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Forum (39) on the Importance of the Scholarship & Legacy of Marilyn B. Young

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 Introduction by Lloyd Gardner, Rutgers University, emeritus

A good while before I met Marilyn Blatt Young in person, we were put side by side together in *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, edited by Barton J. Bernstein.¹ Marilyn wrote on American Far Eastern policy in the post-Civil War years to 1900, and I picked up the story by writing a critique of the ‘Realist’ interpretation of American policy over the next two decades. When we finally met it was on a bus to the airport at the end of a large academic conference. From a few rows back I heard for the first time the melliferous voice that she possessed and always used to such great advantage. “Aren’t you Lloyd Gardner?” I turned and acknowledged that I was. “I’m Marilyn Young.”

I moved back to an empty seat near her, and so began a friendship that lasted all the years after until her death. It was anchored in mutual respect, even as we would argue about cultural markers such as in the film, *The Deerhunter*.² Marilyn’s familiarity and insight into the importance of film, literature, and television as reflections of both political consensus and dissent in American life is highlighted and expanded in Jonathan Nashel’s essay, “I was thinking, as I often do these days of Marilyn Young,” a title after her presidential address at the 2011 SHAFR conference, “I was thinking, as I often do these days, of war.” She had an uncanny sense of exactly what artefact to use with what audience. And one must add to that her ability, as Andrew Bacevich points out in his “My Friendship with Marilyn Young,” to remain “open to hearing out those who might hold alternate points of view.”

Indeed, that was the case. As Bacevich also points out, she never came across as arrogant or unapproachable. All of the essays cite incidences of her kindness and genuine helpfulness with the careers and personal lives of younger scholars. Robert Brigham notes in “Marilyn B. Young’s Scholarship,” that she was the first person to comment on his scholarship at a conference, and then became a constant source of support, “offering valuable critiques to everything I wrote.” In “My Debt to Marilyn,” Lien-Hang R. Nguyen writes that Marilyn’s academic support even extended to holding her baby on her lap at a SHAFR conference while Nguyen practiced her Bernath Lecture. The whole point is that Marilyn demonstrated that one could have and enjoy an academic career “without sacrificing family or forgetting your roots.”

Lien-Hang also notes a meeting in Lexington Kentucky where Marilyn visited her during a Vietnam conference where the usual giants in the field were in attendance: “Marilyn towered over us all.” This is not only a comment on her academic performance, but also on her personal presence where she stayed on an extra day for the “bourbon and enjoy the horse races.” And when Lien-Hang visited New York, it was an occasion to visit Marilyn’s favorite restaurant in the Village, *La Lanterna di Vittorio*. Pierre Asselin, “The Length of a Life,” also writes about Marilyn’s visits to *La Lanterna*, in the context of her friendship and help in securing an academic appointment in California after many years in Honolulu. These social occasions, I would point out were often the scene for serious business. On one of my visits to Marilyn at NYU to speak at her seminar or some other gathering, she instructed the owner of the restaurant to give us a gin-tasting session, as we discussed with a book editor our next collection of essays. We traded several visits in this fashion.³

¹ Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968).

² *The Deerhunter* was a film released in 1979, directed by Michael Cimino, that starred Robert DeNiro, Christopher Walken, and John Savage as friends from a working-class Pennsylvania steel town, who wind up in Vietnam together.

³ We edited two books together. Marilyn gathered most of the authors, and I wrote most of the introductions. The books are *The New American Empire* (New York: The New Press, 2005), and *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: The New Press, 2011).

Fredrik Logevall offers the highest praise for Marilyn, writing that “she was the model for what a historian should be.” His essay also includes some deep insights about Marilyn's impact beyond her books and articles in and of themselves. He reminds us of her moral fervor that was never moralistic prattle, and her sense of the need for historians to confront such issues and make judgments. And closely related to these matters, the importance to acknowledge the centrality of American power in the world that policymakers designed and maintained from World War II. Not just military power itself—not empire thrust upon the United States, but the assumptions that produced Vietnam and the ‘forever wars’ that came after.

Brigham goes back to Marilyn's first book, *Rhetoric of Empire: American China Policy, 1851-1901*, to illustrate her concern that the story told by the *New Left* of the creation of the US empire was incomplete.⁴ It did not adequately account for how it all came together in the search for power, the desire to be a world power required “a strong military presence in Asia.” And he comments on how the addition of one letter, ‘s,’ to the title of her big book, *The Vietnam Wars* made clear that the struggle did not end in 1975 but continued on for another decade and a half, waged by other means.⁵ As Brigham points out, the method for influencing other nations, Young argued, had become perpetual war. Nguyen adds to this with a discussion of how Marilyn's book helped her understand the inside of the war as seen from the perspective of the Vietnamese themselves and its lasting effects, and how it divided families. Pierre Asselin similarly notes how the *Vietnam Wars* opened new perspectives on the long struggle for national liberation: “My perspective on these circumstances changed over time, but I credit Marilyn's work for opening my eyes to meaningful realities I had never considered before, as well as fueling my passion for the study of the American War, which has not abated one iota since.”

Andrew Bacevich goes one step farther. Marilyn Young, he writes, exactly captures the situation today in regard to war: The nation is on hold. On hold in the sense of being “implacably resistant to reconsidering the deeply flawed premises of what establishment types misleadingly refer to as ‘national security’ policy.” And it is here that Nashel points us back to the importance of seeing the interplay, the connections between culture and political formulations, that explain American policy often better (very often better) than textbooks. She made that point using examples from popular tv series. “She argued in numerous works,” writes Nashel, “that American power and its discontents were everywhere, including (and especially) in American popular culture.”

Marilyn continued discussing these arguments and insights in her highly effective, calmly argued, commentaries and interviews until the very end. Andrew Bacevich recalls one of her last public appearances at a forum to discuss one of his books. “The flight to Santa Fe prompted a medical crisis that nearly killed her,” he notes. Even so, she insisted on going through with the event, and all present came away impressed with her gallant spirit. He concludes with a tribute shared by all the panelists: “Come to think of it, a certain kind of gallantry in consistently adhering to principle defined her admirable life.”⁶

Participants:

Lloyd C. Gardner is Professor Emeritus of History at Rutgers University. A Wisconsin PhD, he is the author or editor of more than fifteen books on American foreign policy, including *Safe for Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 1984), *Approaching Vietnam* (W.W. Norton, 1988), *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars*

⁴Young, *Rhetoric of Empire: American China Policy, 1851-1901* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

⁵ Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

⁶ Marilyn and I were asked to write the final chapter for the Cambridge History of the Vietnam War. We had some conversations about it, but she died before we put any ideas on paper. Her spirit is there - always.

for Vietnam (Ivan R. Dee, 1995), and *The War on Leakers* (The New Press, 2016). He has been president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Affairs

Pierre Asselin is the Dwight E. Stanford Chair in US Foreign Relations History, San Diego State University. He is the author of *Vietnam's American War: A History* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), a second edition of which is scheduled for publication in 2024. His latest article titled "The Indochinese Communist Party's Unfinished Revolution of 1945 and the Origins of Vietnam's 30-Year Civil War" is forthcoming in *Journal of Cold War Studies*.

Andrew Bacevich is chairman and co-founder of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.

Robert K. Brigham is Shirley Ecker Boskey Professor of History and International Relations at Vassar College. He is author of nine books on the Vietnam War, among them *Reckless: Henry Kissinger and the Tragedy of Vietnam* (PublicAffairs, 2018).

Fredrik Logevall is the Laurence D. Belfer Professor of International Affairs at Harvard University.

Jonathan Nashel is Professor of History at Indiana University, South Bend. He received his PhD in American History from Rutgers University. His book *Edward Lansdale's Cold War* was published in 2005 by the University of Massachusetts Press. He has two forthcoming essays: "Cord Meyer, the Gray Man of the CIA," in Simon Willmetts, ed., *Agents of Influence: The Cultural Politics of Espionage Washington*, Georgetown University Press; and "The Bonding of Allen Dulles and James Jesus Angleton," in Mark Stout and Sarah-Jane Corke, eds., *Adventures in Intelligence History: Stories from The International Spy Museum and Beyond*, University Press of Kansas.

Lien-Hang T. Nguyen is the Dorothy Borg Chair in the History of the United States and East Asia, Director of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, and co-founder of Vietnamese Studies at Columbia University. She is the author of *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012) and general editor of *The Cambridge History of the Vietnam War* (3 vols). Dr. Nguyen is currently working on a comprehensive history of the 1968 Tet Offensive.

“The Length of a Life”

Over white wine at her other office at *La Lanterna di Vittorio* on McDougal Street in New York City, Marilyn Young remarked, “It’s a long life.” Marilyn shared that little pearl of wisdom as my wife Grace and I were soliciting her advice about our professional prospects and whether we should stay in Hawaii or relocate to the mainland. Grace and I had met in Vietnamese language class at the University of Hawaii during our PhD studies—her in Political Science and me in History—in the early 1990s. Eventually, we each landed an academic job in Honolulu. After more than fifteen years there, we started contemplating the possibility of moving closer to our parents, hers in Queens and mine in Québec City, thinking that might also be good for us professionally.

I had previously spent a summer as a visiting scholar at New York University, where I met Marilyn for the first time. Owing to circumstances, we only had enough time for a brief chat. Our second encounter at *La Lanterna* was the first time we really got to talk. I was struck by how kind, attentive, and generous with her time Marilyn was. She barely knew me. In fact, she thought I was truly French (i.e., not French Canadian) and based somewhere in France. As for me, I was star-struck: this was the scholar whose book I had spent hours reading and re-reading in graduate school. And there she was, taking time from her busy schedule to be with and listen to Grace, whom she had never met before, and me, and being so damn nice about everything.

The Vietnam Wars came out around the time I started my doctoral studies.¹ I thought it was full of fresh, unique, and remarkable insights. No scholar had to that point treated the Franco-Vietminh War (1945-54), the American War in Vietnam (1954-75), and the Sino-Vietnamese Border War (1979)—the First, Second, and Third Indochina Wars, respectively—so comprehensively and engagingly in a single volume. Hers was the first work to make me think of the waves of violence that marked the history of post-1945 Vietnam and the rest of Indochina as one long conflict for national liberation and the construction of socialism across the peninsula. My perspective on these circumstances changed over time, but I credit Marilyn’s work for opening my eyes to meaningful realities I had never considered before, as well as for fueling my passion for the study of the American War, which has not abated one iota since. *The Vietnam Wars* also impressed upon me the importance of producing thought-provoking scholarship and not being afraid to challenge the prevailing consensus on a topic.

From our second encounter forward, Marilyn became for me an exemplar of what a good mentor should be. Above all, I learned from her that it is incumbent upon those who make a name for themselves to always be there for and supportive of junior colleagues who are seeking to do the same. I have always felt that I did not deserve all the time and attention Marilyn gave both Grace and me—because she also listened carefully to Grace’s questions and concerns—that day. And yet, she gave us just that, and really helped us in the process.

I never spent enough time with Marilyn to consider her a friend in the sense that I understand that word. I regret that. But I always deeply respected and admired her. To my great shock and surprise, she developed enough respect for me to agree to write several letters of recommendation on my behalf after Grace and I decided it was time to leave Hawaii. Unaware of her health issues, I kept nagging her for such letters until I secured my current position at San Diego State in 2017. I feel terrible about that; I should have had the decency to inquire about how she was doing beyond the perfunctory lines we customarily include in email messages to each other. Indeed, I never deserved the time, attention, and support Marilyn gave me. Still, she remained there for me, making an immeasurable difference in my professional and personal life.

¹ Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).

Marilyn was right: it sure is a long life. Unfortunately, it can still be a little too short sometimes.

Review by Andrew Bacevich, the Quincy Institute

“My Friendship with Marilyn Young”

Other contributors to this forum are better equipped than I am to assess Marilyn Young’s influential contributions to scholarship. My aim is to offer a brief reflection on our friendship, which was, I now see, as improbable as it was genuine.

I should acknowledge that Marilyn and I were not pals. We did not hang out or meet for drinks. We did not teach courses together or collaborate on scholarly projects. I did not participate in the several important academic entities that she had a hand in creating. I doubt that we were in the same room together more than a dozen times. And yet I count our relationship as one of the most valued of my adult life.

In some respects, we made for an odd pairing. Marilyn was a Jewish New Yorker situated firmly on the Left politically. I am a Catholic with roots in the Midwest who persists even today in describing himself as a conservative. So on the surface there appeared to be little basis for us to forge a friendship. Yet it turned out that we were kindred spirits.

War provided the bond that drew us together—or more specifically the persistent American propensity for war that has become a rarely acknowledged hallmark of our time. For both of us, war became a preoccupation.

Despite being generally allergic to large academic gatherings, I was in attendance at the 2011 meeting of SHAFR when Marilyn gave her evocatively titled presidential address: “I was thinking, as I often do these days, of war.” (She had invited me to give a luncheon talk).

Her remarks that day contained this striking observation: “I find that I have spent most of my life as a teacher and scholar thinking and writing about war.” Her studies ranged from the War of 1898 all the way to US participation in the conflicts of the early twenty-first century.¹ As her work matured, her perspective evolved. “Initially,” she reflected, “I wrote about all these as if war and peace were discrete: prewar, war, peace, or postwar. Over time, this progression of wars has looked to me less like a progression than a continuation: as if between one war and the next, the country was on hold.”²

Marilyn had cut her eyeteeth as an activist and historian in opposition to the Vietnam War.

But if Vietnam served as a point of departure, it also remained an invaluable depository of truths waiting to be discovered. It now appears to me that my own trajectory mirrored Marilyn’s, even if I my own education

¹ Marilyn B. Young, *Rhetoric of Empire: American China Policy, 1851-1901* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991); Young, “Two, Three, Many Vietnams,” *Cold War History* 6:4 (November 2006): 413-424. Mark Philip Bradley and Young, eds., *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars; Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Lloyd C. Gardner and Young, *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam: Or, How NOT to Learn from the Past* (New York: the New Press, 2008).

² The talk was eventually published: Marilyn Young, “‘I was thinking, as I often do these days, of war’: The United States in the Twenty-First Century,” in Mark Philip Bradley and Mary L. Dudziak, ed., *Making the Forever War: Marilyn B. Young on the Culture and Politics of American Militarism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021), 186-204.

lagged behind hers. As a young officer, I had served in Vietnam.³ Yet it was only subsequent to my military service that I came to appreciate the immensity of the crime that the United States had perpetrated there. But I have always been a slow learner.

To a startling, almost inexplicable degree, the United States remains today “on hold” with regard to war, precisely as Marilyn appreciated in 2011—“on hold” in the sense of being implacably resistant to reconsidering the deeply flawed premises of what establishment types misleadingly refer to as ‘national security policy.’⁷

More than a few observers have attempted to explain why this is the case. Prominent among those explanations are the military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower warned against and the self-aggrandizing, self-perpetuating policy elite that David Halberstam and other writers have famously described and dissected.⁴ My own preferred explanation centers on the Vietnam-induced decision to outsource responsibility for the nation’s defense to ‘volunteers’ while giving ordinary citizens a pass. I have never figured out how our approach to raising military forces squares with any meaningful conception of democracy. Of course, a radically warped and conveniently selective grasp of our collective history also figures. Few things help to perpetuate war more effectively than defective memory laced with a belief in American chosenness.⁵

Where Marilyn came down on this fundamental issue I do not know. I failed to ask her—an oversight that I deeply regret.

Although I no longer remember how Marilyn and I first connected, I’m quite sure that it was at her initiative. More than a few first-class scholars of my acquaintance suffer from a touch of arrogance. Not so, Marilyn. She was forthright but approachable, confident but without pretense. She knew where she stood and what she believed, even as she remained open to hearing out those who might hold alternative points of view. She possessed great reserves of integrity. So it seemed to me anyway.

I do remember the last time I saw her, which was shortly before she passed away. The Lannan Foundation had invited me to come to Santa Fe to participate in the annual series of Lannan-sponsored events at the handsome old Lensic Performing Arts Center. (That this series is now ending offers one of the many reasons to lament the fact that the foundation is closing its doors).

Lannan had proposed a ‘conversation’ about a book I had recently published. They asked me to suggest an interlocutor. I nominated Marilyn and she accepted Lannan’s invitation. I did not know at the time that she was gravely ill, already carrying an oxygen canister and badly weakened by the disease that would take her life.

The flight to Santa Fe prompted a medical crisis that nearly killed her. Even so Marilyn gamely insisted on going through with the event. Whether we spread any wisdom that evening is for others to judge, but all in attendance came away impressed with her gallant spirit. Come to think of it, a certain kind of gallantry in consistently adhering to principle defined her admirable life.

I treasure Marilyn’s memory and miss her dearly.

³ See Andrew Bacevich, “On Becoming a Historian through the Side Door,” ed., Diane Labrosse, H-Diplo Essay 184, Essay Series on Learning the Scholar’s Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars, 22 January 2020; <https://issforum.org/essays/PDF/E184.pdf>.

⁴ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972).

⁵ Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 2013)

 Review by Robert K. Brigham, Vassar College

“Marilyn B. Young’s Scholarship”

For Marilyn B. Young, war was always a concern. She was among the first scholars to see war as a perpetual state of being for the United States because, she argued, American officials lacked the imagination, initiative, and interest to explore other possibilities. These shortcomings normalized war for the United States and Americans in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She explored these themes in two major single-authored books, a co-authored book, dozens of anthologies that enjoyed her editorship, and countless essays.

Anyone who spent much time with Marilyn will quickly tell you, however, that she was at her best in front of a live audience of non-believers. She had a vast knowledge and understanding of film, counterinsurgency, and the US wars for Korea and Vietnam. I wish she could have had the time to put some of these pathbreaking ideas into several books. These public talks must be considered part of her gift and contribution to the ongoing debate about America’s use of its considerable projectible power.

Focusing on Marilyn’s two single-authored books, I am struck by the consistency in her arguments. She saw the use of the American military as a blunt instrument of ideology, and she rejected easy national security interest explanations for the use of that power. She often saw the United States as a reactionary state in a revolutionary world. And she was a severe critic of the idea that somehow the United States was different from its imperial predecessors. While many US policy makers thought that a uniquely American story would emerge from war with Spain in the 1890s and from US intervention in Vietnam, Marilyn was critical of both. There was nothing providential about American adventurism, nothing beneficial about spreading the blessings of American liberty abroad.

In her first book, *Rhetoric of Empire: American China Policy, 1895-1901* (1968),¹ she agreed with much of the existing New Left scholarship that saw economic determinism at the heart of America’s Asia policy. She believed that the search for Asian markets was important to US policy makers in the 1890s, but she also thought that they were driven by naked power. She maintained that American officials thought the US had to have a strong military presence in Asia if it was going to be a world power. Becoming a global player was going to take new resources and public commitment. To assure both, Marilyn brilliantly showed the impact of domestic politics and culture on US foreign policy.

She continued to explore these themes in her second book, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (1991).² Joining George C. Herring and William S. Turley,³ Marilyn offered an early and powerful synthesis of the US war in Vietnam. She saw more continuity than change when the US took over the French effort to subdue Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the Vietnamese communist party, and his followers. Full of hubris following victory in the Second World War, American officials quickly brutalized democracy by promoting limited war theory and counterinsurgency. The killing associated with both was far more indiscriminate than US officials let on, according to Marilyn, and this was the beginning of an act of destroying the village in order to save it. When President Richard Nixon attempted to make war look like peace, Marilyn argued that the moral breakdown of US foreign policy was complete.

The simple *s* at the end of her title of *The Vietnam Wars* was another major scholarly contribution to the literature on the Vietnam War. According to Marilyn, because US officials continued to wage war against the

¹ Marilyn B. Young, *Rhetoric of Empire: American China Policy, 1895-1901* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

² Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

³ George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2nd Edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) and William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986).

Socialist Republic of Vietnam, using a full diplomatic and economic embargo, the war did not end with the Fall of Saigon in April 1975. She was an early proponent of the idea of an ongoing war by other means.

Marilyn wrote for a general audience and the book is centered on America and US foreign policy, and yet she was among the first to include diverse voices of Vietnamese in her history of the war, elevating revolutionaries and the Saigon elite to more than passive actor in their own histories. *The Wars for Vietnam* quickly became one of the best standard narratives on the war in Vietnam, winning the Berkshire Women's History Prize. Published in the shadow of the First Gulf War, *The Vietnam Wars* also called into question the idea that American foreign policy was benign and that the US did not go abroad looking for monsters to destroy. Marilyn speculated that US foreign policy elites learned nothing from Vietnam.

In the introduction to *The Vietnam Wars*, Marilyn wrote, “war continues to be a primary instrument of American foreign policy and the call to arms a first response to international disputes.”⁴ This one sentence sums up Marilyn's scholarship nicely.

On a personal note, Marilyn was the first person to comment on my scholarship at a conference. She was warm and generous. We went out for dinner after our panel to continue the conversation and sat there talking into the wee hours of the night, and for the next thirty years. I had no idea at the time that I would end up teaching at her beloved alma mater, Vassar College. It was at Vassar where Marilyn's love of history developed under the watchful eye of Carl Degler. She always spoke fondly of her time at Vassar as a full scholarship student, and I was pleased that we had that connection.

Over the decades, I had the pleasure to write with Marilyn, to travel to Vietnam with her, and to be on the same panel with her in places as varied as the Clinton Institute at University College Dublin and the Air War College. She was a constant source of support, offering valuable critiques to everything I wrote. She was quick with a letter of recommendation and supported me in myriad other ways. We often gathered in Greenwich Village at her apartment or some new Vietnamese restaurant. Our conversations were wide-ranging. She always had something brilliant to say. I miss her.

⁴ Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, x.

 Review by Fredrik Logevall, Harvard University

I first encountered Marilyn Young's work as a graduate student in the early 1990s. It was a revelation, especially for what I saw as its controlled moral fervor. I had been a political science major as an undergraduate, and—in keeping with the prevailing norm in that discipline—had been schooled to believe that moral judgments should be avoided in scholarship, that a researcher, seeking to be *scientific*, should adhere to a positivist value-neutrality that seeks to explain, not affix responsibility or blame. The theory should have pride of place, and any findings about the correctness of the given actors' actions should be hidden or omitted.

Even then, I had read enough history and taken enough undergrad history courses to know that historians think differently. For most of them, moral judgments are unavoidable in historical analysis. It is a fool's errand, as they see it, to attempt to write an 'objective,' value-free study of the human past; such an effort will inevitably founder. Those who claim to have succeeded in the endeavor have not really avoided making moral judgments but merely masked or fudged them. The very words we use in our writing—*good, bad, rational, irrational, attack, wound, maim, massacre, heal, rescue, courage, cowardice, loyalty, honor*, etc. ad infinitum—are hardly value-free; they signify moral judgments. (A separate question on which historians are more divided: should history be used as an instrument of social change in the present?)¹

The force of this disciplinary difference was brought home to me when I read Young's 1991 book *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*.² Here, I realized, was a careful scholar, wedded to the archival and other evidence and fully immersed in the secondary literature, whose moral passion fairly leapt off the page. Though most of the book focused on the period of heavy US involvement in struggle, by her title Young made the important point that there was not just one war for Vietnam, but several. More than most previous authors, she made the Vietnamese actors in their own story. She wrote powerfully about the devastating implications of the decisions by US policymakers, safely cocooned in official Washington, for the people of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. And she stressed the degree to which none of it was inevitable—the resort to major war may have made a horrible kind of sense in the context of the time, but American officials could have chosen differently at key junctures along the way. It was vital to learn this history, she wrote in the preface, for the possibility was ever-present that the United States would undertake a similarly catastrophic intervention again.

I didn't agree with all aspects of the book. My own research led me to believe that Young understated the degree to which key players in the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations (including the presidents themselves) harbored deep private misgivings about the conflict and about whether any lasting success for the US-South Vietnamese side was possible. These doubts existed also in Congress, including among the top Democratic leadership, an element I thought Young could have explored more fully. She arguably romanticized the National Liberation Front and the Hanoi government, and exaggerated—as subsequent studies, drawing on materials that were unavailable to Young, confirmed—the American role in the creation of South Vietnam in 1954.³ But these quibbles did not lessen my appreciation for the book, for its

¹ See Paul W. Schroeder, "International History: Why Historians Do It Differently than Political Scientists," in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 403-416.

² Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

³ See, for example, Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

perspicacity, for the potent sense it gave that a lot hinged on the story it told. *This stuff matters to me, Young was saying to us; it should matter to you too.*

A year or two passed before I met her in person, at the annual SHAFR meeting. I could see right away the qualities that our many subsequent encounters confirmed: her intellectual firepower, her intense curiosity, her puckish sense of humor, her love of interpretive sparring, her fundamental generosity, her willingness—even determination—to give you her undivided attention. She held strong views about history and historiography, about how we should explain this or that American military intervention, yet she retained an open mind, was willing to be challenged, willing to engage competing interpretations. In these and other ways, she was the model for what a historian should be.

And always, there was the work—the stream of books, articles, essays, and reviews. It has informed my own research and writing in countless ways over the past three decades, and generations of my students, undergraduate as well as graduate, have profited from it as well. They will continue to learn from it, as will the rest of us. Here there is much one could highlight, but I wish to focus on just one thing: her warning, in a stellar chapter in the Thomas Bender-edited volume *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, against the growing tendency among international historians of the twentieth century to de-center the United States. Any such effort ran the risk of becoming ahistorical, Young maintained, given America’s outsized place on the global stage. Such was Washington’s position in the world after World War II, she wrote, that all nations “had little choice but to engage the centrality of American power.”⁴

This did not mean, Young hastened to add, that US power was limitless. Even hegemonies have constraints on their power, and successive American administrations after 1945 often failed to achieve their objectives. Moreover, she went on, “people around the world have found reasons enough of their own to engage in civil and other wars, with the result that the United States has sometimes had to conclude that domination over half a country was better than none.” Nevertheless,

in its impact on global culture, economics, military hardware, and international diplomacy, no other powers or coalition of powers comes close to the United States. This is especially the case since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but I would argue it has been true for much longer. To write the history of the United States in the world from outside its claims to a limitless horizon means to take the country as simply one nation among others. This is true and also not true. So the problem is not only how to think about the United States without reinstating its centered sense of itself but how to do this without ignoring the success it has had in achieving, in Melvyn Leffler’s words, ‘a preponderance of power,’ a centralizing power, in the world.⁵

Nor in Young’s estimation was this merely a question of America’s economic and geopolitical might; the nation’s parochialism and political culture mattered too. “Policymakers and, in large measure, the American public, live deeply inside an exceptionalist ideology that has retroactively shaped the material world the historians interpret,” she wrote. Partly because of the advantages afforded by the nation’s size and geographic position, many Americans have been unable “to envision other countries as countries in their own right,” or

⁴ Marilyn Young, “The Age of Global Power,” in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 275. See also Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, “Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations,” *Texas National Security Review*, April 2020.

⁵ Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992). The quotation appears in Marilyn Young, “The Age of Global Power,” 275.

to imagine how the exercise of U.S. power affects others' lives. The result: "Other countries simply do not have much purchase on the American imagination."⁶

What did this mean for the field of US foreign relations history? To Young, it suggested that historians should certainly do multiarchival work and learn foreign languages if their topic required it. "But to do this without at the same time addressing the consistency with which other countries have remained insubstantial to U.S. policymakers and their public distorts the record beyond the redress of polyglottal achievement."⁷

It's a powerful, reasoned argument, one that to my mind has lost none of its cogency in the two decades since it was written. On display in the chapter are the qualities that characterize all of Marilyn Young's writings in her marvelous fifty-year career: deep intellectual engagement, capacious knowledge, moral urgency, and an economic and arresting literary style. The final sentence reads: "De-centering America in one's head is a good thing. But it does not of itself create a world free of its overwhelming military and economic power, and it is crucial to remember the difference or the effort to de-center American history will run the danger of obscuring what it means to illuminate."⁸

⁶ Young, "The Age of Global Power," 275-276. This is also a main theme in Campbell Craig and Logevall, *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, rev ed. 2020).

⁷ Young, "The Age of Global Power," 277.

⁸ Young, "The Age of Global Power," 291.

Review by Jonathan Nashel, Indiana University, South Bend

“I was thinking, as I often do these days, of Marilyn Young”

My hunch is that if one were to draw a Venn diagram with historians of American foreign relations in one circle, and viewers of the 2021 American hit television show *Ted Lasso* in the other, there would be a fair amount of overlap. Sweet, yet sharp, *Ted Lasso* was the perfect tonic for anyone miserable during Covid-19 lockdowns and endless Zoom meetings. But I bet Marilyn would have hated the show. Feel-good wasn't her ethos. And feel-good is this show's *raison d'être*. Take the scene where Ted Lasso, the American soccer coach, is bonding with one of his players, Sam Obisanya, who is from Nigeria and having a hard time fitting in with the rest of the team:

Sam

Coach, what's... what's this?

Ted

Well, my little boy gave me a whole bunch of these [toy soldiers]. You know, help keep me safe while I'm away. I miss him, you know...

Sam

Um, Coach, is it... is it okay if I don't keep this? I don't really have the same fondness for the American military that you do.

Ted

Oh, sure. Right. Imperialism.

Sam

Right. Yeah. Imperialism. Thank you, Coach. Thank you.¹

When a coach and player have a heartfelt moment over the nature of American imperialism, well, I see Marilyn throwing the remote at the TV.

In contrast, I'd wager that Marilyn would have loved HBO's dark comedy, *White Lotus*, which also appeared at the same time as *Ted Lasso*. Set in a 5-star resort in Hawaii, it followed the travails of the uber-rich and the workers who tend to their needs and maladies. It also had scenes that were the most searching critiques of imperialism this side of Noam Chomsky. At one point Nicole, the mother/wife (white, Silicon-Valley entrepreneur) who is financing her family's vacation asks Paula, their daughter's (biracial) friend who has accompanied them to the resort, why she left the Hula-dancing entertainment the night before. (In addition to these two characters, the scene includes Nicole's snarky daughter, Olivia, and Nicole's husband, Mark, who lives off Nicole's wealth):

Nicole

Paula, are you feeling better? Your migraine?

¹ *Ted Lasso*, “Biscuits,” 2021. Transcript from:
<https://tvshowtranscripts.ourboard.org/viewtopic.php?f=1020&t=45361>

Paula

Yeah. Much better. Thanks.

Nicole

Is that why you couldn't stay for dinner last night?

Olivia

Paula was disturbed by the entertainment.

Nicole

The hula dancing?

Mark

Oh, y— you're allergic to fire?

Olivia

It bothers her to watch Hawaiians have to dance for a bunch of white people.

Nicole

Oh. I think it's just a way for them to honor their culture. And they seemed to be having a really good time.

Mark

Look, obviously, imperialism was bad. Shouldn't kill people, steal their land, and then make them dance. Everybody knows that. But it's humanity. Welcome to history. Welcome to America. (Laughs) I mean, what are we gonna do, huh? Really. Nobody cedes their privilege. That's absurd. And it goes against human nature. We're all just trying to win the game of life. How are we— how are we gonna make it right? Hmm? Should we give away all our money? Would you like that, Liv? Hmm? Yeah, that's what I thought. Mm-hmm. M— maybe we should just feel shitty about ourselves all the time for crimes of the past? Wear a hair shirt and not go on vacation?²

Mark seems to be channeling NSC-68 here as he justifies his good luck amidst the sorry state of the world. You can almost hear Marilyn shouting back at the TV, “that daiquiri just didn't appear out of nowhere, bud.”

I bring up these TV shows because Marilyn Young deeply influenced the way I approach the history of US foreign policy. She argued in numerous works that American power and its discontents were everywhere, including (and especially) in American popular culture. The title of my essay, then, is an obvious riff on Young's essay, “I was thinking, as I often do these days, of war: The United States in the Twenty-First Century.” Here, in her 2011 SHAFR Presidential Address, she explored—actually, raged against—all the ways in which the United States has normalized war.³ She exposed the nature of American power, its horrific effect upon Americans and the people in the Global South, and the way it has been marketed and rationalized by policymakers and their supplicants. By highlighting *Ted Lasso* and *White Lotus* I am doing what I believed

² *White Lotus*, “*The Lotus-Eaters*,” HBO, 2021. Transcript from: <https://tvshowtranscripts.ourboard.org/viewtopic.php?f=1000&t=45180>

³ Marilyn Young, “I was thinking, as I often do these days, of war: The United States in the Twenty-First Century,” in Mark Philip Bradley and Mary L. Dudziak, ed., *Making the Forever War: Marilyn B. Young on the Culture and Politics of American Militarism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021), 186-204. The phrasing of her title is of note as she highlighted a poem by C.K. Williams, “The Hearth.” He discussed the nature of war and includes the stanza: “as I often do these days, of war,” 186.

Marilyn would ask of us all: be historically aware of the roots of and justifications for empire. To do otherwise, to look away, or explain away, is tantamount to a defense of the indefensible.

Another point that Marilyn taught me was to be fearless. She was more than ready to challenge collective assumptions. As a graduate student, I first fully appreciated her fearlessness when I read her review of Loren Baritz's *Backfire: Vietnam—The Myths that Made Us Fight, the Illusions that Helped us Lose, the Legacy that Haunts us Today*.⁴ I had read and enjoyed Baritz's book, in a paperback edition with blurbs from Susan Sontag, William Appleman Williams, and Henry Steele Commager. This veritable Murderers' Row of writers applauded Baritz's analysis of American history, culture, and politics, and the way this combustible mix led to the US disaster in Vietnam. But Young did not share in their collective enthusiasm, and her critique forever changed my understanding of the origins of the war. When Lloyd Gardner asked me to take part in this symposium, I dimly recalled the impact her review had had upon me, and so I re-read it. It's a barnburner, with phrases like: "it gets worse,"; "even less analytical," "fatally muddled"; and "Baritz doesn't do cultural analysis, he just moves one or two metaphors around." Her review, though, was much more than a series of swipes and disappointments. She critiqued the logic of American liberalism when it goes abroad and found Baritz's defense of it notably lacking. At one point she observed:

Now we know where we are: The Country of Misguided Benevolence; the Land of the Tragic Mistake; the Sadly Bloodied Banner of Innocence. Thus, distressingly early in this long book, Loren Baritz had reproduced the myth he set out to deconstruct. "An important reason we marched into Vietnam ... was liberalism's irrepressible need to be helpful to those less fortunate. But the decency of the impulse. . . cannot hide the bloody eagerness to kill in the name of virtue." Baritz's ability to write sentences like this contributes to the perpetuation of an ideology I am certain he intends to defeat. But good intentions are not enough.⁵

Her review was an (intellectual) call to arms. It motivated me to approach my coming dissertation with both excitement and the belief that doing history mattered.

Her review probably caught my eye, way back in the 1980s and in the bowels of Alexander Library at Rutgers, because she re-read the passages Baritz had used from *The Pentagon Papers* to show where his reading had missed the mark. I also must have zeroed in on her discussion of CIA operative Edward Lansdale, whose 1954 after-action report of sabotaging the buses in North Vietnam had made him an infamous character. Baritz cited Lansdale's actions too, but viewed them in a light-hearted way, as part of an "idealistic crusade." Marilyn viewed Lansdale's actions very, very differently and in a way that I found utterly fascinating. I must have told Lloyd all this at the time, because he suggested I ask her to be the outside reader of my dissertation. It was my good fortune that she immediately accepted. And so, over the course of my writing of my dissertation, Marilyn and I developed a bit of a rhythm. I would (slowly) send her my chapters and then a few weeks later I would go to her office at NYU for a meeting. Here she would say to me, gently but firmly, that I was letting Lansdale off the hook. "Stick the knife into him" she told me on more than one occasion. I fear I never stuck it in enough for her tastes, but I was honored that she had engaged so much with my work.

Marilyn also helped me become a better teacher. The first time I taught a course on the Vietnam War I used her magisterial *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990*.⁶ To state the obvious: this is no ordinary textbook. Yes, it is chronologically structured and has all the facts and figures one would expect in a single volume history of

⁴ Marilyn Young, "Review," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 18:3 (1986), 59-62; Loren Baritz, *Backfire: Vietnam—The Myths that Made Us Fight, the Illusions that Helped us Lose, the Legacy that Haunts us Today* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).

⁵ Young, "Review," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 59.

⁶ Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

how and why the US intervened in Vietnam. But you hear her voice on every page, and her voice is one of precision and anger as she implores her reader to never look away from the reality of American actions and justifications. I recall reading passages of her work with students and admiring at how she marshalled her evidence to show that the US intervention wasn't some mistake, or that the war could have been won, or that there were no crimes committed upon the Vietnamese people. Lansdale figured in her history as a central, yet shadowy figure, worthy of an extended analysis on how and why the US intervened in Vietnam.

Marilyn's voice lingers with me to this day, and it is one reason I am so grateful that Mark Bradley and Mary Dudziak have collected her essays in their recent collection, *Making the Forever War: Marilyn B. Young on the Culture and Politics of American Militarism*.⁷ It is a fitting testament to her work and a perfect collection to use in our classrooms. In this way, then, we can continue to think about the world through Marilyn's eyes and bring her intellect and passion to our students today

⁷ Bradley and Dudziak, ed., *Making the Forever War*.

“My Debt to Marilyn”

Like most students of the Vietnam War of my generation, I first encountered Marilyn Young through the pages of her powerful tour-de-force, *The Vietnam Wars 1940-1955*.¹ As a senior who discovered her “roots” in college, I became interested in the war’s history as a way to understand my present. In the early 1990s, after my uncle was released from re-education camp, we had successfully sponsored my aunt’s family to the United States. Our reunion was bittersweet. The family of six brought with them more than a decade of pain and suffering, matched by the guilt and sorrow of my family of thirteen who fled Vietnam after the fall of Saigon. Who won and lost the Vietnam War and how do we grapple with its legacies? What happened to the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War? I found answers in the pages of Marilyn’s book. As she began that book by asking how the United States found itself not only in Vietnam, but in overseas wars since 1945, she laid clear that there would be no discharge from that war for its many victims.² I felt indebted to her before I even met her.

But meet her I did, and my life was never the same again and always for the better. It was 2003, and I was at my very first academic conference as a third-year graduate student.³ As one of the few Vietnamese-American scholars at a wars for Vietnam conference, I felt out-of-place. Marilyn immediately saw this, and she struck up a conversation by asking me about my family’s experiences in the Vietnamese war. I told her that my father was a Catholic rank-and-file soldier in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam whose family fled twice from Communism and that my mother was Buddhist and a former factory hand-turned seamstress in Saigon whose family members had joined the southern revolution. I explained how this unlikely couple had nine children, with me as the youngest. She then asked if I remembered anything about Vietnam and I told her sadly, that I could not. I was five months old when we left. Looking at this giant (despite being around my height at a little over five feet, Marilyn was a giant), her passion caught me by surprise. She proceeded to curse all the American leaders who robbed me of this birthright. I was immediately smitten, as well as indebted, after meeting Marilyn in person.

She also taught me by example. Marilyn showed me that you can be a politically committed, activist scholar but that you must always buttressed that activism with impeccable research skills and sharp analysis. More importantly, you can enjoy this career without sacrificing family or forgetting your roots. A good example was when she visited me in Lexington, KY. At yet another amazing Vietnam War conference with the usual giants in the field, Marilyn towered over us all.⁴ After the formal program where we debated and presented on all aspects of the war, Marilyn stayed an extra day to drink bourbon and enjoy the horse races. The graduate students were amazed when they saw Marilyn sleeping off her inebriated state in the morning (races start early), only to be up and ready for more drinks and more betting in the afternoon. We were indebted to

¹ Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991). Alongside *The Vietnam Wars*, George Herring’s *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (please complete the citation) shaped my understanding of the Vietnam War. They continue to do so today.

² Marilyn would grapple with this notion of how US leaders normalized war and violence so that it became a fabric of the American way of life. Despite the formal “end” of US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Marilyn would most likely have argued that so long as US advisors are still in war zones, the United States is still at war. See Marilyn B. Young, *Making the Forever War: Marilyn B. Young on the Culture and Politics of American Militarism*. Edited by Mark Philip Bradley and Mary L. Dudziak. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021).

³ The conference proceedings eventually became an edited volume. See Fredrik Logevall and Mark Lawrence, eds., *Indochina in the Balance: New Perspectives on the First Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁴ Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young, eds., *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National and Transnational Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Marilyn for showing us that you can be serious and passionate about history and politics but also how you can live life to its fullest among friends.

While we met again and again over the course of two decades—at La Lanterna for coffee in New York, at SHAFR gatherings (she held my four-month old baby while I rehearsed my Bernath Lecture), at the Decolonization Seminar, and anywhere else we could be together—my affection for and my indebtedness to Marilyn only grew. She wrote me letters of recommendation, she introduced me to people, she actively mentored me, the list goes on. But I know I am not alone in how I felt—how I feel—about Marilyn. Marilyn belongs to that rare species of scholars who seem to be disappearing on us: those who are just as life-changing in real life as they are through their magisterial work,⁵ scholars who are committed to their scholarship, their colleagues, and their community. In short, they are scholars who are not only great historians but great people too.

By the time I moved to my new job in New York City in 2016, I thought I'd be able to enjoy more great times together in the same city. I was wrong. The next time I saw Marilyn was at her funeral. I miss her but her legacy lives on and we are all indebted.

⁵ The field of Vietnam War history has suffered so many recent blows with the loss of George Herring and John Prados in late 2022.