
Ronald Steel, who died on May 7, 2023, was one of the most lucid and penetrating analysts of US foreign policy of his generation.1 Before settling down at age fifty-five as Professor of International Relations at the University of Southern California, he led a restless, adventurous life, including time spent as a soldier, foreign service office, free-lance journalist and historian, and teacher at institutions including Yale, Princeton, Rutgers, Wellesley, Dartmouth, the University of Texas, and UCLA. As a person, he possessed a warmth, charm, sense of loyalty, and—here is a rare case where the word fits—a charisma that left its mark on his many students, colleagues, and friends. I first met Steel in 1985, when I invited him to give a talk to my class at The Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies on the Truman administration’s foreign policy. In 1995, I attended a memorable conference that he organized at USC on George Kennan. I renewed my friendship with him in 2014, when teaching at SAIS in Washington. Shortly before I returned to my usual base at SAIS Europe in Bologna, Italy, he agreed to my request that we do an interview. I suspected that it might be my last opportunity, as proved to be the case. What follows is an edited version of our conversation. I’m grateful to Diane Labrosse for her help in preparing it for H-Diplo.

John Lamberton Harper is Professor Emeritus of American Foreign Policy at The Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe.

Harper: I’m with Ronald Steel in my office at Johns Hopkins SAIS in Washington. It’s December 12, 2014. Ron has kindly agreed to my suggestion that we record a conversation about his life and career. I’ll start with a few basic questions. Ron, you were born in Illinois?

Steel: Yes, near Chicago. A town called Morris, 6,000 people.

Harper: What year was that?

Steel: 1931.

Harper: At the beginning of the Great Depression.

Steel: Yes, exactly.

Harper: Can you say something about your family?

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1 https://www.washingtonpost.com/obituaries/2023/05/08/ronald-steel-historian-writer-lippmann-dead/
Steel: My mother was from Chicago. Her parents were immigrants from Russia. My father had lived in this little town for some time. He met my mother because his sister was also working in Chicago and she introduced them. In 1928, he opened a men’s clothing store in Morris.

Harper: Would you say that your family was politically active or conscious?

Steel: No, not at all. We never talked about politics.

Harper: Do you remember the point at which you became conscious of what was happening politically in the United States and the world?

Steel: I’d like to say that there was an outstanding event that caused it. I suppose the impression that I had of politics and how it could affect my life and that of everybody around me began in 1941, when I was 10 years old. I was at a family dinner with some relatives, and we heard on the radio about the attack on Pearl Harbor. Suddenly the whole world expanded and it became apparent that we were living in a protective bubble. We could all be affected by what was happening in seemingly incomprehensible and far-away places. I guess that’s a key event in terms of political consciousness. You can’t say that I was a political activist when I was young. I never took an interest in political parties. But, then I started to read about politics and international affairs, and when it came time to go to university I wanted to go to a place where these issues could be taken seriously. Some of my high school friends went to state teachers colleges and that sort of thing. I had a friend, a couple years ahead of me in grade school or high school, who was at Northwestern. I applied there and that’s where I went. I had two main interests, literature and politics. The course that had the greatest impact on me was one taught by Richard Ellmann, the eminent Joyce scholar. It was on the novels of Joyce and I was fascinated by the subject. I also had a professor of politics who had a degree from Harvard, and encouraged me to go to graduate school. I applied to Harvard and was accepted.

Harper: What year would have that been?

Steel: I graduated from college in 1953. My professor had a connection to the Graduate School of Public Administration at Harvard, which wasn’t particularly a draw for me, but he helped me to get a fellowship. I took some courses in public administration, also a politics course with Carl Friedrich, who was a major figure at Harvard at the time. My teaching assistant was (future national security advisor) Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Harper: They wrote a book together called *Totalitarian Dictatorship*.²

Steel: That’s right. After my MA, the question arose as to whether to go on for a PhD. I resisted the idea because I didn’t think I wanted an academic career. It was in the aftermath of the Korean War and there was still a draft. I knew that if I didn’t do a PhD I’d be drafted, which I was.

Harper: The prospect of getting drafted didn’t persuade you to do a PhD?

Steel: Looking back, I can’t imagine why I didn’t prefer going on for a PhD. But as it turned out, I had a wonderful experience in the army.

Harper: Of course, there was no war on at the time.

Steel: Looking back, it was a good experience. I went to basic training in Arkansas. I was fortunate. The army is like any big organization, you can maneuver somewhat within it if you are diligent and make the right connections. I remember when I was finishing basic training, a fraternity brother from Northwestern was in personnel. He told me that my class was all going overseas, half to Korea, half to Europe. He asked, “Do you have a preference?” And so I said, “Yes, I want to go to Europe!”

Harper: He was in a position to fix that?

Steel: He was in personnel and it was just a minor adjustment he had to make. It was just that every other person went to Korea or Europe.

Harper: I guess that’s what fraternity brothers are supposed to do.

Steel: That’s what they’re supposed to do. I remember we had finished basic training and were all lined up next to our carefully made bunks. We stood there taking our orders, and the lieutenant went down the line. We were not lined up alphabetically, it just happened to be where we slept. So, there was a row of beds, there must have been 20 of them at least on each side, and we stood next to them. He went down the row saying “Korea, Europe, Korea, Europe, Korea, Europe, Europe, Korea, Europe, Korea, Korea...” Nobody noticed or seemed to care. And that’s how I got to Europe for the first time. Ten days at sea in February, on a troopship, was a memorable experience, I must say. We landed in Bremerhaven, where we reported for our assignments within Europe. Most of the contingent was going to Bavaria, to the infantry. But, I had somehow mentioned that I had a background in French.

Harper: Had you taken French in college?

Steel: Yes, although of course, I had never been anywhere near France. In any case, I said to the person who was telling us where to go that I had this proficiency in French and therefore I shouldn’t be going to Bavaria. He said, “You don’t want to go to France. The food is terrible and nobody speaks English.” I answered that it would be my duty to go, and that’s how I got to France! I was assigned to Verdun, the site of the historic battle. There I met James Chace [historian of US foreign policy, professor of politics at Bard College, and editor for many years of World Policy Journal], who was also there because of his proficiency in French. Initially I felt threatened by somebody else who spoke French.

Harper: Was he kind of a rival?

Steel: Yes, I thought of him as a rival. But he became a great friend.

Harper: How long did you spend in the army?

Steel: About two years, which is standard. When I came out, I didn’t want to become an academic, so eventually I went to New York and tried my hand at freelance journalism.

Harper: There’s also a Foreign Service interlude. Tell me about that.

Steel: Yes. By the way, I recently saw the obituary of Robert Oakley, who had a distinguished diplomatic career. He’s somebody I knew in the Foreign Service. He was married to a woman who was in my class in the Foreign Service. After the training, I was sent to Cyprus.

Harper: Say a bit more about this choice. Were you a patriotic young man?
Steel: No, I thought it would be an adventure. I would live in foreign countries and learn a lot about them. It sounded more interesting than sitting in an office somewhere in America. I was accepted and there were 30 people in our class. Cyprus turned out to be a great stroke of luck because it wasn’t somewhere I’d have gone otherwise. At that point the place was torn by civil war, and the Greek government was sponsoring an insurrectionary movement to get the British out. Paramilitary groups of young Greek men were wreaking havoc. It became quite dangerous, and we had curfews often from sunset to sunrise. I remember that a Greek teenager on a bicycle shot one of our consular officers while he was in his backyard. It was sort of exciting, although there were also times when it was quite tranquil. I remember I was reading Lawrence Durrell who’d been a journalist on Cyprus.

Harper: Durrell of The Alexandria Quartet fame.³

Steel: He wrote a book about Cyprus, too, although I’ve forgotten the name.⁴ Anyway, even as I explored the island, I was thinking, “Well, this is all really interesting but it will take a long time to get to a position in the Foreign Service where I really feel I have some independence.” So, I decided to leave. Looking back on it, I think I am just not a good organization person. I had a good assignment on Cyprus, but God knows where I’d have been sent after that. So I went back to the States and as mentioned, moved to New York where I had always wanted to move. I went to work first in the Institute for International Education (IIE) processing Fulbright grants, and then started doing freelance work for magazines.

Harper: You also began writing on US foreign policy. The End of Alliance: America and the Future of Europe and Pax Americana,⁵ the book that put you on the map as a commentator, someone to be reckoned with in the public debate raging at the time. It created a certain sensation, just the title itself. It was shocking to many people, as it was probably intended to be.

Steel: Yes, exactly.

Harper: Obviously you wrote it in the mid-60s when the Vietnam War was reaching its peak. Were you in New York at that time?

Steel: Yes, and I had a contract with Viking. But I’d spent some time in London in the 60s. I lived in a basement flat owned by a wealthy American who had an interest in the arts. He had a summer home in Winchelsea, on the south coast. At a dinner party there I met some people I didn’t know, and when somebody asked me what I was doing, I said, “I am writing this book about American foreign policy, and how it has turned into a “quest for empire” that really wasn’t necessarily intended. He said, “Oh, that sounds like our Pax Britannica.” So, he gave me my title, and it was a great title.

Harper: A search for empire not necessarily intended.

Steel: Well, obviously it was intended up to a certain point. Certain parts of it, individual pieces of it were intended, but the project itself I don’t think was.

Harper: The way empires usually come about.

Steel: Yes. Who was it that coined the phrase?

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⁴ Durrell, Bitter Lemons of Cyprus (London: Faber & Faber, 2000).
**Harper:** The historian John Robert Seeley said empires are born—the British empire at least-- in a fit of absence of mind.6

**Steel:** Anyhow that’s how I got the title. The book took off, as you suggest, and there was a lot of press.

**Harper:** When you wrote *Pax Americana* were you feeling indignant about American foreign policy? How would you describe your attitude?

**Steel:** No, not indignant. I was never a political radical. It wasn’t meant as a denunciation, but as an explanation, as an elaboration of an empire that had acquired its prominence, as Seeley implied, in a fit of absent-mindedness. One thing had led to another, and in effect that is what it had become. We had to come to terms with that.

**Harper:** Were you calling for the dismantling of the empire?

**Steel:** I should go back and read it [laughs]. But it wasn’t really prescriptive. It was more; this is what it is.

**Harper:** A work of history rather than a prescription. As was your biography of Walter Lippmann.7 Tell me about the origins of that.

**Steel:** Well, after *Pax Americana* had come out, I got a call from Richard Rovere, who was a well-known journalist in New York. He said, “I wonder if you would come and have lunch with me at the Century Club. I want to talk to you about something.” I had always wanted to go to the Century Club, so I said sure. Then he told me he’d been commissioned to write a biography of Lippmann. But it took a lot of time away from his column for *The New Yorker*. It was more than he could manage, and he’d like me to collaborate with him. I knew little about Lippmann’s life at the time, but of course I knew who he was. I thought it over, and said no to Rovere because he was very well known and I wasn’t really. He would get the credit and I would be doing most of the work. Then he said, “Actually I’d just like to turn it over to you.” Suddenly it became a whole different proposition. He said of course we’d have to run the idea by Lippmann.

**Harper:** Rovere’s was to be an authorized biography?

**Steel:** Authorized in the sense that Lippmann provided all the information, but he did not have a veto power over anything. In fact, I never showed Lippmann the eventual manuscript before it was published. So, we arranged a lunch at the Century for the three of us [Rovere, Lippmann and Steel]. Rovere could not quite bring himself to tell Lippmann. And, then he [Lippmann] just says, “Listen Dick. Are you telling me that you really do not want to do this?” Rovere said, “Well…” Lippmann replied, “That’s ok!” So, that’s how I got started on the Lippmann biography.

**Harper:** Did Lippmann know you at that point?

**Steel:** I had met him once. I’d spent some time in Paris as well as London in the 60s, writing articles for the *New York Review*. I came back to Washington once on a visit. I had written a piece for *The New York Review* about the war and I was here. I looked him [Lippmann] up in the telephone book and just called. I got his secretary and asked, “I’d like to talk to Mr. Lippmann.” I talked to him and we arranged to have tea.

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Harper: So he certainly knew something about you before agreeing to have you as his biographer. That you’d written *Pax Americana*.

Steel: He’d probably done some homework.

Harper: And, he probably agreed with the book.

Steel: Yes, I would imagine.

Harper: Going back to the late 60s for a minute, at the time of *Pax Americana*, were you involved in anti-war activities?

Steel: Not really. I was never an activist. Only I might have been indignant.

Harper: But, you weren’t in “the movement”?

Steel: No, no!

Harper: Where would you have put yourself on the political spectrum at that point?

Steel: I don’t know. Center-left.

Harper: A liberal democrat?

Steel: Liberal democrat. But, I was not an activist.

Harper: That’s also the moment when Bobby Kennedy was emerging as a national figure and as the standard bearer of the left challenging Johnson in 1968. You later went on to write a book about him.

Steel: Yes.

Harper: Tell me about writing the Lippmann book. Did you get to know the subject well?

Steel: He was quite a private person. I saw him a few times, but it was hard to get information out of him. I remember one of the first things I asked him was, “Do you have any living relatives?” He said no. I looked in the New York phone book and there was somebody who spelled his name with two Ps and two Ns, which is unusual. I called this person and he said Walter was his cousin, but they hadn’t seen each other in a long time. Lippmann was very private about that sort of thing.

Harper: Did you develop an admiration for Lippmann? What did you come to think of him?

Steel: I admired him enormously. He was the founding editor of *The New Republic*. He had written some very important books. He had kept his independence. And it was such an education researching his life. He’s a real lesson in American history. It was wonderful doing the research.

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Steel: I felt it was necessary to give it a dimension that went beyond a single personality.

Harper: In the conclusion, you say that if one is looking for threads running through his life, fundamental views that he sticks to, it’s hard to find them. You say something along those lines. Was there nothing that marked Lippmann’s view of the world and of America’s role in it?

Steel: One thing that marked it was that the US should avoid unnecessary interventions, not become entangled in useless military interventions. And the importance of a solvent foreign policy. Matching resources to commitments.

Harper: Another distinctive thing that you wrote was a review of Dean Acheson’s Present at the Creation in the New York Review. It must have been between Pax Americana and the Lippmann’s biography. I remember being very struck by it. Practically everybody was fawning over it, and you essentially trashed it.

Steel: Oh God, I can hardly remember!

Harper: In Acheson’s papers at Yale, I came across a letter he’d written about it. He was furious. Correspondence between him and his editor saying that the reviews had all been good, except that damn Ronald Steel, or something like that.

Steel: I did a profile of Acheson for Esquire.

Harper: Also one of [George] Kennan.

Steel: I went to Princeton to interview Kennan for Esquire. I remember he had a number of books and magazines in his office in German. He was gracious, but quite wary and detached. He wasn’t the kind of person given to emotional outbursts. In terms of his basic views, I’d say I was pretty much in agreement with him.

Harper: It sounds like you were having a lot of fun doing these things.

Steel: I was, but I was also ready for a change, and I needed some solvency. Foreign policy journals are not a place where you make a living, nor did I want to spend all my time writing for Vanity Fair and that sort of thing. As it turned out, not long before the publication of the Lippmann book, I had been invited to a conference on the Vietnam War at the University of Southern California (USC). Some months later I got a phone call from a man who said, “My name is Justin Lee and I am the provost at USC. I wonder if you would come have lunch with me.” I said, sure. He said he was very impressed by my books and would like me to become a professor at USC. I told him I did not have a PhD, but he said that didn’t matter to him. He said...

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10 Steel, “Commissar of the Cold War,” The New York Review of Books, Feb. 12, 1970. The review concluded, “In the pages of this long memoir lie the intellectual justification for the Cold War, the enormous expansion of American military power, and the ignoble interventions that have been carried out with the most noble rhetoric. The world Acheson helped to create is the world we still live in. Although his book tells us what it was like to be ‘present at the creation’ of the post-war world, as we enter the 1970s his pride in that role seems strangely misplaced.”
“I am telling the School of International Relations they can have you. If they don’t take you, I’m not planning on getting anybody else.”

Harper: He was in a position to call the shots?

Steel: He was the provost, second in command.

Harper: So, Pax Americana paved the way for Lippmann, and Lippmann paved the way for USC.

Steel: Exactly, and my first teaching job was as a full professor.

Harper: Not everybody is so lucky. Did you enjoy teaching? You must have liked the contact with the students.

Steel: Yes, I did. I enjoyed being part of the university, I enjoyed having colleagues, and I enjoyed meeting students. Sometimes I feel that I retired too soon, even though I was pretty old when I did. I remember that there was somebody at USC who was still teaching classes at 83. And I thought to myself, “This is absurd. It just doesn’t seem right.” But now I think that’s a good thing [laughing], taking advantage of the expertise!

Harper: I’ve always thought you are someone who has looked and acted about ten years younger than he is. I remember that when I first met you--it was in 1985 when I invited you to give a talk here at SAIS--I forget how old you were, but my guess then was ten years off. The last time I was in Los Angeles, by the way, was for the wonderful conference you organized on Kennan at USC in January 1995.13 Most of the people writing about Kennan were there.

Steel: It was a great conference. I think I should have probably stayed in LA longer than I did, whether teaching or not. I had a community there and here I don’t. I go to meetings of the Council on Foreign Relations, but I don’t have colleagues. I did think about staying, and I decided against it because of geography. Not in the sense of being far away because I liked a lot of things about California, but just the difficulty of going places. I remember once I had a friend who lived on the beach in Malibu. He invited me to a lunch on Sunday afternoon, and it took me 2 hours to get there from Pasadena. LA is a very interesting city, but Washington is an interesting city too and it’s easy to get around. But, I miss having colleagues and being part of something.

Harper: Can I take you back to something that we mentioned before? The Bobby Kennedy book. Why did you decide to write about him? And you ended up writing a very critical book.

Steel: Yes, it was critical. He was an interesting political phenomenon, but he did nothing in foreign policy. So, that wasn’t an obvious reason to do it. He was a polarizing figure and a very interesting one. It wasn’t about foreign policy. Since I had never even met him, it was a real departure from what I normally had done. I thought it would be interesting to do a personality study.

Harper: Were you at one point a fan or sympathizer of Bobby?

Steel: Not particularly. I wasn’t a disillusioned fan, or anything like that.

13 “Kennan, the Cold War, and the Future of American Foreign Policy” at The School of International Relations, University of Southern California, January 27-29, 1995.
Harper: What did you find interesting about him?

Steel: He had an intense personal component that people reacted to either very positively, as a kind of would-be savior, or very negatively. His brother was cool, and people could like JFK’s policies or not like them, but they were not going to get impassioned about them or him in the same way. Bobby seemed to be a phenomenon in politics.

Harper: Not cool, but hot.

Steel: Hot and passionate, compared to his brother.

Harper: Are there other political figures who have intrigued you? Maybe not in the same way as Bobby, but in other ways.


Harper: An eternally elusive character who also intrigued Lippmann. You grew up under Franklin D. Roosevelt. At the time, did you have a passionate connection to him, or find his death traumatic?

Steel: No. It wasn’t traumatic, and I never had any thoughts of writing about FDR. Nor Lyndon Johnson. I read one of [Robert] Caro’s volumes and decided this was more about the subject than I really wanted to know.

Harper: Could you write a book like Pax Americana today? Would you feel inspired to do a similar critique of contemporary US foreign policy?

Steel: No.

Harper: Is that out of resignation?

Steel: Maybe it is. I mean I am not indignant about these issues. I could teach them, but I’m not impassioned about them.

Harper: From what you said before it seems as though you were not particularly impassioned at the time. You were looking at the phenomenon of American empire from a detached, long-term perspective, rather than writing an engaged critique or a call to action.

Steel: I think that’s true.

Harper: This surprises me a little, but maybe it shouldn’t. Somehow I’ve always thought of you as someone more actively and identifiably engaged on the left. But you were keeping your Lippmann-esque independence. In the end, you have the temperament of the historian and biographer. Maybe the university was your natural habitat all along.

Steel: I think so. It’s just that I came to it in a roundabout way.

Harper: And, rather late.

Steel: Late, yes. Because I could have stayed at Harvard in the 50s, gotten a PhD, and then worked my way up the ladder. But I was much too impatient for that.
Harper: Impatient and adventurous. Did you ever regret that you didn’t do it that way?

Steel: No, I think the reason I don’t regret it is because I had the equivalent of a PhD when I was given the full professorship at USC. What I’d done up to then allowed me to come in through the side door. I didn’t have to get a PhD!

Harper: Ron, thank-you for talking to me.

Steel: Thank-you, John