible for developing and implementing solutions, two vectors that were constants in May's work.

The Cold War and post-Cold War periods were fertile grounds for May's institutional analysis of both the impact of the growth and complexity of the U.S. government on national security policy in a bipolar world and the need for change to support a new geopolitical order. In "The Cold War and Defense" May analyzed the forces shaping the chaotic history of the Department of Defense from 1945 to 1950. He began with a broad canvas of post-War transformation: foreign policy superseded domestic policy; non-elected officials replaced elected politicians; and foreign government concerns and officials became entwined in the decision-making process. Against this background, the national security strategy that emerged between 1949 and 1950 was the product of conflict – over doctrine, roles, missions, and budgets – that had riven the military services and divided the government. Importantly, the Department's tangled history had long-term consequences as those divisions, rather than defined priorities, continued to drive strategic decisions for two decades.²⁴

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, May addressed the need for institutions to adapt and serve new national security priorities. "The U.S. Government, a Legacy of the Cold War" began with a snapshot of government buildings in major capitals where form and function were misaligned. In London, Buckingham Palace, the houses of Parliament, and the Georgian and Regency offices arrayed on Whitehall reflected a past empire, not "... the capital of middle-ranking member of the European Community." In Vienna, the Hofburg was ill-suited to "... the seat of government for a republic smaller than Indiana," while in Tokyo and Bonn drab office blocks were inadequate representations of what were then the world's second and third ranking economic powers. The metaphor positioned the strategic argument: the Pentagon, the Central Intelligence Agency, the related Congressional committees, even the Washington news bureaus, had grown and developed following World War II and subsequent decades to meet the challenges of a military threat that no longer existed.²⁵

Amid changing national security priorities, intelligence analysis and organization began to absorb more of May's time and attention. As an advisor in Washington, a Harvard Kennedy School professor, and an historian, May approached intelligence as a means to improve the decision-making process.

His testimony before the House and Senate Intelligence Committees in 1992 reflected his purpose. Two bills, introduced by Oklahoma Senator David Boren and Congressman David McCurdy, were designed to reorganize the intelligence agencies. While endorsing the need for change, May advised that the pending legislation "... would solve

²³ Richard E. Neustadt and May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York and London: The Free Press/Macmillan and Collier Macmillan, 1986).

²⁴ May "Cold War and Defense," in Keith Neilson and Ronald G. Haycock, eds., *The Cold War and Defense* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 7-73.

²⁵ May, "The U.S. Government, a Legacy of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 16 (1992): 269-277, quotations, 269. Also in Michael J. Hogan, ed., *The End of the Cold War: Its Meaning and Implications* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 217-228.

problems of the past, not problems of the future.”²⁶ As intelligence requirements for traditional national security issues were giving way to the challenges of immigration, the environment, and banking, the bills’ recommendations on the role of the National Security Council (NSC), intelligence budget oversight, and the organization and structure of intelligence operations and analysis did not support the policymaking requirements for a different international order. The NSC was especially ill-equipped to provide direction to the legislation’s newly created Director of National Intelligence (DNI) whose portfolio would expand across new subjects and additional departments.

To support his argument, he used the NSC’s institutional history. Years earlier he had written about the creation of the NSC, “... the product of a long and painful history,” that followed decades of failures with informal consultation and lower level coordinating committees. In 1947 the reorganization of the national security apparatus produced a cabinet-level forum to both reconcile political and military perspectives and provide a forum for decision-making.²⁷ As May explained to lawmakers, the NSC’s origins and history as a mechanism for the president to manage the State and Defense Departments did not allow for easy adaptation. The NSC had already proven incapable of addressing economic issues. In the context of intelligence reform, it would be equally ineffective in dealing with non-traditional matters like the environment and the war on drugs and therefore unable to provide direction to the DNI.²⁸

In the end, the Boren-McCurdy attempts at increased centralization did not survive opposition from the Defense Department and the Congressional Armed Services Committees. It would require a catastrophic event a decade later to effect major change.

In the intervening period May brought intelligence analysis out of the shadows of defense and foreign policy by initiating a program at the Harvard Kennedy School for mid-career intelligence professionals to improve and enrich their skills by using and applying history. He also served as a consultant to the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency. His book, *Strange Victory: Hitler’s Conquest of France*, equal parts historical narrative and exploration of contingencies and counterfactuals, challenged the predominant defeatism interpretations of the fall of France with deep dives into British, French, and German intelligence, military planning, and diplomacy.²⁹

He applied the full dimension of his thinking and experience to the 9/11 Commission Report. Serving as Senior Advisor to the Commission and working with Executive Director Philip Zelikow and other members of the Commission staff, May contributed to structuring and crafting a document that not only addressed critical policy issues but also helped the country understand what happened and why -- from the perspective of both the United States and al-Qaeda.

The Report resulted in the implementation of major organizational changes in the intelligence community, notably two additions: the position of Director of National Intelligence, reporting directly to the President (not the NSC) and the National Counterterrorism Center, whose purpose is to integrate strategic intelligence by breaking down the barriers

²⁶ May, “Intelligence: Backing into the Future,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 71 (1992): 63-72, quotation, 63. Article adapted from testimony before the Senate and House Intelligence Committees. Also in Roy Godson, May, and Gary Schmitt, eds., *U.S. Intelligence at the Crossroads: Agendas for Reform* (McLean: Brassey’s, Inc., 1995), 36-45.

²⁷ May, “The Development of Political-Military Consultation in the United States,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 70 no. 2 (1955): 161-80, quotation, 180. Also in Karl F. Inderfurth and Lock K. Johnson, eds., *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7-16.

²⁸ May, “Intelligence: Backing into the Future,” 65-66.

²⁹ May, *Strange Victory: Hitler’s Conquest of France* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2000).

between domestic and foreign intelligence and between operations and analysis. A chapter on the obstacles within and across existing departments and agencies drew from the backgrounds of each.

The Report's impact on what had become an anachronistic and sclerotic organization demonstrated the narrative power of history. Written in language both simple and literary, the Report combined the insights of historical analysis with the drama of human tragedy, while presenting compelling conclusions on the U.S. government's failures of imagination, policy, capabilities, and management. ³⁰ May wrote a memoir of his experience, "When the Government Writes History," which offers lessons for future investigative endeavors.³¹

In a traditional field within a traditional discipline, May was distinctly non-traditional. Rigor and discipline were hallmarks of his work but his cast of mind was experiential, venturing into other disciplines and other avenues of research. In 1984, as President of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations, he issued a clarion call to members. Studying international relations from the mid-50's and beyond would require broadening the conception of the discipline and abandoning the assumption of comprehensiveness that had defined historical research since Thucydides. Not only was the volume and scale of material overwhelming; the documentation was less revealing. Among other solutions, he proposed that scholars attempt to establish the social and organizational settings of their documentary sources and use "... quasi-anthropological research" to determine the key principals in their narratives, whose titles and positions were less likely to reflect their roles and influence.³²

Later, he devoted considerable time to the publication of the Kennedy Tapes, the secret White House recordings of meetings and telephone calls related to the Cuban Missile Crisis and other crises during John F. Kennedy's Presidency, providing unique insights into the psychology of individuals and the unfolding of the policy process.³³

This essay has focused on what may be considered the structural aspects of May's work, but these did not translate into a construct. May did not trade in dogma, even his own. His analysis often acknowledged the unknown or unknowable. His perspective and tone were laced with empathy for policymakers, who were awash in the human condition, and confronted complex circumstances and difficult choices. This quality infused his historical work and is explicit in *Thinking in Time*. The closest methodologies are those of the philosopher historians R.G. Collingwood and Benedetto Croce, both of whom rejected history as science.³⁴ May makes scattered references to their non-formal epistemology and their emphasis on empathy to explain the past. And, much as he advocated the uses of history for policymakers, he held historians responsible for too often retreating into the protective cocoons of complications and dependencies rather than attempting to disaggregate contemporary problems and clarify issues.

³⁰ The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004).

³¹ May, "When the Government Writes History," *New Republic* 232 (2005): 30-31.

³² May, "Writing Contemporary International History," *Diplomatic History* 8 (1984): 103-113, quotation, 110.

³³ May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes. Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1997). Also Ernest R. May, Timothy Naftali, and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy, The Great Crises*, 3 vols. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

³⁴ See R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, ed. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946) and Benedetto Croce, *Theory and History of Historiography*, tr. Douglas Ainslie (London: Harrap Press, 1921).

H-Diplo/ISSF Forum 31 (2021)

Ernest May was a public intellectual before the label was associated with heavy doses of self-promotion. Of the academy, his work inside and out was saturated with public purpose.

Essay by Francis J. Gavin, Johns Hopkins University

A Late Appreciation

A confession – in my younger days, unlike many others in the scholarly and policy world, I was not an Ernest May fan. Part of my hesitation emerged from my training. As an undergraduate, I was mentored by John Mearsheimer, and did my graduate work with Marc Trachtenberg. Their approach to international relations focused on how the structure of the international system shaped and constrained the choices available to policymakers. They highlighted material factors, such as military power and the size of a state’s economy, describing international relations largely through the lens of balance-of-power politics. In this worldview, policymakers who ignored material factors and the harsh realities of geopolitics– say, someone like United States President Woodrow Wilson, whom May treated with sympathy – were doomed, despite noble intentions, to failure.¹ Stylistically, both of my mentors put an emphasis on sharp, parsimonious analysis and clear, powerful arguments. I found this way of understanding the world, and of conveying my views, appealing.

May seemed different. He often explained outcomes based on his readings of the messy, uncertain world of domestic politics and public opinion. Actors made decision less like a Cardinal Richelieu or Klemens von Metternich, assessing the globe like a chess board, and more like a Tammany Hall politician, buying off various constituencies, motivated less by a larger grand strategy than more narrow parochial interests. Parsimony was not his style. I preferred the grand, sweeping explanations of world politics offered by historians like Paul Kennedy and William McNeill.² I was also influenced by another mentor, Bruce Kuklick, and his devastating (and to my mind entirely accurate) critique of the bureaucratic politics school of thought that served as the intellectual backbone of the early days at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. It struck me that the so-called 1960s May group – populated with practitioners and scholars like Richard Neustadt, Carl Kaysen, Thomas Schelling, and William Kaufmann, amongst others – appeared eager to blame the disasters of the Vietnam War on anyone or anything other than themselves or the Presidents they served.³ Bureaucratic politics, it seemed to me, was a fine way to understand why a post office was placed in a particular ward in Chicago, but a less satisfactory method to explain serious matters of state, such as how to think about the role of nuclear weapons in American grand strategy.

It was actually my relationship with Philip Zelikow that caused me to rethink my skepticism about May. When Phil took over the Miller Center for Public Affairs at the University of Virginia in the late 1990s, he created the Presidential Recordings Project. In addition to being an important scholarly undertaking, it served as sort of an academic Works Progress Administration for underemployed graduate students of May. I was struck by Zelikow’s generous willingness to take on this smart but somewhat hapless group of half a dozen or so newly minted Ph.D.s who were at loose ends and had dim prospects of gainful academic employment. I was lucky enough to be included in the sinecure through my friendship with the star of the group, Drew Erdmann, a brilliant if at times sullen scholar who vouched for me with Zelikow. To this day, Drew has my all-time favorite academic job market story. After struggling to find more than underpaid postdocs and part-time teaching gigs, Drew entered and thrived in government service (with great assistance from Phil). In April 2003, Drew left me a voicemail that said “Frank, I am in Qatar. They’ve X-rayed my teeth, given me small arms training, and asked me to write a will. They haven’t explained why I am here.” A few weeks later, I

¹ Ernest May, *The World War and American Isolation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), viii, 482.

² Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict, 1500-2000* (New York: Random House, 1987); William McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Forces, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

³ Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 159-161.

opened the New York Times to see that Drew had been named the Minister of Higher Education for the Coalitional Provisional Authority of Iraq.⁴ In other words, Drew was qualified to lead all the universities for a nation of 25 million but could not get a tenure track job in a history department.

May's influence shaped the recordings project from day one. I worked on the tapes that President John F. Kennedy made of his meetings with Cabinet officials and White House advisors. On any given day, the President might have briefings and discussions about the segregation crisis at the University of Mississippi, the price of steel, labor relations, the dangerous standoff over Berlin, tax policy, the outflow of gold and dollars from the U.S. Treasury, and thermonuclear tests. The recordings provided a granular level view of how policymaking worked – the difficult tradeoffs, the rivalries amongst advisors, the motivation to hedge and delay on important decisions about an uncertain future. May and Zelikow wove together these disparate themes with a synthetic approach that married micro history with macro perspectives.⁵ While I retained my “third image,” systemic view of the world, both the recordings and the comradery of various May acolytes pushed me to add nuance to my previous view. I began to see how various issues connected not simply through time, or on a vertical axis, but also across space, as horizontal history. My own subject, how the United States dealt with its balance-of-payments deficits and gold and dollar outflow, could connect, in a May-like fashion, to issues ranging from how the United States thought about the German question to what its policies were on nuclear strategy and proliferation.⁶

As I made my scholarly turn from dollars to bombs, an unusual product of May's work had a big influence on me: the extraordinary, massive, top-secret study, *The History of the Strategic Arms Competition, 1945-1972*, co-written with John D. Steinbruner and Thomas W. Wolfe at the request of Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger.⁷ The massive (the two volumes come in at just over 1000 pages) and still highly redacted book was a godsend for someone seeking to understand the how, what, when, and where of America and the Soviet efforts to build strategic nuclear weapons and how those efforts interacted with and shaped each other. There were all sorts of critical details about a variety of American and Soviet systems, with insights and evidence about nuclear strategy and operations at odds with the more stylized histories. What was especially impressive was how the authors handled the “why” question. The authors rejected popular if simplistic explanations such as technological determinism or security-dilemma dynamics that many believe drive arms races. In spite of bureaucratic rivalry and the military's fascination with new weapons, in the end, politics, or the perception of political realities, shaped what was built and deployed. The study is unique in that it serves both as a primary and a secondary source document and remains the most important source for understanding the first decades of the superpower nuclear rivalry. It is also one of the most powerful examples of how scholars can undertake contemporary history on behalf of national security officials without compromising their principles or perspective.

As my career developed, May's influence on me expanded. I left Virginia to take a tenure track position at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas. The public policy or school of international affairs track, a more common path now, was at the time novel for historians. There was little in my training, or frankly in the history field writ large, that offered guidance as to what I could offer to these students that could be of use to them. May had been a

⁴ For a sense of how it went, see George Packer, “War after the War: What Washington doesn't see in Iraq,” *The New Yorker*, November 23, 2003, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/11/24/war-after-the-war>

⁵ May and Philip Zelikow, general eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy, The Great Crises* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), vols. 1-3.

⁶ Thomas Schwartz, another excellent May student and an extraordinarily kind and generous mentor, was especially important in shaping my views on these issues.

⁷ May, John D. Steinbruner and Thomas W. Wolfe *The History of the Strategic Arms Competition, 1945-1972*, March 1981, part 1 accessed at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB277/front%20matter%20chs%201-5.pdf>

trailblazer – not only had he taught at a policy school; with his political scientist colleague, Richard Neustadt, he had designed perhaps the most influential policy course in the country, which was the basis of their influential book, *Thinking in Time*.⁸ The use of detailed case studies, where assumptions were challenged, combined with the kind of active learning exercises their class emphasized, became the bread and butter of my policy school pedagogy. His methods were exactly what my students were looking for and had become a model for my teaching ever since:

“For effective analysis or management, the kind that is not just academically right but gets something done, it is crucial, we think, to anticipate and take into account the different ways in which different actors see the world and their roles in it – not only organizationally but humanely as individuals.”⁹

As valuable as *Thinking in Time* was for my teaching, May’s slim volume, “*Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*” made an even bigger impression.¹⁰ *Lessons* is a strange, dark book, published in 1973, just as the disastrous American military intervention was coming to a tragic end. It is one of the few times May abandoned his typically cool, temperate prose and even-handed analysis. The word “lessons” is in quotation marks, as if May is despairing of the ability of American decision-makers to learn. Makers of “foreign policy are often influenced by beliefs about what history teaches or portends” but “ordinarily use history badly.”¹¹ May looks at policies and presidents that conventional wisdom holds up as wise and forward looking, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s planning for the postwar world, and Harry Truman’s decision to intervene on the Korean Peninsula with skepticism if not outright scorn. Though May attempts to provide insights and tools for policymakers to avoid disaster, one senses that he despaired for an America whose Cold War policies were erratic, unwise, and shaped more by bureaucratic battle than any sense of *raison d’état*. Even his unconvincing recommendation that the national security bureaucracy be staffed with historians is delivered without much passion, as I think May himself suspected that the suggestion would neither be taken up nor make much of a difference if it was.

Despite, or perhaps because of these qualities, I kept coming back to the book. I first assigned it to my “Policy Development” students in 2001, before 9/11, but as the United States began to lose its collective mind after the al-Qaeda attacks on New York City and Washington DC, the book’s message seemed even more urgent. Policymakers were regularly using terrible historical analogies – comparing Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler and breezily positing the ease with which the United States had transformed Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan into pacifistic liberal democracies. May understood something that my more realist models often underplayed, that public opinion in a democracy was volatile and there was not necessarily wisdom in crowds. Nor was there much incentive for decision-makers to break the shackles of an incorrect past, if it suited their political purposes. *Lessons* seemed the perfect antidote to the madness of 2002-03, but of course, it was out print, a fact my students always complained about. But another May book, his 2000 masterpiece, *Strange Victory*, was widely available even if its contemporary lessons were ignored.¹² Its riveting, detailed account of how not one but two democracies calamitously misunderstood the dangers hiding in plain

⁸ Richard E. Neustadt and May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York and London: The Free Press/Macmillan and Collier Macmillan, 1986).

⁹ Neustadt and May, *Thinking in Time*, 157.

¹⁰ May, “*Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*” (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

¹¹ May, “*Lessons of the Past*”, xi.

¹² May, *Strange Victory: Hitler’s Conquest of France* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2000).

sight, while wildly overestimating their ability to shape their environment, served as an eerie and distressing forecast for many of the disastrous foreign policies the United States would pursue in the follow two decades.

I did not start out as a May student or devotee. Nor have I abandoned my earlier framework that power shapes the international system and constrains what decision makers can do. Historians have preferences, and mine lean towards the longer term and structural, if not quite the *longue durée*. My reading of the historical record still makes me skeptical of the ability of unfettered bureaucracies to undermine the policies of a determined executive. As I have gotten older, however, May's influence has helped me to add nuance and context to these views. His examples and practices have made me a much better teacher. Through his books, I've recognized the centrality of critical choices decision-makers face in the face of uncertainty. Largely because of May, I've come to understand how history, used unwisely, can be a burden, but when used wisely, can provide, if not answers, at least reduce the risks of catastrophe. Most importantly, I've learned that a historian can't stay apart from the larger problems of the day, but has an obligation to engage, to contribute to the world outside of the ivory tower, and perhaps most importantly, to challenge presumptions and interrogate beliefs – even or perhaps especially, one's own.

Essay by Daniel Sargent, University of California, Berkeley

The Irony of Ernest May: Reflections on a Historian

Isaiah Berlin, in his essay on Tolstoy, derives from a fragment of Archilochus a famous distinction between foxes and hedgehogs. The fox knows many things; the hedgehog, one big thing.¹ No intellect conforms precisely to either archetype; that was precisely the point Berlin intended to make about Tolstoy. But the British philosopher's distinction remains a useful guide to intellectual propensities. Some of us quest for unifying explanations. Others favor complexity, paradox, and irony. This tension has been present if not since the creation, then at least since the Greeks.

Herodotus, foremost among his discipline's founders, did not deduce grand theory from the chaos of historical events. Instead, his *Histories* evoke a pluralist and cosmopolitan sensibility, inhospitable to unifying explanations. Call him an archetypal fox, as Berlin does. Thucydides, a near contemporary of Herodotus, also knew many things, but Thucydides's reconstruction of the war between the Athenians and the Spartans pointed towards a unifying explanation, from which much theory has been derived.² This, in the end, made Thucydides more hedgehog than fox.

The tension has endured. We can situate individual thinkers and theorists in relation to Berlin's zoology. But we might also locate in relation to Berlin's distinction between foxes and hedgehogs the propensities that demarcate academic disciplines, including those that mark the divide between the discipline of history and the realm of the social sciences. The split begins, perhaps, with Herodotus and Thucydides, whose instincts pointed in divergent directions, but it became institutionalized only during the twentieth century, with the formalization and entrenchment of disciplinary conventions and boundaries within research universities.

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Ernest R. May was a historian whose forays across intellectual boundaries were prolonged, intimate, and productive. Educated at the University of California at Los Angeles, where he matriculated at the age of 16, May won appointment to the Harvard Department of History in 1954 and tenure in 1959. He spent his entire career in Cambridge, where he taught legions of undergraduates and scores of graduate students (including this author). By anyone's measure he excelled within his own discipline. By the time May was elected president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations in the early 1980s, he ranked among his field's most senior and influential statesmen.³

But May engaged where most historians did not. He did significant work for the U.S. government, including as a consultant for the CIA. For the Defense Department, he co-authored a history of the strategic arms race, a project that Defense Secretary James Schlesinger initiated in 1974 out of concern that a "lack of sufficient historical analysis and

¹ Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951).

² Ernest R. May, "The United States' Underuse of Military Power" in *History and Neorealism*, eds. Ernest R. May, Richard Rosecrance, and Zara Steiner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 228-45. Also see Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

³ I have relied in this essay upon two substantial obituaries: Graham Allison, Akira Iriye, Charles Maier, and Philip Zelikow, "Ernest R. May," *The Harvard Gazette*, February 2011; and Samuel Williamson, Jr., "Ernest Richard May," *Perspectives on History*, September 1, 2009.

knowledge” impeded decision-making.⁴ The resulting study, *History of the Strategic Arms Competition*, remains classified, in part, and unpublished, in entirety, unlike the *9/11 Commission Report*, another official history in which Ernest May was involved.⁵ May served as a consultant to the 9/11 Commission and functioned, along with the Commission’s executive director Philip Zelikow, as one of the principal “architects of the report.”⁶ An exercise in public history enacted on a large scale and under immense pressure, the report’s success resulted from collaboration, in which several of May’s former students participated. Taken as a whole, the 9/11 Commission functioned, in some sense, as both testament and capstone to May’s conviction that good history, predicated upon rigorous research and situated in an international panorama, can, and should, serve the public interest.⁷

If public service was an unwavering commitment, interdisciplinary engagement was another longstanding preoccupation. From 1967, May chaired Harvard’s Research Seminar on Bureaucracy, Politics, and Policy, often known, simply, as the “May Group.”⁸ Based in Harvard’s Institute of Politics, the seminar dedicated itself to exploring “how bureaucracy works” and to understanding why “governmental programs have so often produced results divergent from...intentions.” Luminaries from across Harvard’s social science departments participated: economists, sociologists, political scientists, even a historian, or two. The effort spawned books, but the May Group also did vital institutional work, incubating the core curriculum for what became the Kennedy School of Government. For his own part, Ernest May relocated half of his faculty appointment and his office from the History Department to JFK Street. He thus became, in a literal sense, a historian among the social scientists.

May’s engagement with the social sciences was extraordinary in extent and unusual in accomplishment, much like his public service. But these two through-lines of his career—the extramural and the interdisciplinary—represented quite different kinds of extra-disciplinary commitment. Government work appeared, for May, to be an uncomplicated and essentially intuitive commitment, springing from his devotion to the public good and to his country, which he might well have called patriotism. May’s interdisciplinary forays, on the other hand, were more ambivalent in nature. His engagements with the social sciences were deep, prolonged, and irrigated by personal friendships. But the result was not a convergence of intellectual purpose. Rather, engagement with the broader social sciences appears to have sharpened May’s sense of his own difference, of himself, perhaps, as a fox among the hedgehogs.

May himself described his respectful, but critical engagement, with mid-century realist thinkers as an impetus to his work as a historian. Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, and Robert Osgood, who critiqued the surfeit of “sentimentality, moralism, and legalism” in American foreign policy, inspired May’s early historical work.⁹ Later, as political science moved towards formal theory and quantitative abstraction, neo-realist theory became more bugbear than

⁴ The first five chapters have been declassified and are available from The National Security Archive. For the links and an illuminating essay by a former student, see Robert Wampler, “Ernest R. May, 1928-2009: An Appreciation,” June 10, 2009, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB277/index.htm>.

⁵ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004).

⁶ Ernest R. May, “When Government Writes History.” *The New Republic*, May 22, 2005.

⁷ The characterization of the Commission Report as a capstone to May’s career feels especially fitting to the present author: my career as a graduate student began on September 11, 2001 with a 9 a.m. meeting in Ernest May’s study in Widener Library, which is where we both were when the second plane hit the World Trade Center.

⁸ Institute of Politics, “Ten Year Report: 1966-67 to 1976-77,” John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

⁹ Ernest R. May, *American Imperialism: A Speculative Essay*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Imprint, 1991), v-vi.

inspiration. May did not perceive in the complex drama of world politics the distinct analytical realms of man, the state, and war, as the era's most influential IR theorist put it.¹⁰ Rather, international relations were for him more akin to a dynamic game of three-dimensional chess, wherein causation and explanation had to be complex, located at the same time in the choices and beliefs of the statesman, the peculiarities of the government, and the dynamics of the international system. May recoiled from the assertion, heralded in Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979), that what truly matters is the structure of the international system.¹¹ Such reductionism, May sniffed in the mid-1990s, "remains a theory not applicable to foreign policy."¹² Indeed, May's final published essay indicted neorealism for what he called its near-complete inability to account for his country's historical march to global ascendancy.¹³ May preferred to narrate his country's ascent to global predominance as a series of conjunctural developments, some improbable.

More generally, May disliked the propensity of political science to ransack the historical evidence as an empirical quarry. "When political scientists ask historians for help," he observed, "they usually sound like restaurant patrons summoning waiters."¹⁴ For May, good history was an end itself, not just a source of data, from which understanding of the transcendent phenomenon might be refined. The kind of scholarship May practiced dealt with hard particulars, not general conclusions about "appeasement or deterrence or whatever," as he once put it.¹⁵ He remained quite steadfast in his instincts over the arc of his long career. But as political science waltzed towards theoretical refinement, May became in some sense an outsider twice over. Having slipped the confines of his own discipline for a rich and productive interdisciplinary engagement at the Kennedy School of Government, what he encountered only entrenched his sense of himself as a historian and his deep conviction in the necessity of good history to the work of government.

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Knowing many things, May returned, again and again, to the specificity of the historical moment. But he also insisted upon the utility of history for government work. These positions might appear incompatible. If human society resists universal laws, how can history yield worthwhile predictions, far less probative direction? It mostly can't, was May's position, and his views on the uses of history in the public arena were, in the main, cautionary. And still he insisted upon the necessity of good history. Historical analysis will be deployed whether we get the history right or wrong, he reasoned. The historian, it follows, can help to align the historical analysis with the available evidence or, at minimum, confront the inevitable misuses of history in the public arena.¹⁶

But if the past reveals no iron laws and tolerates few predictions about the future, robust historical analysis can at least expand the decision-maker's horizons, May argued. Knowing the history of the issue at hand and, even better, knowing the histories of similar cases expands the decision maker's awareness of their options and, perhaps, of the unanticipated

¹⁰ Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

¹² Ernest R. May, "History—Theory—Action," *Diplomatic History* 18:4 (1994): 589-603.

¹³ May, "Underuse of Military Power."

¹⁴ May, "History—Theory—Action," 593.

¹⁵ May, "History-Theory-Action," 596.

¹⁶ Ernest R. May, *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

effects that choices might set in motion.¹⁷ May's case for history thus aligns with what Henry Kissinger, the most influential historian in American government since Theodore Roosevelt, has called a historical sensibility. Consider, on this theme, Kissinger's reflections on the uses of history, offered in 1974:

"I think of myself as a historian more than as a statesman... History is a tale of efforts that failed, of aspirations that weren't realized, of wishes that were fulfilled and then turned out to be different from what one expected. So, as a historian, one has to live with a sense of the inevitability of tragedy... insofar as I think historically I must look at the tragedies that have occurred. Insofar as I act, my motive force, of which I am conscious, it is to try to avoid them."¹⁸

This, I think, captures the case for history that May made—in the seminal books and articles that he published; in the institutional work that he advanced at the Kennedy School of Government; and in the example that he set to those who followed, including the advocates of Applied History today. That history teaches few probative lessons was, for May, a foundational insight. The use of history situated not in the transcendent lessons that historical analysis might have to teach us but, rather, in the sensibility that immersion in history's complexities cultivates, a sensibility, May insisted, that might empower decision makers to improvise for themselves workable and even wise solutions, tailored to the contingent needs of their own historical circumstances.

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May and Kissinger were Harvard colleagues for a decade. While they cohered in their shared appreciation of history's uses, they also clashed, including over Vietnam. In May 1970, May, who was then serving as Dean of Harvard College, joined a faculty expedition to Washington, where a dozen faculty members planned to confront Kissinger, then serving as U.S. national security adviser, over the U.S. invasion of Cambodia. Fortified with scotch, the Harvard luminaries, who mostly hailed from the faculty's moderate wing, assailed what Thomas Schelling called a "disastrously bad foreign policy decision."¹⁹ May, revealingly, focused on the domestic implications of the escalation. "You're tearing the country apart domestically," he told Kissinger, warning that the adverse consequences of the Cambodian invasion would linger in American politics. "Tomorrow's foreign policy is based on today domestic situation," May warned.²⁰

A second clash came decades later in the pages of the *New York Times*. Invited to review Kissinger's *Diplomacy*, May delivered a mixed verdict.²¹ He hailed the book as a window into the thinking of Kissinger, whose wisdom and significance May compared to Machiavelli's. (May would later compare Kissinger to George Kennan, another lofty tribute.²²) But May's review critiqued Kissinger's book as a work of historical analysis. May lamented Kissinger's preoccupation with great men and his evident indifference to "forces and trends," including the historical development

¹⁷ Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May. *Thinking In Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

¹⁸ Interview with Secretary of State Kissinger," October 6, 1974, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976*, Vol. XXXVIII, Part 1, no. 46.

¹⁹ Mike Kinsley, "Twelve Professors Visit Washington..." *Harvard Crimson*, June 11, 1970.

²⁰ Kinsley, "Twelve Professors."

²¹ Ernest R. May, "The 'Great Man' Theory of Foreign Policy," *The New York Times*, April 3, 1994; and Henry Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. New York: Touchstone, 1994.

²² May, "Underuse of Military Power," 237.

of political institutions. May also alleged specific errors of fact. Kissinger, he declared, had made “the types of mistake for which students fail to get pass degrees in history.” The intent may well have been humorous; May often deployed exaggeration as a literary device, coming up with some brilliant one-liners over the arc of his career. But in this instance, May’s spiked—and unnecessary—barb provoked Kissinger himself called a “violent” rejoinder in the *New York Times*.²³

These political and intellectual spats divided two men who, at some level, had much in common. Kissinger and May shared an ironic sensibility: both were intrigued by the unintended consequences of well-intentioned policy choices; both doubted the statesman’s capacity to master the currents of their eras. Concerned with the specificities of historical conjunctures, especially of decision-making, both dissented from post-1945 efforts to transform international studies into a social science, capable of producing general rules, or predictions. Both strove, in their own ways, to bring history to bear upon the work of government: Kissinger as practitioner; May as teacher.

The differences are also instructive. Understated and shy where Kissinger was charismatic and gregarious, May neither sought nor achieved the power and influence that Kissinger won. Both arrived at Harvard in the early 1950s as outsiders, but they came from different places. Kissinger was an émigré from the Old World, a refugee from Nazi persecution. May was a child of the New World frontier, born into a Texas family that had straddled the U.S.-Mexico border for generations. These contrasting journeys may help to explain differences in their intellectual orientations, especially towards the republic that both men cherished.

Henry Kissinger devoted much of his life to serving the country that had offered him and his immediate family sanctuary from Nazi tyranny, but the United States, for Kissinger, remained intellectually secondary; what animated his understanding of statecraft was his deep and profound immersion in European diplomatic history. His was the “European mind in American policy,” as biographer Bruce Mazlish puts it.²⁴ (In academia, Kissinger’s European mind did not make him an outlier; much thinking about international relations, including the mid-century realism against which May reacted, has striven to derive general conclusions from European experience.) May’s orientation was different. A Texan by birth and a Westerner by orientation, his first academic publication was a brief biography of nineteenth-century California’s “second-most notorious bandit.”²⁵ Next came a brief biography of the frontier journalist and printer Benjamin Parke Avery, who served for a year as minister to China in 1874-75, then died in Beijing.²⁶

The pattern of these early publications evokes May’s intellectual drift. He might have flourished as a historian of the American West; the Master’s thesis that May wrote in his first year as a graduate student at UCLA devoted over 250 pages to the career of Bret Harte, the great raconteur of the California Gold Rush.²⁷ But May’s interest in world affairs pulled him outward, from the history of California, where his early interests as a historian situated, towards the international arena.

Still, the American experience remained foundational, including for what it taught May about the workings of the U.S. government, even the institutional aptitude of the United States for *Weltpolitik*. Having begun on the Western frontier,

²³ Kissinger to Sulzberger, April 4, 1994, Henry A. Kissinger Papers, Box 754, Folder 1. Yale University, Manuscripts and Archives.

²⁴ Bruce Mazlish, *Kissinger: The European Mind in American Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

²⁵ Ernest R. May, “Tiburcio Vasquez,” *Quarterly of the Historical Society of Southern California*, 29:3-4, (Winter 1947-1948): 122-35.

²⁶ May, “Benjamin Parke Avery,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 30:2 (June 1951):125-149.

²⁷ May, “The Overland Monthly under Bret Harte,” M.A. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1949.

May devoted himself, over the long arc of his career as a historian, to understanding the U.S. ascent to global predominance. But he never lost sight of how the early circumstances of the United States, and the distinctive trajectories of institutional development that resulted from the frontier experience, shaped U.S. engagement with world affairs, including in his own times. For May, the superpower role the United States came to assume in the 1940s was not an inevitable destiny; it was the result of contingent choices, taken under external pressure. Explaining how the United States came to accept, and even embrace, such power and responsibility became a lifelong preoccupation, one that would define May as a contemporary historian, as one who strives to understand how his own times came to be.

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May was a child of the 1940s, of that crucible decade when geopolitics and choice thrust the United States into a permanent global role. He was thirteen years of age at the time of Pearl Harbor: young enough to be impressionable but mature enough to understand the strength of the domestic political forces that had arrayed against Franklin Roosevelt's internationalist instincts. May entered college in 1945, the *Stunde Null* of the American Century. In the summer of his college graduation, the Cold War's first great crisis exploded over Berlin. (He commemorated the crisis fifty years later with an essay in *Foreign Affairs*.²⁸) May entered graduate school that fall. He completed his Ph.D. with impressive velocity, but the world was moving even faster.

In the three years it took May to write his MA and Ph.D. theses, the Truman administration improvised an American world order. Truman acted in response to setbacks that startled and alarmed, both at home and abroad. The creation of NATO and the Soviet atomic bomb; the ascent of McCarthy and the triumph of Mao; the coming of the Korean War and the enactment of NSC-68: these seminal events coincided with May's education. Graduating into a world transformed, May's first assignment as a newly minted Ph.D. was naval service, which he spent working as a historian for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He never published an autobiography, alas, but "placing" May in the historical context of the 1940s (to deploy a mode of analysis that he and Richard Neustadt would later commend to policy analysts) suggests how global events might have impressed themselves upon a prodigious but young intellect.

By 1954, May was at Harvard. His professional journey more complete than he could have known at the time, May devoted himself to his historical scholarship. Having abandoned California for Massachusetts and the history of the American West for the history of American foreign relations, May embarked upon a series of historical studies that would illuminate a series of crucial pivot points in the long, uncertain American march to global predominance.

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First came U.S. entry to the First World War. May's doctoral thesis had presented a careful study of Secretary of State Williams Jennings Bryan during the years of American neutrality.²⁹ The dissertation concluded with Bryan's June 1915 resignation over President Wilson's decision to issue, over Bryan's objections, a strong note of protest in response to Germany's sinking of the SS *Lusitania*. Bryan's resignation, which in May's later assessment marked "the administration's gradual shift from indrawn pacifist reformism to Progressive nationalism" came almost two years before

²⁸ Ernest R. May, "America's Berlin: Heart of the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs* 77:4 (July-August 1998):148-60.

²⁹ Ernest R. May, "Bryan and the World War: 1914-1915," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1951.

Wilson went to Congress to seek a declaration of war against Germany.³⁰ May's first book, *The World War and American Isolation, 1914-1917* (1959), sought to explain that larger decision, over a longer time span.³¹

May's conclusions were unorthodox, even radical. To grasp their boldness, we need to situate May among the historiographical orthodoxies of his era. By the time May entered high school at the end of the 1930s, Wilson's choice for war was understood, by most well-informed Americans, to have been a tragic and even nefarious mistake. This critical view found potent expression in the 1934-36 work of the U.S. Senate's Special Committee on the Investigation of the Munitions Industry, known as the Nye Committee for its chairman Gerald Nye, a progressive Republican from North Dakota. The Nye Committee concluded in the mid-1930s, to great public fanfare, that an unholy trinity of arms dealers, financiers, and Ivy League Anglophiles had dragged the United States into war, over the objections of such wise pacifists as William Jennings Bryan.

The Nye Committee never accumulated evidence equal to its argument, but prominent historians embraced the Committee's view, none with greater influence than Charles Callan Tansill, probably the preeminent diplomatic historian of the 1930s. In his 1938 study, *America Goes to War*, Tansill drew deep upon the historical records that the Nye committee had generated, especially witness interviews.³² Tansill's analysis reaffirmed Nye's conclusion, as did the work of Charles Beard, another luminary of interwar historiography.³³ Both historians adjudged the war a mistake: Beard, a materialist, blamed structures; Tansill pointed the finger at decision-makers, including Wilson.³⁴ Their critical analyses were variations on a theme: that U.S. involvement in the First World War had been a colossal and costly blunder. The strength of the consensus that cohered around this view from the mid-1930s anticipated, in some ways, the bipartisan opprobrium that has come in more recent times to envelop the Bush administration's choice for war in Iraq in 2003.

May took a different view, which he reached using quite different research methods. Whereas the Nye Committee had predicated its conclusions on witness interviews, May dived deep into the archival record, and not just the records of U.S. archives. He made extensive use of European materials, drawing upon British, French, and German materials and from published series from the Russian state archives. This diligent, multinational reconstruction led May to a novel analysis of U.S. entry to the First World War. Wilson had not chosen war, May concluded, so much as the world war had overwhelmed his efforts to avoid embroilment in Europe's catastrophe. But Wilson confronted forces that he could not resolve, beginning with the vast productive capability of the U.S. industrial economy.

Unfortunately for Wilson, the global preeminence of American industrial production in the 1910s did not give the United States the "command of its own fortunes," such as George Washington had predicted the historical development of North America would someday achieve.³⁵ Instead, the sheer prowess of the U.S. industrial economy was the dynamo

³⁰ May, Ernest R. *The World War and American Isolation. 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959):155.

³¹ May, *The World War and American Isolation*.

³² Charles Tansill, *America Goes to War* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1938).

³³ Charles Beard, *The Devil Theory of War: An Inquiry into the Nature of History and the Possibility of Keeping Out of War* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1936).

³⁴ For May's analysis of Tansill, see Ernest R. May, *American Intervention: 1917 and 1941* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association), esp. 6-7.

³⁵ George Washington, "Farewell Address," September 17, 1796, available from American Presidency Project at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/farewell-address>.

that engaged the United States in Europe's Great War. While none of the war's European belligerents sought to enlist the United States as a military ally, all of them understood that securing reliable access to the output of the U.S. economy, with its "industrial plant rivaling all Europe," could tilt the balance of forces in Europe's war of attrition.³⁶ Britain, with its vast Navy and merchant marine, was well-positioned to enlist the industrial capacities of the United States to support the Entente war effort.

Wilson's predicament thus recalled Thomas Jefferson's in the context of Europe's Napoleonic Wars. President Wilson might have imposed an embargo on the export of war materiel, as President Jefferson had done. An arms embargo would have insulated the United States from involvement in Europe's war, but imitating Jefferson would also have outraged those U.S. citizens who insisted upon their rights, as citizens of a neutral power, to trade with any of the war's belligerents. Unwilling to take such an unpopular and contentious stand, Wilson instead asserted neutral trading rights, a stance that precipitated sharp conflicts with both Great Britain and Germany.

Tensions with Great Britain, Ernest May reminded his readers, were especially severe in the first years of the war. Anglo-American frictions in 1915-16 resulted from the disinclination of U.S. traders to honor the Royal Navy's blockade and from President Wilson's own interest in negotiating a diplomatic settlement to the war. Had Wilson's advisor Colonel House not blunted the president's peace diplomacy, May suggested, Wilson's moralistic entreaties on behalf of peace might have escalated Anglo-American tensions to the point of irreconcilability.³⁷ In the end, British diplomats, especially Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, a hero of May's account, greased the frictions that resulted from the explosive combination of European War and American neutrality with greater acumen than did their German counterparts, who blundered into war. Cultural affinity, May noted, sometimes matters in world politics.

Taken as a whole, May's reconstruction of the U.S. entry in the First World War yielded paradoxical conclusions. His reconstruction foregrounded the machinations of diplomats and decision makers; they were the prime actors in his historical drama. But they were not the prime movers in his historical explanation. Far from being the architects of catastrophe whom Gerald Nye and Charles Tansill had indicted and then summarily convicted, the decision makers who populated May's *The World War and American Isolation* resembled captives more than culprits. Tough circumstances, May rued, had left them with sparse latitude for choice. "A near-pacifist President found himself marching step by step toward war," May summarized.³⁸ Unlike Tansill, May saw no alternative paths down which Wilson might have sauntered. "Close analysis," May surmised, "cannot find the point at which he might have turned back or taken another road." This verdict highlights what became a defining trait of May's scholarship: the deeper he immersed himself in the primary sources and in the thoughts and deeds of senior decision makers, the more convinced he became that forces beyond the control of apex policymakers often circumscribed those leaders' capacity for choice.

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After 1917, May turned to 1898: an earlier pivot-point in the American ascent to *Weltmacht*. His next book, *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a World Power* (1961) functions as a sort of prequel to *The World War and American Isolation*: the book explains the coming of the Spanish-American War, which heralded the arrival of the United

³⁶ May, *World War and American Isolation*, 3.

³⁷ May's interest in Wilson's peace diplomacy was pioneering but fleeting, reflecting the limitations of the evidence available to him in the 1950s. For a much fuller account, see Zelikow, Philip. *The Road Less Traveled: The Secret Battle to End the Great War, 1916-1917* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2021).

³⁸ May, *The World War and American Isolation*, vii.

States among the great powers.³⁹ *Imperial Democracy* also underscored and reaffirmed what were by now defining intellectual traits: May's interest in the conjunctures that constrain the choices of leaders; his attentiveness to the vital role of U.S. domestic politics in the making of foreign policy; and his insistence that American conduct must be situated in a larger international context.

Imperial Democracy went beyond *The World War and American Isolation* in situating public opinion, an abiding preoccupation of May's, at the center of the history of U.S. foreign relations. The last years of the nineteenth century, May argued, witnessed a dramatic upswell of public interest in foreign affairs: in opportunities for aggrandizement, such as Hawai'i, and in outrages against morality, such as the Armenian massacres of 1894-95. The fusion of piety and opportunity, May wryly noted, proved an especially potent combination, as events in Cuba would confirm.

President William McKinley, who entered office in 1897, was no expansionist, but intense public sympathy for the rebels who launched an armed rebellion against Spanish rule in February 1895 made Cuba an unavoidable preoccupation for his administration. A pragmatist who was tethered to the business community, McKinley strived to avoid involvement in Spain's Cuban crisis, but Congress forced his hand, reacting to a public clamor that William Randolph Hearst's media empire stirred. In April 1898, Congress passed a resolution demanding that Spain emancipate Cuba and authorizing the use of force should it not. Hemmed in by Congress, McKinley led "his country unwillingly toward a war that he did not want for a cause in which he did not believe," May concluded.⁴⁰

Congressional assertiveness left it to Spain, a dwindling, second-tier power, to decide whether to accept U.S. terms and relinquish Cuba through an arbitration process, or fight. But the government of María Christina, Spain's Queen Regent, had to contend with its domestic politics of its own, May argued. As angry crowds spilled onto the streets of Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia to protest the prospect of arbitration, "successive Spanish ministries judged it safer to get into a losing war than to have the Queen Regent bear the obloquy of having voluntarily abandoned Cuba."⁴¹ And, so, May argued, the Spanish-American War came. Like Wilson in 1917, McKinley chose war not because he had yearned for it but because it was the path of least resistance, perhaps the only path.

The brief Spanish-American that resulted captivated Europe, May explained. For outsiders, McKinley's smashing victory transformed perceptions of the United States. Europeans ceased to view America as outsiders have recently viewed China: mainly as a gargantuan market and opportunity for investment. Now, the United States became a great power, an undeniable factor in the rivalries of the great powers. Some trembled at the prospect; others, especially in London, pondered how American power might be harnessed to serve their own purposes. But much of this speculation, May argued, rested upon a misunderstanding. Outsiders saw the war as an expression of surging American ambition; the more prosaic reality, May believed, was that McKinley's choice for war had resulted, to an impressive degree, from the paucity of the alternative choices. To wit, May paraphrased Shakespeare: "some nations achieve greatness; the United States had greatness thrust upon it."⁴²

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³⁹ Ernest R. May, *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961).

⁴⁰ May, *Imperial Democracy*, 159.

⁴¹ The quote summarizes May's argument, but it is from the 1991 edition of *American Imperialism*. See May, *American Imperialism*, rev. ed. viii.

⁴² May, *Imperial Democracy*, 269-270.

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With this memorable line, May shifted his relationship to the field of foreign relations history. *The World War and American Isolation* had marked May as a pioneer. His multilateral reconstruction of Woodrow Wilson's world set him apart from the stale conclusions of the Tansill generation. May was cosmopolitan where they were parochial, judicious where they were partisan, restrained where they had overreached. But if his work on 1917 separated him from his field's past, May's conclusions on the War of 1898 alienated him, in important ways, from its future. Between May's first two books, William Appleman Williams published *The Tragedy of American History* (1959), a book that has, for better or worse, exerted greater influence upon the subsequent historiography of U.S. foreign relations than any other.⁴³ May compared its influence, facetiously, to that of the Bible.⁴⁴

If May knew many things, Williams knew one big thing. His unified theory of U.S. history centered on an ideology that Williams called "Open Door imperialism." This ideology, he argued, assumed that "America's domestic well-being" required "sustained, ever-increasing overseas economic expansion." To this end, Williams insisted, American elites had striven, over successive generations, to impose upon foreign societies American-style solutions: liberal trade and capitalist development. Williams's theory was not materialist or Marxist, at least not in his early writings. *Tragedy* situated ideas and ideology, not the material interests of the American bourgeoisie, at the causal heart of U.S. diplomatic history. But what Williams offered, and what made his work so alluring for so many, was a grand and unified theory of U.S. foreign policy: a single big idea. Quickly, the New Left or "Wisconsin" School that Williams pioneered, inspired, and mentored produced a remarkable flurry of work. The landmarks included Walter LaFeber's *The New Empire*, probably the outstanding book to emerge from the Wisconsin School's efflorescence of the 1960s.⁴⁵

The New Empire strove, like *Imperial Democracy*, to explain the coming of the War of 1898. But whereas May found his explanation in the domestic political conjuncture, LaFeber sought his in the American economy's need for access to overseas markets. This interpretive divergence did not stifle collegial interaction between the two historians, who had found themselves, at points, working alongside each other at the National Archives in Washington D.C. LaFeber's reminiscences on this experience are worth repeating, if only for the reminder that disagreement need not be disagreeable:

"May quickly understood that we differed in our interpretation of the 1890s, and I immediately understood that his high reputation in the field relived me of any obligation to humor him. But Professor May was not only tolerant; he passed most helpful materials across the table. Here was a case study of how two different scholars could look at the same material and come to different conclusions about its significance."⁴⁶

Such comity was less evident in May's interactions with the dean of the Wisconsin School. In 1963 Williams published an intemperate response to *Imperial Democracy*.⁴⁷ Patronizing and sarcastic, his essay disparaged May's scholarship and

⁴³ William A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988).

⁴⁴ May, *American Imperialism*, 1991 ed., xiii.

⁴⁵ Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁴⁶ LaFeber, *The New Empire*, xiv.

⁴⁷ William Appleman Williams, "The Acquitting Judge," (1963), reprinted in *For A New America: Essays in History and Politics*, eds. James Weinstein and David W. Eakins (New York: Random House, 1970), 37-4 Ernest R.5.

chided May for his devotion to objective historical analysis. May did not respond to Williams's review, but the few words he later committed to print did not convey a high regard for Williams. "Though tautologous in the sense of not being susceptible to proof or disproof," May wrote of Williams's work, "this reconstruction captured the imagination of a number of young American scholars."⁴⁸ May resisted the addition of the adjective "regrettably," but its inclusion in the sentence would have captured his sentiment.

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The tensions with the New Left sharpened during the Vietnam War, including at Harvard. As the debate over Vietnam intensified, May's undergraduate teaching frustrated radical students who lamented that his course in diplomatic history "was not an indictment of American imperialism," as May himself put it.⁴⁹ The students, for their part, objected to what the *Harvard Crimson* characterized as May's "conservative theory of foreign policy." Echoing Williams, whose writings they implored May to include on his syllabus, the student radicals took special objection to May's disinclination to position himself as a righteous prosecutor of history's miscreants.

May was fond of a line from Sir Herbert Butterfield, the philosopher of history whose disinclination to judge sprang from Christian humility, not post-modern relativism. "Behind the great conflicts of mankind," Butterfield once wrote, "is a terrible human predicament which lies at the heart of the story."⁵⁰ The genius of the historical discipline, Butterfield argued, is that *ex post facto* reconstruction (such as May accomplished in *The First World War and American Isolation*) enables us to grasp with greater precision than contemporaries the unresolvable dilemmas that the statesman confronts: the "terrible knot almost beyond the ingenuity of mankind to untie." May invoked Butterfield often, to the umbrage of his Harvard students, who believed that Butterfield's Christian magnanimity let the likes of McGeorge Bundy, their former dean, too easily off the hook.

But those Harvard students who lambasted May as a Kennedy Man, corrupted by his glancing proximity to power in the early 1960s, misunderstood the sophistication of their professor's position. For May, the appropriateness of normative judgment by the historian was not a political dilemma so much as a matter of methodology. He made this clear in an important but mostly forgotten 1963 essay that casts bright light upon his own differences with the New Left. The fundamental problem with much U.S. diplomatic history, May declared, was not the field's politics but its parochialism, especially its devotion to the mistaken assumption that "international relations can be viewed as aspects of one nation's history."⁵¹

Having constituted the history of diplomacy as a subfield of U.S. history, Americanists, May argued, were prone to exaggerate the variety of credible alternatives that had been available to U.S. decision makers. This led, almost inevitably, to overhasty judgments. Historians "who concerned themselves exclusively with American events," May wrote, "tended also to be those who were on the hunt for villains." Conversely, historians who "saw all sides in an international controversy were more apt to realize that one side was rarely able to control or determine the actions of others." Such

⁴⁸ Ernest R. May, "The Decline of Diplomatic History," in Gerald Grob and George Billias, eds., *American History: Retrospect and Prospect* (New York: Free Press, 1971): 399-430.

⁴⁹ "Profile: Ernest R. May," *The Harvard Crimson*, October 18, 1969.

⁵⁰ Herbert Butterfield, "The Tragic Element in Modern International Conflict," *Review of Politics* 12:2 (1950):147-64.

⁵¹ Ernest R. May, "Emergence to World Power," in John Higham, ed., *The Reconstruction of American History* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1962):180-196.

breadth of perspective, May argued, engendered understanding: compared to the Americanists, the internationalists, May wrote, “were more likely to be charitable, humble, and perhaps fatalistic.”⁵²

Williams confirmed the point. Multi-archival research, Williams chafed in his review of May, “is not the essence of determining why a given country, say the United States in the decade of the 1890s, chose to embark upon a given foreign policy.”⁵³ Following this line, Williams critiqued the “simple insufficiency of May’s research in American materials.” The charge was ludicrous: May’s analysis of 1898, like his analysis of 1917, was grounded in his profound understanding of the American history and sources. An Americanist by training and by instinct, May understood the domestic contexts for U.S. foreign policy with precision; over his career as a historian, he gave far greater thought than Williams did to the question of how United States government works (and doesn’t). In the end, Williams’s harrumph revealed his own limitations, especially his disinclination to situate the U.S. ascent to global power in anything approaching an international context. But Williams also clarified one of the primary reasons for May’s divergence from the Wisconsinite wing that came, from the 1960s, to dominate the field of U.S. foreign relations history: his insistence on approaching the American ascent to global power as international history, not as a mere subfield of American domestic history.

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By the early 1960s, May was established. A full professor at Harvard, he was the author of two seminal books. Together, *The World War and American Isolation* and *Imperial Democracy* offered a coherent interpretation of the American ascent to global ascendancy, of the historical origins, that is, of the world that May inhabited. But May’s remained an idiosyncratic perspective. Like his Harvard contemporary Henry Kissinger, May centered powerful decision-makers in his historical reconstruction. But to those apex decision makers upon whom his historical writings centered, May conceded little agency. McKinley and Wilson, in May’s hands, struggled and mostly failed to master the historical currents of their times. These forces included not only the machinations of foreign powers, whose archives May had often plumbed, but also the force of American public opinion, a perennial preoccupation to which May now turned his careful focus.

May’s interdisciplinary forays in the 1960s nurtured his interest in public opinion, but he took special inspiration from an improbable source: the Soviet journal, *International Affairs*. Several years after the publication of *Imperial Democracy*, May found himself struck by one Soviet writer’s critique of the notion that public opinion exists as an independent political force, as a force that *exists* in an ontological sense. This misconception, the Soviet author declared, was “one of the favorite fetishes invented by the ideologists of the capitalist system.”⁵⁴ American might recoil from such claims, May acknowledged, but the longer he mulled the problem, the more sympathetic he became to the suggestion that public opinion exists, to some degree, mainly in the eye of the beholder.

This insight animated May’s next book, a companion volume to *Imperial Democracy* that appeared in 1968. *American Imperialism: A Speculative Essay* refined May’s earlier arguments about the role of public opinion in the American choice

⁵² May, “Emergence to World Power,” 195-196.

⁵³ Williams, “The Acquitting Judge.”

⁵⁴ Quoted in Ernest R. May, “An American Tradition in Foreign Policy: The Role of Public Opinion” in William H. Nelson, ed., *Theory and Practice in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964): 101-122.

for empire in 1898.⁵⁵ Dissatisfied by his own prior lumping, May now split the category. The dynamic element in the movement of what passed for public opinion in the eyes of the policy elite, he now argued, was that small cohort of citizens who took an active interest in world affairs: the so-called “foreign policy public.” Internally divided by the prospect of a U.S. colonial empire, May argued, the foreign policy public had in 1898 failed to play a stabilizing part in the historical drama and had divided internally, leaving the political terrain open to jingoes and upstarts. Issued in the late 1960s, just as the foreign policy public of his own era was dividing over the Vietnam War, May’s argument pointed, suggestively, to the volatile propensities of a “public opinion” that a small cohort of elites determines in the making of foreign policy.

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At this juncture, the next challenge for May might have been the grandest historical turning point of all: Franklin Roosevelt’s choice for globalism in 1940-41. In many ways, May was the perfect historian for the assignment: his fascination with the specificity of the historical conjuncture; his deep engagement with the complexities of public opinion, such a crucial element in the Great Debate that preceded U.S. entry to World War II; and his international range, in which his command of German sources was especially robust. These traits made him well suited to write a field-defining history of the greatest turning point in the American march to global ascendancy. Such a book might have affirmed May’s belief that the “the most important single international relationship” of the twentieth century, as he put it, “has been that between the United States and Germany.”⁵⁶

Instead, May’s interest in the Roosevelt administration pulled him in a different direction: toward a probing, learned, and generative analysis of the uses, and misuses, of history in the making of American foreign policy. Published in 1973, May’s *“Lessons” of the Past* was, in essence, a book in two parts.⁵⁷ The first evaluated how policymakers’ beliefs about history had shaped the making of foreign policy at four key junctures: in the waging of World War II, in the origins of the Cold War, in the initiation of the Korean War, and in the escalation of the Vietnam War. He concluded that the recent past, and the world wars, had weighed especially heavily upon the making of U.S. foreign policy.

The second part of May’s book asked how history might be put to more effective use in government. While May resisted the conclusion that historical analysis yields probative lessons, he argued that historians in government might serve a variety of important and useful tasks: providing vital context for dilemmas with which policymakers must grapple, even identifying and analyzing cases that might offer instructive analogies for present dilemmas. The bottom line, for May, was the inescapability of historical analysis: “men and women making decisions under conditions of high uncertainty,” he wrote, “necessarily envision the future partly in terms of what they believe to have happened in the past.”⁵⁸ That history will be used and abused was for May an inescapable fact, a point of departure with which all reflection on the uses of history must grapple.

Given this assumption, the most useful work that professional historians could perform in the public arena, May argued, would be to ensure that historical analysis that informs government work is both rooted in evidence, not misconception

⁵⁵ Ernest R. May, *American Imperialism: A Speculative Essay* (New York: Atheneum, 1968).

⁵⁶ Ernest R. May, “Writing Contemporary International History,” *Diplomatic History* (Spring 1974) 8:2: 103-113.

⁵⁷ May, Ernest. *“Lessons” of the Past the Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

⁵⁸ May, “*Lessons*,” 190.

or myth, and subject to the rigorous scrutiny of informed specialists. But even such rigorous historical analysis offers no master keys for policy, May insisted. This conclusion was a rebuke to those who argued that the failures of appeasement in the late 1930s taught transcendent lessons about the imperatives of confronting dictators. On the contrary, May's measured and restrained case for historical analysis in public affairs offered a self-conscious corrective to such axiomatic analysis.⁵⁹ This was a theme to which he would return, including *Thinking in Time*, a 1986 volume co-authored with Richard Neustadt that remains a touchstone for subsequent efforts to leverage history on behalf of effective and imaginative public policy.⁶⁰

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After this detour into history's uses in the arena of public policy, May resumed his inquiries into the historical development of U.S. foreign relations. Few books have probed deeper into the role of domestic politics in the making of American foreign policy than *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine*, which May published in 1975.⁶¹ The book begins, like May's earlier volumes, with a tour of the international horizon: the crisis of the Spanish Empire after 1820, Foreign Secretary George Canning's proposal for an Anglo-American alliance, and the churning of elite American outrage over the Greek War of Independence. But this conjuncture also coincided, crucially, with an impending presidential election, in which several of President James Monroe's cabinet members intended to compete, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams included. Breaking novel interpretive ground, May identified the political ambitions of these protagonists as a crucial driver of historical events in 1823-24.

John Quincy Adams, May reasoned, had good reasons to oppose Canning's proposal for an Anglo-American alignment to oppose the restoration of the Spanish-Bourbon empire in Latin America. Accepting such an alignment would have empowered Adams's foes to deploy up old charges of Anglophilia against the former Federalist: a potentially devastating line of attack. The foreign policy "doctrine" that Adams drafted for President Monroe was thus a clever dodge: Adams's bifurcation of the New World from the Old, which historians have often interpreted as a grand ideological statement, instead fulfilled more prosaic political purposes. Adams aimed to neuter the prospect of an Anglo-American entanglement, for which enthusiasm within the United States in 1823 was broad, while silencing the domestic clamoring for a quixotic mission to aid Greece's revolutionary nationalist insurgents. The single biggest idea in the entire history of U.S. foreign relations thus originated, May concluded, in one politician's interest in a forthcoming presidential election. After his seminal books on 1898 and 1917, May could hardly have conceived a stronger case for the ironic approach to the history of U.S. foreign relations that his own scholarship exemplified.

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Remarkably, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine* was May's last book to deal directly with the American ascent to global predominance. Hereafter, May skirted around the 1940s but never summonsed himself to reconstruct, at least not in a book-length project, the diplomatic choices that had transformed the country into which he had been born into a global superpower. A man of the 1940s, perhaps he adjudged himself too close to the history to be an objective analysis?

⁵⁹ Also see Ernest R. May, "The Nature of Foreign Policy: The Calculated versus the Axiomatic." *Daedalus* 91:4 (1962): 653-667.

⁶⁰ Neustadt and May, *Thinking in Time*.

⁶¹ Ernest R. May, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

Perhaps he worried that Minerva's owl had not yet taken flight? Perhaps he recoiled from the sheer scale of the research enterprise? We cannot doubt that he grasped the scale of the challenge.

"Approaches which serve well for reconstructing events and trends up into the 1930s," May wrote in the early 1980s, "cannot enable us to understand the mid- and late-twentieth century."⁶² What had changed in the 1940s was the essential nature of the political regime. As May wrote in 1990:

"The years around World War II form one of the great periods of change in U.S. political history. The only comparable periods are those of the War for Independence and the War between the States. The institutions from which defense policy emerged underwent transformation in 1945-50; so did accepted definitions of the national interest defense policy was supposed to serve."⁶³

The obstacles facing the historian who intended to navigate this transformation were vast, beginning with the sheer quantity of the available evidence. The explosion of the federal bureaucracy during the 1940s and the concomitant explosion in the paperwork that the United States government produced, May argued, created technical challenges eclipsing those that historians of earlier eras faced. Beyond these obstacles, May noted, diplomatic historians of the postwar era would have to grapple with the remaking of the object of their analysis, a fundamental metamorphosis that turned on the 1940s. "Almost everywhere on the planet," May wrote, "the United States became a cynosure with no parallel except perhaps for that of the papacy in Medieval Europe."⁶⁴

Though he left no synthesis of his own, May over his career provided important clues for historians eager to understand the apotheosis of American globalism in the 1940s and the concomitant transformation of the American government. May's deep interest in the operations of U.S. government gave him an acute understanding of the interplay between domestic political development and international engagement. May grasped, with more clarity than most diplomatic historians, that the United States had acquired only very belatedly the institutional capacities necessary to function as a great power. For decades after the Spanish-American War, he explained in an insightful early essay, interagency coordination between the Departments of State, War, and the Navy had been ineffectual, devoid of coordinating bureaucracy and reliant upon personal correspondence between the secretaries. So impoverished was interagency coordination during the First World War, May noted, that a talented and frustrated Assistant Secretary of the Navy in the Wilson Administration had been moved to advocate for what he called a "Joint Plan Making Body": a permanent bureaucratic framework capable of coordination among the agencies involved in making American foreign policy. That no such entity existed was a powerful indication, May grasped, of the American republic's institutional ill-adaptation for great power politics.⁶⁵

Institutional capacities for effecting foreign policy remained limited even twenty years later, after the young assistant secretary had ascended to the presidency. As late as 1938, May noted, the State Department employed no more than a thousand people, not even a fifth of its post-1945 workforce. And for all Franklin Roosevelt's prodigious interest in bureaucratic reform, the work of interagency coordination during the Second World War remained ad hoc, centered on the president himself. Roosevelt's management of the war effort was a bravura performance of presidential leadership, warranting comparison, perhaps, to Abraham Lincoln's management of the Civil War or Napoléon Bonaparte's

⁶² May, "Writing Contemporary International History."

⁶³ May, "The Cold War and Defense," 8.

⁶⁴ May, "Writing Contemporary International History."

⁶⁵ Ernest May, "The Development of Political-Military Consultation in the United States," *Political Science Quarterly* 70:2 (1955): 161-180.

management of France's revolutionary wars. But Roosevelt, like Lincoln, left no permanent institutions sufficient to manage the responsibilities of a global superpower; these institutions would be an invention, May argued, only of the Cold War that followed.

May developed this insight in a brilliant pair of essays published in the early 1990s: "The Cold War and Defense," consigned to the obscurity of an edited volume, and "The U.S. Government, A Legacy of the Cold War," published in *Diplomatic History*.⁶⁶ The second essay began by surveying the landscape of prewar Washington D.C. Even by the late 1930s, May began, the U.S. government was hardly a plausible framework for projecting global military power; the federal state was merely a middling bureaucracy, capable of providing little more than "modest help to people within the continental limits." World War II changed Washington in important respects, imposing a five-sided behemoth upon the city's skyline, but the war, May argued, did not remake the nation's capital into "a headquarters for a global diplomatic-military contest" that would span decades.⁶⁷

The genesis of what future historians would call the national security state came later, May argued. Postwar grappling with the specific institutional deficiencies that the war years had exposed—intelligence failures and interservice conflicts, in particular—produced institutional reforms in the war's immediate aftermath. The National Security Act of 1947 created the National Security Council, the CIA, and the Office (but not yet Department) of the Secretary of Defense. The reforms were foundational, but the completion of the Cold War national security state came later.

During 1949-1950, a set of interlinked crises and setbacks upended U.S. foreign policy: the Soviet atomic bomb, the rise of McCarthyism, the Sino-Soviet alliance, and the outbreak of the Korean War. The intense pressures this novel conjuncture generated, May argued, catalyzed the transformation of the federal government into a permanent national security state, at the center of which sat the National Security Council. "From being merely one part of the executive office of the president," May argued, "the NSC became the government's main steering mechanism, almost as central as the Cabinet in Britain or the Politburo in the Leninist-Stalinist Soviet Union."⁶⁸ The comparison was pellucid: May grasped what the prewar United States government had lacked, and he understood how the challenges of the Cold War transformed the institutional capabilities of the U.S. government, creating a quite different regime.

May's elucidation of the far-reaching implications of this dramatic institutional shift reminded readers, once again, that he was not only a master of rigorous empirical history but also a historian of extraordinary range and startling imagination. "Before World War II," he wrote:

"...the U.S. government had been a government of, for, and by people who for the most part lived in the United States or its territories. By the second half of the 1950s, it had become a government much more of, for, and by people inhabiting a global commonwealth-empire."⁶⁹

The implications for republican democracy were obvious and deleterious, but May resisted the temptation to shoehorn his analysis into a tragic form. On the contrary, he argued, the national security state invented in 1949-50 "can be seen as a creative response" to a very real Soviet threat. And yet May understood the perils that subsequent generations might

⁶⁶ Ernest R. May, "Cold War and Defense." In *The Cold War and Defense*, by Keith Neilson and Ronald G. Haycock: 7-73 (New York: Praeger, 1990); and Ernest R. May, "The U.S. Government, a Legacy of the Cold War." *Diplomatic History* 16:2 (April 1992): 269-277.

⁶⁷ May, "The U.S. Government," 270.

⁶⁸ May, "The U.S. Government," 276.

⁶⁹ May, "The Cold War and Defense," 14.

become captives to solutions devised in the late 1940s to manage specific historical threats, namely Soviet military power. May's reflections on this point are also worth repeating in full. Offered in 1992, just as the Cold War was ending, his reflections anticipate the pitfalls of the post-Cold War era, a time when institutions and assumptions inherited from the era of the Cold War have too often determined the identification of both threats and priorities for national policy. "The Cold War," May wrote in 1992:

"left the United States with a government that seems ill-suited for the future. The NSC is an odd mechanism for framing policy options regarding trade, resources, the environment, population, hunger, or disease. Even if the defense and intelligence establishments contract and undergo shuddering reorganization, they will still be equipped primarily for military or quasi-military missions."⁷⁰

This observation showcased the true critical power of May's historical-analytical method. Unlike the critical historians of the New Left, he did not invoke transcendent normative commitments to condemn the national security state that was invented in the early years of the Cold War as a tragic choice, far less as a tragic destiny. But his insistence on contingency, on the specificity of the historical conjuncture, and on the recognition that events might have turned out differently, led him towards conclusions that were, in some ways, more radical than theirs. History, May insisted, is always within our power to make; with sufficient imagination, which the study of history cultivates, we should be able to summon the capacity to set aside solutions and even institutions that have fulfilled their intended purposes and devise, in their place, novel solutions for the problems that vex us in our times.

May's last book delivered an appropriately contrarian take on one of the supposedly most overdetermined events in the history of the twentieth century: Nazi Germany's conquest of France in the summer of 1940. In the seminal telling of Marc Bloch, the great French historian, the fall of the Third Republic exposed France's political, economic, and even spiritual decay, all of which made France's military defeat at Hitler's hands more-or-less inevitable.⁷¹ May took a quite different view.⁷² The real difference between the Third Republic and the Third Reich, he argued, had been the superior quality of German intelligence and the superior effectiveness with which Hitler's General Staff had integrated tactical intelligence into its operational military planning. French strategic thinkers, for their part, perpetrated a seminal blunder when they assumed that the German attack would come through Belgium, as in 1914, and not through the dense and hilly Forest of the Ardennes. Few misuses of historical analogy, few failures of the imagination have been more consequential in the history of the modern world than theirs, May concluded.

Strange Victory had little to say about the United States. Instead, May's oldest intellectual preoccupation became in his final book an offstage presence, irrelevant to the history or the argument. The United States entered May's analysis of the summer of 1940 only in the final days of France's tragedy, when Prime Minister Paul Reynaud dispatched to Roosevelt a desperate plea for American intervention.⁷³ The appeal went unanswered. And yet, what the *Strange Victory* reconstructs, in almost novelistic detail, is the first great link in the causal chain that led, over 18 months, to U.S. belligerence in the Second World War. Thus situated, the book completes an arc that traces the American rise to predominance: from the Monroe Doctrine to the War of 1898 to the First World War and, ultimately, to the origins of

⁷⁰ May, "The U.S. Government," 277.

⁷¹ Bloch, Marc. *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

⁷² Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York: Macmillan, 2001).

⁷³ May, *Strange Victory*, 446.

the Second World War, the conflict that was, for May, the crucible of the American global ascendancy and of the remaking of the American government that followed.

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May passed away in June 2009, still an active member of the Harvard faculty. He had recently concluded what would be his final lecture with a recitation from Yeats's "Second Coming": "What rough beast its hour come round at last / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born."⁷⁴ The dead may be convenient witnesses, as all historians know, but we can safely assume, I think, that developments in American public life since 2009 would not have assuaged May's sense of unease, in his last years, about his country's course since the Cold War's end.

Americans' transformation into zealous partisans; our devotion to ideological lodestars; our gnawing distrust of evidence; our ardor for demagogues: such tendencies would have dismayed a rigorous and empirical scholar whose bearing radiated reasonableness, a quiet patriot who sought not the power and influence that some of his contemporaries gained, only opportunities for service and, perhaps, a little enlightenment. Barely twelve years have elapsed since his death, but May now appears, for this former student, almost as a figure from another era. His memory offers a dignified rebuke to the bleak trends that have corrupted American public life and begun to challenge even the university's commitment to objective truth.

So, what can we learn today from May's example? What might be the enduring "lessons" of May: the quotation marks offered as both tribute to his seminal book on the use and misuse of history in American foreign policy and acknowledgment of the unease that this shy, self-effacing historian would probably have expressed at the effort to derive teachable lessons from his work and life. But cast aside the caution that May would most likely have disapproved, and contemplate, by way of conclusion, three discrete sets of lessons from May: lessons for historians, lessons for theorists, and lessons for decision makers.

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Start with the lessons for historians. Henry Kissinger, in his response to May's mixed review of *Diplomacy*, pegged his erstwhile colleague for a moralist. Professor May, Kissinger chided, preferred to portray "international relations as a permanent conflict between good and evil."⁷⁵ May's review had been sharp, and Kissinger's frustration was understandable. But the point got May backwards. It was not moralism that set May apart but his disinclination to moralize, his reluctance to function, as Lord Acton urged his fellow historians, as history's "hanging judge."⁷⁶ Unlike other writers, it might be said, May had little interest in putting historical personalities, Kissinger included, on trial. His instinct was instead to ask: what might we learn from Kissinger? For May, resisting the urge to judgement was what gave historical analysis its vitality, its relevance to the present and future.

All historical analysis serves the historian's circumstances, to some degree, but presentism comes in different versions. The sort that Acton espoused strives to hold history's actors accountable for their deviations from universal moral values, from ethical commitments that transcend circumstances, like the Ten Commandments. The Actonian approach has experienced a renaissance in recent years, as historians and society have grappled with the legacies of racism and slavery in

⁷⁴ Vivek Viswanathan, "Professor Ernest R. May: A Personal Reflection," July 2009. Copy in the author's possession.

⁷⁵ Henry Kissinger, Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, April 24, 1994.

⁷⁶ Gertrude Himmelfarb, ed., *Essays on Freedom and Power by John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press), xliii. For May's use of Acton, see "Emergence to World Power," 181.

the American experience; with the consequences of colonialism; and with the entanglements of once venerated figures, like Jefferson, in systems of oppression.

What May would have made of this prosecutorial turn is hard to know. He was devoted to an inclusive conception of the American past, and he affirmed the urgency of reckoning with specific injustices, especially racial violence, exclusion, and oppression. To advance such reckoning, he collaborated in the 1960s with John Hope Franklin, the dean of African American history, and John Caughey, the UCLA mentor whose daughter May had married, to synthesize a textbook version of American history in which the experiences and contributions of peoples long omitted, especially Native Americans and African Americans, were integrated and amplified.⁷⁷ Caughey, Franklin, and May celebrated diversity as a crowning achievement of American history; their substitution of the figurative “salad bowl” for the older metaphor of the national “melting pot” pointed towards a more inclusive vision of the American past, in which a broader and more diverse variety of Americans would find themselves and their forebears represented.

Land of the Free was written in the 1960s. May’s involvement in the project indicates his understanding of how a history that condemns injustice and celebrates those who struggled against injustice serves the purposes of the present, in vital and significant ways. What Caughey, Franklin, and May had written, after all, was an American history for their times, a history for an America engaged in a civil rights revolution. Situated among his writings, though, the project was distinctive: none of May’s monographs on U.S. foreign policy reached to envelop the broad sweep of the American past with such comprehensive ambition; none strove to serve the normative needs of contemporary society with such vigor. And yet, May’s better-known writings on U.S. foreign policy teach us, I think, that a history that curtails normative judgment to *explain* why historical actors, even historical elites, made the choices they did should be no less useful to the purposes of the present, no less vital a priority for justice-minded historians to pursue.

If the past situates in relation to the present as a laboratory of experience, the only such laboratory we possess, the admission of normative filters into the work of reconstruction risks imperiling our capacity to learn from the past. Consider the case of McKinley. The twenty-fifth president expressed beliefs and used words that decent people in the twenty-first century would consider repugnant. Colonialism was for McKinley an option and a temptation but never an abomination. But if we, as historians, permit our distaste for colonialism to lead us to conclude that McKinley’s colonialist proclivities or racial prejudices constitute sufficient explanation for his conduct, we risk hanging our explanations upon the hook of outrage and ceding the ability to understand why McKinley in the end chose empire.

The kind of empathetic reconstruction that May practiced represents a different approach. May sought to understand McKinley on his own terms, not ours. But May’s purpose in writing history “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*” (as Leopold von Ranke put it) was no less animated by concern for the present than is the writing of history that grapples with the hypocrisies and crimes of past actors, such as Lord Acton favored. Call it the distinction between *analytical* and *normative* presentism; both engage the past to serve the needs of the present and the future, but they do so in different ways. The Actonian approach affirms the transcendent reach of shared values and, at its best, expands the “circle of we” to include communities excluded from formerly dominant historical narratives.⁷⁸ But the Rankean approach, which May more often favored, should be no less useful for the present. May’s example teaches that a history that strives for an objective and empathetic reconstruction of events need not be an exercise in mere apologetics; in the end, it is our ability

⁷⁷ Caughey, John Walton, John Hope Franklin, and Ernest R. May. *Land of the Free: A History of the United States* (Pasadena, Calif: Franklin Publications, 1965).

⁷⁸ “Circle of we” is borrowed from my Berkeley colleague David Hollinger, from whom this author has learned a great deal about the purposes of good history. See “How Wide the Circle of the ‘We’? American Intellectuals and the Problem of the Ethnos Since World War II,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 98 no. 2 (1993): 317–37.

to understand the past on its own terms, to comprehend why events played out as they did, that empowers us to learn from experience. This seems a lesson worth remembering today.

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Turn next to the lessons for theorists, especially those theorists of international relations among whom May spent a decent portion of his academic career. Here, too, May has contrarian lessons to teach. If May became something of an outsider to his own discipline as his career progressed and he migrated towards policy relevance and the Kennedy School of Government, he did not become a political scientist, much less a theorist of world politics.

Far from it. Instead, May's sustained engagement with political science and the subfield of international relations in particular reveals a stark divergence from what became, over the arc of his career, the prevailing drift of mainstream American IR. At the same time, May's career also suggests the necessity of engagement between history and political science, not for the purposes of reconciliation, which is probably unachievable, but for the distinctive illumination that these two traditions can bring to the study of world politics.

May never explained his engagement with political science with so much lucidity as he did in "History-Theory-Action," a 1994 essay that he wrote in response to Alexander George's seminal book, *Bridging the Gap*.⁷⁹ May's reading of George was not unsympathetic. He admired George's call for proactive engagement with problems of policy, and he shared George's skepticism for the "otherworldliness" of neo-realist theory, which makes the structure of the international system the primary determinant of how states behave in the international arena.

But May and George parted way on the desirability, purpose, and even the feasibility of generalization about historical events. For George as for most political scientists, May argued, the purpose of inquiry is, in the end, to refine our knowledge of the general problem at hand. Social science, he wrote, strives "to develop generic knowledge: generic knowledge about problems such as taming outlaw states or terminating war and about strategies such as appeasement and coercive diplomacy." Fuller and more refined understanding of such vital concepts, the political scientist often reasons, can inform better public policy.

May took a different view, his skepticism grounded in a different concept of how knowledge about the world is assembled. The human mind, May argued, does not link disparate events via unifying transcendent concepts; when we make analogies, we are engaged in something more like metaphorical reasoning than statistical inference. We may intuit striking parallels in the French, Russian, and Iranian Revolutions, we may even perceive recurrent patterns. But we do not interpret these events as mere instances of a superior, trans-historical phenomenon—revolution—a historical real to the metaphysical, or Platonic, ideal.

This insight led May to distinctive conclusions about where history and theory might situate in relation to the practical work of decision making. Decision-makers, May reasoned, do not select from a menu of ideal-typical options. They do not ask themselves: "should I appease, today, or should I adopt a strategy of coercion?" Rather, they improvise specific solutions in response to specific problems. Historical analysis, May argued, could support the intellectual work of decision-making, not by furnishing more refined theories of the problem—be it appeasement or coercion—as Alexander George argued, but by challenging the policymaker's intuitive (and quite human) propensity to glom onto the nearest cognate case. Rigorous and thoughtful history, May explained, might furnish a broader range of analogical counterpoints, the parsing of which might expand the "range of possible referents for decision making."

⁷⁹ May, "History-Theory-Action." Also, Alexander L. George, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1993).

This point, I think, situates May's distinctive contribution to policy-adjacent intellectual work. Harnessing experience to inform better decision making, he insisted, required the eclecticism of Isaiah Berlin's fox, not the singlemindedness (or even the theoretical refinement) of his hedgehog. Abstract problems, such as great power transition, reside mainly in the minds of social scientists, May insisted; they are not the practical problems with which decision-makers deal. May thus challenged the assumption that the refinement of theory might yield conceptual master keys capable of guiding the practice of world politics. To put it more bluntly, the use of theory for policymakers who must deal with the world as they find it will be limited.

Theorists will undoubtedly find much with which to disagree, but what they might take from May is an awareness of how historical analysis, as a disciplinary tradition, affords an alternative way of thinking about patterns in world politics, in which insight is achieved via metaphor or induction, and not by conceptual or deductive reasoning. If history can be understood in these terms, as a method for thinking about similarities across cases, and not as a mere stockpile of evidence that can be raided to support the construction of theory, perhaps a more constructive engagement between history and social science might yet be achievable.

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Turn last to the decision makers, that amorphous cohort whom May hoped historical analysis would empower to make better decisions. What lessons might they take from his half century of scholarship and reflection on of decision-making in government? *Learn history* might be sufficient conclusion, for May, in the end, insisted on nothing so much as the capacity of an erudite and cosmopolitan sense of history to expand and empower the imagination.

But May has more specific lessons to teach. Nothing he wrote offered such thoughtful guidance as his 1962 essay "The Nature of Foreign Policy," published in *Daedalus*.⁸⁰ The essay begins with Dean Acheson's famous January 1950 speech to the Washington Press Club, in which the Secretary of State identified Japan and the Philippines as vital links in an outer perimeter of U.S. military security. Against this "cautious and judicious" approach, May contrasted the pell-mell rush into Korea, Taiwan, and Indochina that followed North Korea's transgression of the 38th Parallel in June 1950. The difference, May argued, was the abandonment of Acheson's "calculated" approach to regional security for an "axiomatic" approach that insisted on the need to "resist...armed aggression, wherever it occurred."⁸¹

May was not opposed to axiomatic thinking, but he urged his readers—and decision makers in particular—to be self-conscious about the sources of axiomatic beliefs, which, like most belief, derive from historical experience. Some axioms, such as the general preference in U.S. foreign policy for alignment with national self-determination, derive from deep experience. Other axioms refract shallower experience. The axiomatic insistence on confronting aggressors that exerted such decisive influence in the early Cold War reflected the conclusions that American policy elites drew only from the late 1930s. The shallowness of the experience from which such axioms derive might not invalidate the conclusion, May reasoned, but it should warrant introspection among decision makers who predicate choice upon axiomatic insights.

A consummate fox, May insisted on the necessity of calibrating policy to circumstances, of introducing specificity and calculation to the decision-making process. While he recognized the utility of axiomatic commitments, including within the policy arena, he remained wary of over-generalization. He did not believe that good judgment requires fealty to unifying ideas. May resisted the Wisconsin School's effort to cram the history of U.S. foreign relations into a tight framework, and he indicated little enthusiasm for unifying or strategic concepts intended to provide foreign policy with

⁸⁰ May, "The Nature of Foreign Policy."

⁸¹ May, "The Nature of Foreign Policy," 662.

overarching coherence, for what we might call the “Yale School” of grand strategy.⁸² What policymakers can take from May, then, could be some enduring recognition of the enduring value of specific knowledge: knowledge about the myriad societies and governments with which the United States interacts; knowledge of the deep history of U.S. foreign policy; knowledge about what has been tried, what has failed, and what has succeeded. Such knowledge tempers our propensity to axiomatic thinking, including in foreign policy; it may even expand self-awareness.

In this spirit, consider the fate of the Pax Americana in our times and ponder what May might have to teach a generation of policymakers who must today manage a delicate inflection point in the long arc of American ascendancy. Deeply versed in the historical formation of the American era, May understood that the predominance achieved in the 1940s was not a natural destiny, far less the realization of some will-to-power emanating from the recesses of the nation’s character, or history. “Until very recently,” he wrote in the 1960, “the nation characteristically followed aggressively isolationist foreign policies and stood ostentatiously unprepared for war.”⁸³ Americans, he continued, “seemed not only to love peace but to be infatuated with it.” What changed in the 1940s was the conjuncture of external and internal circumstances that prompted the Roosevelt administration to calculate that mobilizing U.S. capabilities to support Great Britain would serve the national interests of the United States.

If international contingency precipitated the choice for globalism, what enabled Roosevelt to choose was, in the end, the vast preponderance of material capabilities the United States possessed. Even before Roosevelt took office, the United States, May noted in his final essay, was already and “incomparably the strongest power on Earth,” its raw power potential measured in “iron and steel production and energy consumption.”⁸⁴ May did not believe that material capabilities determined geopolitical outcomes; this was precisely his critique of neorealist theory, which he viewed as determinative and simplistic. But what we might call the social and economic capabilities or resources of American society remained, for May, a bedrock foundation for American foreign policy, a structural reality in relation to which decision making must always be situated.

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In the summer of 1978, the speechwriter Jim Fallows solicited from a range of foreign policy thinkers advice for a marquee speech on foreign policy that President Jimmy Carter would soon deliver. May’s counsel to Fallows offers a succinct summary of what May saw, in the end, as the ultimate sources of American influence and capability in world politics. “If you looked at the United States at the end of the nineteenth century and asked what made it a great power, different from all the others, there were two factors,” May explained.⁸⁵ “One was sheer material and productive wealth. The other was the quality of the highly educated population. Both of those are still true today.” The advice encapsulates what we might call the irony of Ernest May: this consummate diplomatic historian, who devoted his career to learning from the mistakes (and the occasional successes) of decision makers past adjudged that what matters most in world politics are those domestic economic and social capabilities that make societies effective and even influential in the affairs of the world.

⁸² For the Yale approach, see John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin, 2019) and Charles Hill, *Grand Strategies: Literature, Statecraft, and World Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011)

⁸³ May, *American Intervention*, 1.

⁸⁴ May, “The United States’ Underuse of Military Power,” 228.

⁸⁵ Jim Fallows, Memorandum to the President, May 23, 1978, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Office of the Staff Secretary, Handwriting File, Box 89.

From this irony, we might derive some useful, if speculative, insight. Twelve years after May's passing, American foreign policy finds itself in a historical impasse: wracked by internal divisions, befuddled by geopolitical conflicts, beholden to old international commitments and uncertain as to how novel threats should be managed. Amid such uncertainties, May's career and work should command enduring relevance. His own migration from West to East, from American to diplomatic history teaches us to be attentive to domestic political forces far beyond the Washington Beltway. His recognition that outsiders play an outsized part in determining Washington's choices teaches us to be attentive to the world and not to succumb to facile assumptions about non-American actors. And his insistence on the social and economic foundations of American global influence teaches that renewal begins at home. These are insights that today's decision makers might do well to contemplate as they grapple with challenges quite different from those of the Second World War and Cold War but do so under circumstances and constraints—both institutional and conceptual— inherited from the past. We learn history, Ernest May teaches, not because experience offers ready-made solutions but because knowledge of the past is the only answer that we possess to the lingering grasp of history's dead-hand grip.

Essay by Niall Ferguson, Stanford University

"From the Academic World to the World of Affairs": A Tale of Two Professors

I

"Henry Kissinger's *Diplomacy* is a book of maxims disguised as a history of statecraft," Ernest May began his 1994 review for the *New York Times*. "The maxims are often splendid. The history is not."⁸⁶ In a number of respects, this was a flattering review, comparing Kissinger to Niccolò Machiavelli—"We read [the *Discourses*] now for what it tells about Machiavelli himself and for its wisdom. Future generations will read *Diplomacy* for comparable reasons"—and ranking Kissinger among the top five American secretaries of state, alongside John Quincy Adams, Charles Evans Hughes, George Marshall, and Dean Acheson, as one of the true "molders" of U.S. foreign policy. "Parts of *Diplomacy*," wrote May, "have the mind-provoking quality of great teaching." The book had the strength of marrying "vision and shrewdness."

And yet this flattery was a velvet glove over an iron fist. Kissinger's book of maxims, May went on, was "amateurish" history that "got facts wrong," making "the types of mistakes for which students fail to get pass degrees in history." Not content with that, May accused Kissinger of "focus[ing] on episodes with the randomness of a roving reporter at a political convention." Rereading May's review after the passage of nearly three decades, it is impossible not to be struck by the harshness of its language. A failing undergraduate? A roving reporter? These were insults calculated to wound a former colleague. And wound they did.

By 1994, the author of *Diplomacy* should have had skin as thick as a rhinoceros's. A refugee from Hitler's Germany, he had risen to hold the highest public office attainable by an immigrant to the United States. He had weathered multiple crises while in government. He had been criticized repeatedly and often vituperatively for his policies by both the left and the right. By contrast, his critic had risen no further in life than Dean of Harvard College, a post he held for just two of the fifty-five years he served on the university's faculty. Yet Kissinger's response to May's review was incandescent. In a dozen drafts, first hand-written, then typed, then corrected and typed again, the former secretary of state composed a lengthy refutation, which appeared as full-page letter to the *Times* three weeks after the publication of the review.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Ernest R. May, "The 'Great Man' Theory of Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, April 3, 1994.

⁸⁷ "Henry A. Kissinger Replies to Ernest May," *New York Times*, April 24, 1994.

The sins of commission May cited were as follows:

“Diplomacy ... says that Wilson’s doctrine of self-determination ‘put European diplomats on thoroughly unfamiliar terrain.’ It attributes to Britain’s World War I Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, a promise to ‘squeeze Germany until the pips squeak.’ And it describes the Hossbach memorandum of November 1937 as recording Hitler’s avowal of plans for wars of conquest before ‘an assemblage of almost all of Germany’s general officers.’”

May found fault with each. “Long before Wilson’s Fourteen Points, Europeans had heard self-determination preached ardently by, among others, the leading newspaper publishers in Milan and London. ... The promise to squeeze the German lemon’s pips came from Sir Eric Geddes ... [and] caused trouble for Lloyd George, who clung to a last-ditch hope that public opinion would not demand unreasonable reparations from just defeated Germany.” And the Hossbach memorandum “recorded a meeting involving only seven people: Hitler himself, Col. Friedrich Hossbach (who took the notes), the foreign minister, the war minister and the commanders in chief of the army, air force and navy.”

As for the sins of omission, May complained that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were given short shrift. Where were Kaunitz, Choiseul, Vergennes and Franklin? Where was the period from 1770s to the 1790s, “a period strikingly parallel to our own ... which saw a cascade of ‘democratic revolutions.’” The reviewer also grumbled that there was no acknowledgement of Harold Nicolson’s *Diplomacy*, published in 1939.⁸⁸

In his response, Kissinger successfully rebutted the first and second allegations of error, conceded the third as a “technical” mistake (the word “top” had been deleted before the phrase “general officers”), and ignored most of the omissions of which the reviewer complained, apart from pointing out the two references to Nicolson’s book that May had overlooked. In an early draft, Kissinger accused May of “distorting quotes and relentlessly nitpicking.” In the final version, this became “a specious and nitpicking search for errors, laced with personal invective.”

Superficially, it was Kissinger’s pride in his own scholarship, not to mention that of his researchers, that was wounded. “I have literally spent tens of thousands of dollars on research to check every footnote in a book of 912 pages,” he complained to Arthur O. Sulzberger, the chairman of the *New York Times*, in a private letter. “To be accused of ... writing ‘amateurish’ history is unforgivable.”⁸⁹ The criticisms that really stung were not these, however, but May’s representation of Kissinger’s treatment of the great dictators. This was the objectionable paragraph:

“Mr. Kissinger even admits admiration for Stalin and the tyrants of Beijing because of their coolheadedness. Stalin, he says, ‘was indeed a monster; but in the conduct of international relations, he was the supreme realist—patient, shrewd and implacable, the Richelieu of his period.’ Of the Chinese: Mao, Zhou and Deng ‘reflected a common tradition of painstaking analysis and the distillation of the experiences of an ancient country with an instinct for distinguishing between the permanent and the tactical. Mr. Kissinger is impatient with Hitler because he ‘operated by instinct rather than analysis.’”

This, Kissinger wrote in one of the early versions of his response, was May’s “lowest blow. ... Following immediately on Professor May’s reference to my admiration for Stalin and Mao, this clearly implies that whatever objection I had to Hitler resulted not from moral aversion but a kind of intellectual snobbery or fastidiousness. Such a charge toward a victim of the Nazi persecution who lost thirteen members of his family in concentration camps goes beyond permissible limits.” In a later version, this became: “As a victim of Nazi persecution, the moral crimes of Nazism were, of course,

⁸⁸ Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939).

⁸⁹ Henry A. Kissinger Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library [henceforth HAKP], Part II (MS 1981), *Diplomacy—Ernest R. May review rebuttal* [1 of 2], 1994, Henry A. Kissinger [henceforth HAK] to Arthur O. Sulzberger, April 4, 1994.

familiar to me.” Then: “No academic disagreement justifies the use of such innuendo toward a victim of Nazi persecution, thirteen members of whose family died in the concentration camps.” Finally, this was toned down to “Professor May’s unworthy innuendo.” One of the few lines that survived multiple rewrites was that May had set out “to demonstrate that I never met a dictator I did not like.”

May did not take Kissinger’s counterblast lying down. He not only wrote a response for the *Times*— conceding that he had missed the Nicolson reference but archly referring to Kissinger’s “new insistence that political leaders must respect values as well as power,” and restating his claim that *Diplomacy* was bad history⁹⁰—but also told *New York Magazine*’s gossip column that the author of *Diplomacy* “takes offense at any criticism. He’s very prickly in that way. On foreign policy [he] is very wise ... and a first-rate analyst. If he had couched his book as an essay with a few illustrative historical examples, there wouldn’t be a problem. He made his mistake when he couched this as history.”⁹¹

Kissinger’s publishers were less prickly. They lost no time in printing the following words from May’s review in a newspaper advertisement for their book: “The strength of *Diplomacy* lies in its marriage of vision and shrewdness. Most commentary on foreign policy lacks one quality or the other (or both).”

II

To understand the vehemence of Kissinger’s reaction to May’s review, one must appreciate that this was more than a clash over methodology between representatives of two different disciplines, History on one side and Government on the other. It could be represented that way, of course. “Professor May obviously has a different philosophical approach to foreign policy than I do,” Kissinger began one of his many draft rejoinders. “He seems to believe that history should be written as a conflict between good and evil.” But those lines were later struck out. In truth, this was as much a personal matter as one of principle.

“It may interest you to know,” Kissinger told Sulzberger, that May had been “one of the spokesmen of a group of protesting Harvard professors who called on me at the White House and that he specifically accused me of dividing the country.” He was alluding to the occasion on May 8, 1970, when a dozen of Kissinger’s Harvard colleagues—the others included Francis Bator, William Capron, Paul Doty, George Kistiakowsky, Richard Neustadt, Thomas Schelling, and Adam Yarmolinsky—traveled to Washington to meet with him.⁹² Kissinger had expected to host a private lunch for them. Instead, according to one well-known account of the meeting, Schelling began by saying he should explain who they were. Kissinger was perplexed. “I know who you are,” he said, “you’re all good friends from Harvard University.”⁹³

⁹⁰ Ernest May, “Kissinger’s ‘Diplomacy,’” *New York Times*, May 1, 1994.

⁹¹ Pat Wechsler with Ruth G. Davis, “Kissinger: Them’s Fighting Words,” *New York Magazine*, April 25, 1994.

⁹² Michael E. Kinsley, “Harvard Groups Continue to Strengthen for Anti-War Lobbying, Fund Raising,” *Harvard Crimson*, May 12, 1970.

⁹³ William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002 [1979]), 150.

“No,” said Schelling, “we’re a group of people who have completely lost confidence in the ability of the White House to conduct our foreign policy, and we have come to tell you so. We are no longer at your disposal as personal advisers.” Each of them then proceeded to berate him, taking five minutes apiece.⁹⁴

The group’s stated reason for breaking with Kissinger was the invasion of Cambodia. As their informal leader Schelling put it, “As we see it, there are two possibilities. Either, one, the President didn’t understand . . . that he was invading another country; or, two, he did understand. We just don’t know which one is scarier.”⁹⁵ Each offered his own criticism of the administration’s action. Kissinger offered to respond, but on condition that he spoke off the record. When that was refused by his visitors, the meeting ended. It had been, Schelling recalled, “a very painful hour and a half.” The *Washington Star*’s Mary McGrory reported that the professors had “descended” on the White House “with blood in their eyes” to tell Kissinger that “if he doesn’t quit soon—or reverse policy—Harvard will never have him back again,” a story swiftly seized on by other papers, despite the professors’ plaintive insistence that they had made no such threat.⁹⁶

No doubt Schelling and his colleagues had cogent reasons to criticize Nixon’s decision to send troops into Cambodia. Still, there was something suspiciously staged about their showdown with Kissinger—in particular, their insistence that everything be on the record, for the press. Each one of those named above had experience of government, some at high levels. Bator, for example, had served as deputy national security adviser to Nixon’s predecessor, Lyndon Johnson, and had therefore enjoyed a ringside seat for the escalation of the war against North Vietnam. As Bator confessed to *The Harvard Crimson*, “Some of us here at Harvard have been working on the inside for a long time.” Neustadt, too, admitted that he had “regarded the executive branch as . . . home for twenty or thirty years. . . . This is the first time in years that I’ve come to Washington and stayed at the Hay-Adams and had to pay the bill out of my own pocket.” (The *Crimson*’s Mike Kinsley had considerable fun with these and other professorial boasts.)⁹⁷

For these men, who understood very well why Kissinger would only speak off the record, publicly breaking with Kissinger was a form of self-exculpation, not to say an insurance policy, as student radicals back on the Harvard campus ran riot. The university had been in turmoil since the spring of the previous year, when members of the organization Students for a Democratic Society had occupied University Hall, the university authorities had called in the police, and the students had gone on strike, issuing demands for the removal of the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps and the creation of an “Afro-American Studies Department.” The crisis led to the early retirement of President Nathan Pusey. When Neustadt told Senator Edward Kennedy, “I think it’s safe to say we’re afraid,” he clearly meant afraid of (in his phrase) the “young people.” As Schelling put it, revealingly, “If Cambodia succeeds, it will be a disaster not just because my Harvard office may be burned down when I get home, but it will even be a disaster in [the administration’s] own terms.”⁹⁸ May, who had rushed down from an emergency faculty meeting called to address student demands about examinations, told Kissinger, “You’re tearing the country apart domestically.” The country he meant was not Cambodia. The invasion “would have long-term consequences for foreign policy,” May argued, “as tomorrow’s foreign policy is based on today’s domestic situation.”⁹⁹ In short, he viewed the invasion of Cambodia through the lens of an embattled

⁹⁴ Thomas Schelling, interview by author.

⁹⁵ Shawcross, *Sideshow*, 150.

⁹⁶ Mike Kinsley, “Twelve Professors Visit Washington,” *Harvard Crimson*, June 11, 1970.

⁹⁷ Kinsley, “Twelve Professors.”

⁹⁸ Kinsley, “Twelve Professors.”

⁹⁹ Mike Kinsley, “I think We Have a Very Unhappy Colleague-on-Leave Tonight,” *Harvard Crimson*, May 19, 1970.

professoriate. “Whatever the Cambodia invasion achieved in foreign terms,” May told the Earl of Gowrie, a friend of Kissinger who was then dabbling in journalism, “it was not worth it in terms of its effects internally.”¹⁰⁰

It is easy to see why such reasoning failed to persuade Kissinger. Schelling’s favorite argument of the time became known as his “Monster Speech.” “It’s one of those problems,” he would explain, “where you look out the window, and you see a monster. And you turn to the guy standing next to you at the very same window, and say, ‘Look, there’s a monster.’ He then looks out the window—and doesn’t see a monster at all. *How do you explain to him that there really is a monster?*”¹⁰¹ This sort of thing may have impressed the undergraduates in Schelling’s course on game theory (Ec 135); it was unlikely to impress a harassed national security adviser (whom the president at one point called away from the abortive lunch with his former colleagues). Recollecting the occasion, Kissinger noted astutely that Schelling and the others had come “not as eminent academicians but as political figures representing a constituency at home, a campus inflamed by the Kent State tragedy as much as by the war.”

“One distinguished professor gave it as his considered analysis that ‘somebody had forgotten to tell the President that Cambodia was a country;’ he acted as if he didn’t know this. ‘Had we undertaken a large commitment to Cambodia? If we had, this was rotten foreign policy. If we hadn’t, this was rotten foreign policy.’ He was convinced that this action ‘clearly jeopardized American withdrawals’—though in fact it did the opposite. This professor was prepared to believe, on the basis of no evidence whatsoever, that Secretary of Defense Laird had been unaware of the military operations before the President announced them. He held the amazing view that ‘it was a gamble that shouldn’t have been taken even if it succeeds on its own terms.’ Others said the decision was ‘incomprehensible,’ ‘more horrible than anything done by LBJ,’ ‘disastrous,’ ‘dreadful.’ One professor advanced the extraordinary hypothesis that an operation lasting eight weeks to a distance of twenty-one miles might lead our military commanders to believe that the use of nuclear weapons was now conceivable. Another declared that we had provoked all the actions of the other side. The meeting completed my transition from the academic world to the world of affairs. These were the leaders of their fields; men who had been my friends, academicians whose lifetime of study should have encouraged a sense of perspective. That they disagreed with our decision was understandable; I had myself gone through a long process of hesitation before I became convinced that there was no alternative. But the lack of compassion, the overweening righteousness, the refusal to offer an alternative, reinforced two convictions: that for the internal peace of our country the war had to be ended, but also that in doing so on terms compatible with any international responsibility we would get no help from those with whom I had spent my professional life. The wounds would have to be healed after the war was over; in the event, these were not.”¹⁰²

After their meeting with Kissinger, as if to underline their contrition for past misdeeds, Neustadt and two of the others joined a much larger “Peace Action Strike” of Harvard students and faculty, led by the antiwar firebrand Everett Mendelsohn. “No sooner had the troops entered Cambodia,” one left-wing student commented, “than Dean Ernest May, heretofore mum on the question of the war, was appearing all over the place flashing the ‘V’ sign and urging students to follow him down to Washington and lobby for peace.”¹⁰³ However, the campus radicals were not propitiated. That same day, the Center for International Affairs, where both Bator and Schelling had their offices, was invaded and

¹⁰⁰ HAKP, Part II (MS 1981), Series II, Government Service, Correspondence, General, G, “Grey” Gowrie to HAK, July 23, 1970.

¹⁰¹ Kinsley, “Twelve Professors.”

¹⁰² Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), KL 10628-10640.

¹⁰³ Cheney Ryan, “The University and Repression,” *Harvard Crimson*, August 14, 1970.

“trashed” by demonstrators.¹⁰⁴ One radical student leader suggested an alternative headline to the *Crimson*: “Former War Criminals Go To Washington To Advise Their Successors.” Bator was ready to swallow even that. “For whatever it matters,” he told the student newspaper, “the kids are right.”¹⁰⁵

“It might seem a very nuancy thing for someone who wants to burn down University Hall,” Bator went on, “but for us middle-aged squares to go to Washington in public like this and tell them to Get The Hell Out Of Cambodia, Stop The Idiot Bombing, and reaffirm the road being taken in the past to withdraw all troops, is a big deal.”¹⁰⁶ He little realized that, in the eyes of those who had led the Harvard strike of April 1969, there was nothing to distinguish him and his colleagues from Kissinger. They all shared the same “ethic of brute competence”:

“—a belief that they are members of an intellectual elite which is more clearly fitted to make the crucial decisions in American life than any other individual or group in the country. It is this, an absolute confidence in the intellectual and moral fitness of the A students to run every aspect of the nation and the world, that Harvard teaches us; and coupled with it comes an absolute contempt for the C students, for all those whose background or race or education or style mark them as unsuitable to join the elegant world of the elite. We learn here that the C students must be deprived of any power and prevented from making mistakes which the elite could avoid. Our rebellion was, in part, an attempt to destroy the identities which Harvard had prepared for us as administrators of the A students’ empire, to reach out and proclaim our kinship with all those who had been denied admission: America’s victims at home and abroad.”¹⁰⁷

III

Remarkably, May does not seem to have regarded his trip to Washington as marking an irrevocable breach with Kissinger. On June 24, 1970, he sent him an advance copy of an article he was about to publish in the *Washington Post*, “partly to communicate with you through a less cold medium than newsprint and partly to prevent our springing yet another unwelcome surprise.” The article, co-authored with Bator, Schelling, and Yarmolinsky, was another broadside against the administration’s invasion of Cambodia. Yet it made no mention of Kissinger, implying that it was Nixon alone who had taken the decision to invade. “No matter what Mary McGrory [the *Post* columnist] and *Time* may think,” May told Kissinger, “your colleagues in Cambridge love you still.”¹⁰⁸

That this was not entirely ironical is clear. Although they had been in different departments, the two men had been much more than mere colleagues at Harvard. They had been collaborators.

Though not an avowed Republican, as Kissinger was, May was certainly regarded as a conservative by the student radicals of the day. His course on the history of American diplomacy (History 164b) had come under attack in 1967 for “reinforcing anti-Communist cold war mystique and substituting ‘semi-official clap-trap’ ... for analysis of U. S.

¹⁰⁴ Kinsley, “Twelve Professors.”

¹⁰⁵ Kinsley, “Twelve Professors.”

¹⁰⁶ Kinsley, “Twelve Professors.”

¹⁰⁷ Garrett Epps, “A Parting Shot,” *Harvard Crimson*, Feb. 7, 1972.

¹⁰⁸ HAKP, Part II (MS 1981), Series II, Government Service, Correspondence, White House personal file, Max-Maz, Ernest May to HAK, June 24, 1970. The draft article was entitled “Cambodia: Entries for the President’s Yellow Pad.”

economic motives.”¹⁰⁹ Like Kissinger, he had been identified with the administration of John F. Kennedy—a Democratic president to be sure, but one who had secured election in part by being more hawkish on the Cold War than Nixon. According to the *Harvard Crimson*, he belonged to “a clique of Kennedy men in Cambridge, a semi-official policy group waiting out of power” at the Institute of Politics housed in the school of government that after 1966 bore Kennedy’s name. May was a member of the school’s Academic Advisory Council and for several years led a faculty seminar on the art and practice of bureaucracy, a subject which also interested Kissinger.¹¹⁰ May, like Kissinger, had little sympathy with the student left. Indeed, he was a member of the “conservative caucus” of more than 20 faculty members that formed in response to the spring 1969 upheaval on the Harvard campus, in opposition to a larger liberal caucus.¹¹¹ As Dean of the College, it is true, May pursued a strategy that can only be characterized as appeasement of the radicals, “staying clear of any affiliation with the conservative caucus now that he is Dean,” as the *Crimson* noted.¹¹² He insisted that the “conservative caucus” had merely been a procedural device to cope with the unwieldy size of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Other members of the conservative caucus—notably Kistiakowsky and the economist John T. Dunlop—subsequently “pled the Fifth Amendment” or feigned deafness when the subject was mentioned. However, those who were not ashamed to be known as conservatives—notably the historian Richard Pipes and the political scientist James Q. Wilson—doubtless remembered where May had initially stood in the revolutionary moment.¹¹³

What made May’s later conduct especially surprising to Kissinger was that the two men had in fact worked closely together in 1968 as members of a “Study Group on Presidential Transition” at the Institute of Politics.¹¹⁴ The other members of the group were Phillip E. Areeda of the Law School and Frank Lindsay of the defense company Itek. Their mode of operation was to invite expert guests to Harvard and pick their brains: the roster of speakers in the spring semester of 1968 included General Andrew Goodpaster—the man widely credited with the success of President Dwight Eisenhower’s National Security Council (NSC)—McGeorge Bundy, General Matthew Ridgway, and Henry Cabot Lodge; they were followed in the fall by General Lauris Norstad, Adam Yarmolinsky, and Richard Neustadt. Although Kissinger dropped out during the late spring to work on Nelson Rockefeller’s third bid for the Republican presidential nomination, he was able to “rejoin us later,” as Lindsay explained to the man to whom, in the course of 1968, all the study group’s reports would be sent—a man he had known since their work together on the Herter Committee twenty years before.¹¹⁵ That man was Richard Nixon.

With Rockefeller’s defeat, Kissinger returned to the group, which now carefully tailored its research to meet Nixon’s needs. On August 15, 1968, Lindsay wrote directly to the Republican nominee, offering to make available to him all the study group’s findings on past transitions, its recommendations on how best to proceed, and perhaps also some “names (especially of younger men)” whom Nixon might consider as appointees. As Lindsay pointed out, if Nixon won the election, he would have just ten weeks before his inauguration to fill around two dozen of the most important posts in his administration—far less time than would be typical for a business or even a university engaged in an analogous search

¹⁰⁹ Ruth Glushien, “Profile: Ernest R. May,” *Harvard Crimson*, October 18, 1969.

¹¹⁰ Glushien, “Profile.”

¹¹¹ Jonathan Alter, “On the Right,” *Harvard Crimson*, April 26, 1979.

¹¹² Glushien, “Profile.”

¹¹³ Alter, “On the Right.”

¹¹⁴ Library of Congress [henceforth LOC], K-2, Study Group on Presidential Transition, 1968–1969.

¹¹⁵ LOC, K-2, Study Group on Presidential Transition 1968–1969, Frank Lindsay to Richard Nixon, Aug. 15, 1968, enclosing report signed by Areeda, Lindsay and May.

for executive talent. He should therefore consider appointing, with immediate effect, a personnel adviser to begin drawing up the list of potential hires; he should also consider commissioning “substantive studies on issues which may be in crisis” in the first phase of his administration.¹¹⁶ He should appoint a screening committee to draw up shortlists for the key jobs and encourage its members to look beyond the political class to foundations, universities, and investment banks. Rather than interview candidates, he should use seminars to see how well they performed in a group setting. And his goal should be to have all the key positions filled by mid-December.

The study group’s August report listed three staff jobs that Nixon should prioritize: appointments secretary, press secretary, and the post of “national security liaison and advice—a role similar to that played by [Walt] Rostow for Johnson, Bundy for Kennedy and [Gordon] Gray and Goodpaster for Eisenhower.”¹¹⁷ In filling this third post, Nixon should bear in mind the potential for friction between this individual and the State Department: in the words of the report, “the lack of confidence, communication and team-spirit at the top level of the Kennedy-Johnson State Department is not a happy precedent.”¹¹⁸ The future president would need to make a choice, even before he was elected, as to who would be his “principal adviser on all foreign policy problems, including military, financial and economic policy.” Would it be the secretary of state, or would it be the national security adviser? “This decision,” the authors noted, “will affect both the qualities you will seek in a Secretary, and the breadth of the charter you will assign to the National Security Adviser on your staff.”¹¹⁹ Without stating flatly that it should be the latter, the study group made it perfectly clear that they saw the State Department as the wrong institution for this broader role because of its “perennial organizational problems,” which in the past had “prevented it from being as useful to the President as it might be.”¹²⁰

Nor was this all. Two months later the Harvard study group followed this up with a long report on “Dealing with the Old Administration,” which reinforced the argument for a strong national security adviser. “One of your most difficult and critical problems during the transition,” the group’s next report told Nixon, “will be the gaining of mastery (insofar as mastery is possible) over national security affairs.” He must make sure no “eyes only” files relating to negotiations with the North Vietnamese vanished out the door of the White House in Lyndon Johnson’s luggage. And he must make haste: “Unlike McGeorge Bundy [under Kennedy] ... your national security staff should be appointed early and begin performance as soon as possible.”¹²¹

On November 1, with just four days to go before the nation voted, the study group sent a third report specifically focused on transitional organization in the area of national security. Unlike the first reports, this one bore Kissinger’s name, as well as his metaphorical fingerprints. The study group assumed Nixon would be his “own Secretary of State in the sense of retaining control over policy,” leaving whoever he appointed to “mobilize and manage the diplomatic corps and related groups.” He should aim to “preserve [the] centralized control of the military establishment” that had been Robert McNamara’s principal achievement, keeping the tight budgetary control that McNamara had established through the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Nixon did not need to worry about the CIA, which was “comparatively efficient.” The one institution that presented “an immediate problem for your administration” was—once again—the

¹¹⁶ Lindsay to Nixon, Aug. 15, 1968.

¹¹⁷ Report by Areeda, Lindsay and May, 11.

¹¹⁸ Report by Areeda, Lindsay and May, 12.

¹¹⁹ Report by Areeda, Lindsay and May, 28.

¹²⁰ Report by Areeda, Lindsay and May.

¹²¹ LOC, K-2, Study Group on Presidential Transition 1968–1969, Frank Lindsay to Richard Nixon, Oct. 18, 1968, enclosing report.

State Department, which was “ineffectual as compared with CIA [or] Defense” and seemed to excel only in generating a “stupefying ... flow of written matter.”¹²²

The most important proposal on the Harvard study group’s November 1 report, however, was that Nixon should consider reviving the NSC rather than having a free-floating special assistant in the mold of Bundy and Rostow. Downgrading the NSC had led to excessive informality under Kennedy and Johnson. True, as the authors noted, Johnson’s administration had sought to re-impose some kind of bureaucratic structure on national security with the creation in 1966 of the Senior Interdepartmental Group (SIG) as a coordinating body composed of the undersecretary of state (who chaired it), the deputy secretary of defense, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the special assistant, and the heads of CIA, the United States Agency for International Development, and the United States Information Agency. There were also now interdepartmental regional groups (IRGs) chaired by the regional assistant secretaries of state. Though this system had at first seemed “a total failure,” it was now working quite smoothly. The study group was therefore open to “giv[ing] the SIG-IRG system a trial before reinstating NSC or other formal consultative machinery.” But the report strongly “caution[ed] against the other extreme—concentration of the coordinating function under a single Special Assistant,” unless Nixon was willing to consider having a very strong deputy in the role.¹²³

“As we read the history of the presidency in the last quarter-century,” the authors concluded, “it contains many fewer examples of decisions unsoundly based than of decisions misinterpreted, misunderstood or accidentally or deliberately not carried out.” Nixon would be “well advised not to adhere too closely to the often-stated rule that a President should keep as many options as possible open for as long a time as he can.” This had been taken to extremes by Kennedy and Johnson. Yet “by maintaining until the last moment the impression that they might choose any one of a number of courses, they [had] encouraged the build-up of bureaucratic lobbies”—notably over the Vietnam bombing pause and the Multilateral Force. The president had to take decisions, often sooner than was comfortable. Above all, the president had to make clear the strategic concept behind his decisions, something Johnson had never been able to do.

“The great statesmen of nineteenth-century Europe—Metternich, Castlereagh, Palmerston, Bismarck, Salisbury—all had to write out explanations for their actions because they were responsible to monarchs. You face a similar necessity, of course, in having to respond to press conference questions and deliver messages to Congress and the public, but, in statements which all the world can hear, you can seldom be as explicit and candid as you might be *in camera*. And for the next four years you have as great a stake in winning understanding among the managers of your bureaucracy as among the electorate.”¹²⁴

The Harvard study group saved its final report, on staffing the White House, for November 6, the day after Nixon’s victory. Once again deploying their intimate knowledge of recent administrations, the authors advised against appointing a powerful chief of staff controlling access to the president, as a successful chief executive needed to mix “elements of hierarchy and diffused access.” What the president most needed was to have loyal assistants in the West Wing. These assistants must not represent their own views as the president’s or conduct their “own policy on any issue.” They should not be briefing the press other than on condition of anonymity, as there had been “cases where a publicized staff member has exaggerated his role.” They should be prepared to engage in “effective devil’s advocacy” to resist the temptations of groupthink. They should not be too specialized, though Nixon should resist Roosevelt’s penchant for duplicating assignments in order to promote competition among his subordinates. Finally, the authors offered a

¹²² LOC, K-2, Study Group on Presidential Transition 1968–1969, Frank Lindsay to Richard Nixon, Nov. 1, 1968, enclosing report.

¹²³ Lindsay to Nixon, Nov. 1, 1968.

¹²⁴ I had previously assumed that it was Henry Kissinger who wrote that paragraph. I have come to see that it could have been Ernest May.

suggestion: “We would call an adviser simply ‘Special Assistant’ and assign him to, say national security affairs rather than designating him ‘Special Assistant for National Security Affairs.’” A strong argument for this kind of generalism was that “a foreign relations adviser should bring congressional or domestic political factors into his thinking and recommendations before he comes to you.”¹²⁵

The reports of the Harvard study group were the first shots in a battle over the structure of Nixon’s administration—and in particular over the question of whether or not to revive the NSC—that would rage into 1969, inviting expert commentaries from such experienced former officials as John Eisenhower (who expertly characterized the role Andrew Goodpaster had played as Eisenhower’s staff secretary)¹²⁶ and Roswell Gilpatric (who as Kennedy’s former deputy defense secretary was naturally against NSC restoration).¹²⁷ The outcome would have a profound impact on the way Nixon’s administration functioned, especially in its first two years. It is richly ironic that Ernest May had helped Henry Kissinger draw up one of the most sophisticated job applications in modern American history.

Nor did the Harvard study group cease its operations when, to Kissinger’s genuine surprise, Nixon offered him the job of national security adviser. The day before Nixon’s unveiling of Kissinger, in the St. Regis Hotel—just six blocks away from the Pierre—the study group had reconvened, minus Kissinger, to discuss a new paper on “Revitalizing and Streamlining the NSC.”¹²⁸ The next day Areeda wrote to Nixon’s chief of staff H.R. Haldeman, setting out the group’s ideas on the need for a central program planning staff in the White House.¹²⁹ The former Massachusetts attorney general Elliot Richardson was also now drawn into the discussion. (Nixon would later name him as undersecretary of state; he too would receive a delegation of protesting professors less than two years later.)¹³⁰ On December 4 a copy of the group’s key paper on “Revitalizing and Streamlining the NSC” was sent by May to Kissinger.¹³¹ Although others weighed in,¹³² NSC revival was indeed the direction that Nixon took.¹³³ To an extent hitherto overlooked, the Nixon administration’s overhaul of the machinery of foreign policy making was based on a blueprint drawn up at Harvard.¹³⁴

¹²⁵ LOC, K-2, Study Group on Presidential Transition 1968–1969, Frank Lindsay to Richard Nixon, Nov. 6, 1968, enclosing report.

¹²⁶ LOC, K-2, John Eisenhower to H.R. Haldeman, Nov. 25, 1968.

¹²⁷ LOC, Elliot Richardson Papers, Box I 64, Roswell Gilpatric to Frank Lindsay, Nov. 24, 1968.

¹²⁸ LOC, Elliot Richardson Papers Box I 64, Task Force on Organization of Executive Branch I, Revitalizing and Streamlining the NSC, Dec. 1, 1968.

¹²⁹ LOC, K-2, Study Group on Presidential Transition 1968–1969, Program Planning for the White House, Phillip Areeda to H.R. Haldeman, Dec. 2, 1968.

¹³⁰ LOC, Elliot Richardson Papers, Box I 64, Frank Lindsay to Elliot Richardson, Dec. 2, 1968.

¹³¹ LOC, K-2, Ernest May to HAK, Dec. 4, 1968.

¹³² LOC, K-2I, Jerry Friedheim, “Thoughts on National Security Council,” Dec. 5, 1968.

¹³³ Robert B. Semple, Jr., “Nixon to Revive Council’s Power: Aims to Give Security Board,” *New York Times*, Jan. 1, 1969.

¹³⁴ James Reston was even fooled by Nixon into believing the ideas for NSC reform were the president’s own: “The First Myth of the Nixon Administration,” *New York Times*, Dec. 18, 1968. Yet Nixon acknowledged the role of the Harvard study group: James C. Kitch, “Harvard Group Aids Nixon in Transition,” *Harvard Crimson*, Dec. 9, 1968.

A striking feature of that blueprint was its deeply historical character. It was no coincidence that one of the study group's reports was entitled "Historians and the Foreign Policy Process" and argued for the introduction of a British-style rule for automatic declassification—but after only twelve or twenty years rather than the British thirty—to allow scholarly history to be done on the recent past.¹³⁵ This was one of May's favorite themes, but it was one to which Kissinger had no objection. A recurrent theme of his critique of Johnson's administration had been its historical ignorance, extending all the way down from the president himself to the lowliest "grunt" in Vietnam. No one in the entire chain of command appeared even dimly aware of the lessons they might learn from the past, even the very recent past. This reflected partly a failure to institutionalize the learning process, partly the shortness of tours of duty in Vietnam. But it also reflected the innate bias of the American bureaucracy in favor of legal training. In a revealing clash with the Tufts political scientist John P. Roche—who had served as a special adviser to Johnson between 1966 and 1968—Kissinger derided Roche's claim that "all the history in the world doesn't make any difference if the Russians decide to bail out their clients."

"You have to know what history is relevant [Kissinger replied]. You have to know what history to extract. I am sure an apple grower would tell Newton he did not know all there is to be known about the apple. History is not a cook book you can open. Some history is relevant to many situations. ... [Lawyers are] the single most important group in Government, but they do have this drawback—a deficiency in history."¹³⁶

On this issue Henry Kissinger and Ernest May had once seen eye to eye.

Their collaboration continued into the presidential transition. May continued to help Kissinger, writing with "names of potential planners" and potential Latin America staffers, and sending him a paper proposing non-public "histories of national security policy since World War II."¹³⁷ Neustadt continued to work on the NSC overhaul.¹³⁸ Lindsay's now-much-expanded study group cranked out its final report, providing yet more grist to the mill of executive branch reform.¹³⁹ Another ambitious professor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, offered his two cents' worth on the State Department.¹⁴⁰ By Christmas Eve, Kissinger had also taken delivery of Goodpaster's inside account of the functioning of the Eisenhower NSC.¹⁴¹ By New Year's Eve, he was writing to May to apologize for not replying sooner to his list of suggested appointees with Latin American expertise. "Needless to say," he confessed, "the pace here in New York has been more hectic than I ever imagined when I accepted the job. Hopefully, things will settle down after the 20th"—the date set for

¹³⁵ LOC, K-2, May, "Historians and the Foreign Policy Process," Dec. 4, 1968.

¹³⁶ Joseph A. Loftus, "Ex-Adviser Cites Problems of Presidential Power," *New York Times*, Sept. 7, 1968.

¹³⁷ HAKP, Part II (MS 1981), Series II, Government Service, Correspondence, Ernest May to HAK, Dec. 6, 1968.

¹³⁸ LOC, K-2, Richard Neustadt to HAK, Notes of Dinner Meeting, Dec. 9, 1968.

¹³⁹ LOC, K-2, Frank Lindsay to Richard Nixon, Report of Task Force on Organization of Executive Branch of the Government, Dec. 17, 1968. See also LOC, Elliot Richardson Papers, Box I 91, Frank Lindsay to Richard Nixon, Dec. 20, 1968; Frank Lindsay to Richard Nixon, Program Planning for the White House, Dec. 28, 1968.

¹⁴⁰ LOC, J-3, Zbigniew Brzezinski to HAK, Dec. 18, 1968.

¹⁴¹ LOC, K-2, Andrew Goodpaster to HAK, National Security Council Staff, Dec. 24, 1968.

Nixon's inauguration.¹⁴² Did Kissinger really cling to such an obviously forlorn hope? Probably not. More likely, he was just trying to make his former colleague feel better about the gap that had now inevitably opened up between them.

IV

Ernest May never held a position of importance in the U.S. government. Yet he was no stranger to Washington. He wrote an internal history of the nuclear arms race between 1945 and 1972 for the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He served as a senior consultant to the Senate committee investigating the Central Intelligence Agency in the 1970s. At Harvard, he devoted a significant proportion of his time to executive education at the Kennedy School, collaborating with Richard Neustadt to produce the influential collection of case studies published as *Thinking in Time*.¹⁴³ Many years later, May served as an adviser to the 9/11 Commission, a body that Kissinger had been appointed to chair, only to be forced to step down after sixteen days because of alleged conflicts of interest. In May's own account, the Commission's report was "professional-quality narrative history ... international history, not just American history," thanks to the historiographical skills of its chairman, Thomas Kean, its executive director, Philip Zelikow, and others they recruited to work with them. Along with Zelikow, May regarded himself as one of the "architects" of the Commission's report.¹⁴⁴

The crux of May's critique of Kissinger's *Diplomacy* was, as we have seen, that it did "not take pains to reconstruct the past as the past rather than as a source of parables for the present." He was not the first historian to make such a complaint; A.J.P. Taylor's 1979 review of Kissinger's first book, *A World Restored*, had said much the same ("the book is a rhapsody, not a work of history").¹⁴⁵ Yet it is impossible not to detect in May's attack on *Diplomacy* a deeper-seated resentment. It was not the resentment of one whose advice has been spurned. After all, the invasion of Cambodia did not, in the end, derail the process of "Vietnamization," whereby the Nixon administration rapidly reduced the number of U.S. troops in Indochina. Nor did it plunge the United States into the state of civil war feared by May and his fellow professors. Other criticisms that May and other Harvard professors later leveled at the Nixon administration were even less compelling—for example, the argument in January 1970 that the U.S. should scale down its military presence in Europe.¹⁴⁶ As Kissinger sardonically observed, "The article did not address the question whether the probability of a Soviet conventional attack might be affected to some extent by the size of the opposing forces; it simply assumed that since there had been no aggression in the past there would be none in the future and therefore we were maintaining unnecessary forces." His former colleagues had drawn "from the approaching nuclear parity the amazing conclusion that we should cut our conventional forces in which we were already vastly inferior."¹⁴⁷ By 1972—the year of Nixon's visit to China, the SALT agreement, and the first light at the end of the Vietnamese tunnel—May had to acknowledge grudgingly the scale of Kissinger's achievement. Nixon's decision to send Kissinger to Beijing in 1971 "suggests a degree

¹⁴² LOC, K-2, HAK to Ernest May, Dec. 31, 1968.

¹⁴³ Edward Berkowitz, "Ernest R. May," *Journal of Policy History*, vol. 22 no. 3 (2010): 366-73. See Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Freedom Press, 1986).

¹⁴⁴ May, "When Government Writes History," *New Republic*, May 22, 2005.

¹⁴⁵ A.J.P. Taylor, "Kissinger Fireworks," *Observer*, Nov. 11, 1979, reprinted in *Struggles for Supremacy*, ed. Chris Wrigley (Ashgate, 2000), 17-19.

¹⁴⁶ Graham Allison, Ernest May and Adam Yarmolinsky, "Limits to Intervention," *Foreign Affairs*, 48, 2 (1970).

¹⁴⁷ HAK, *White House Years*, KL 4293.

of confidence on the President's part that their two minds work alike ... that Henry wouldn't say anything the President wouldn't." This sympathy between the two men May confessed he found "very surprising."¹⁴⁸

Strength of character can be hateful to the weak. Fame is insufferable to the obscure. Throughout the 1960s, a group of Harvard professors had enjoyed influence, prestige and in some cases power in Washington. Henry Kissinger was not the first among them to serve as national security adviser; McGeorge Bundy had beaten him to it under Kennedy. Yet Bundy had never attained the height of influence that Kissinger achieved; nor was he promoted to secretary of state. Ernest May can 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. May was a shy self-effacing man. He can never have aspired to high executive office. Still, it cannot have been easy to see the co-author of the study group's memoranda to Nixon take on precisely the role of presidential adviser that the study group had envisioned.

May was a gifted historian whose finest scholarly work (notably the book *Strange Victory*) still lay ahead of him in 1994.¹⁴⁹ Yet his assessment of Kissinger's *Diplomacy* was not his finest hour. Not only were its criticisms rather weak; its tone was also uncharacteristically spiteful. In view of their years of collaboration at Harvard and their common interest in bringing historical knowledge to bear on decision-making in Washington, Kissinger was entitled to be enraged by it.

¹⁴⁸ Stephen Seplow, "Our 2d Man in Russia: A Close-Up of Kissinger," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 28, 1972.

¹⁴⁹ May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2000).

