

# H-Diplo ESSAY 184

Essay Series on Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars  
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## *On Becoming a Historian through the Side Door*

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*From: Diane Labrosse*

*H-Diplo is pleased to announce a new essay series, "Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars."*

*We have invited over seventy scholars to write autobiographical essays on their formative years, reaching out to research scholars as well as academics who have devoted their careers to teaching. The series includes essays by practitioners of an array of approaches to the study of diplomacy and international relations, and features trailblazers who broke new methodological ground and brought formerly marginalized perspectives and voices into the guild.*

*We want to know what led these scholars to choose their specialties in graduate school; which mentors influenced that choice; and how their interests have changed based upon their work in the archives and the evolving scholarship on their topics. We have asked them to reflect on the changes that have taken place in the field at large, as well as in their own approaches, based upon new historiographical trends and 'turns' from the 1960s to the present.*

*These digital essays, which will be read from thousands of points across the globe, allow us to bridge vast distances and unite our readers in the personal conversations and reflections that ordinarily take place on a face-to-face, intimate basis at conferences and in seminar rooms. Our aim is to provide a collegial set of essays that draw readers into the larger academic community of shared experiences as practitioners of the scholarly craft.*

*We open the series with Andrew Bacevich's "On Becoming a Historian through the Side Door."*

*With best regards,*

*Diane Labrosse, H-Diplo managing editor*

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ESSAY BY ANDREW BACEVICH, BOSTON UNIVERSITY, EMERITUS

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I arrived at Princeton in the summer of 1975, just months after the fall of Saigon. At the time I was a serving officer in the United States Army and a veteran of the Vietnam War. The army, generously from my point of view, was sending me to graduate school to prepare me to teach at West Point. To emphasize: The army sent me to Princeton not to become a professional historian but to acquire knowledge sufficient to enable me to convey to cadets some basic grasp of U.S. history. After a three-year teaching stint, I would return to soldiering.

In retrospect, I am embarrassed to recall how unprepared I was for the course of study on which I was about to embark. The U.S. Military Academy I had attended a decade prior had classified history as one of the lesser social sciences. There was then no stand-alone Department of History. Regarding dates, places, events, and famous West Pointers, I had acquired a smattering of familiarity, but not much more.

As to history as a discipline, a continuously evolving inquiry and argument, I knew nothing. Before setting foot on campus, I could not have named a single member of Princeton's distinguished history faculty. Nor could I have identified a single book that any member of the department had written. I doubt that I could have even spelled historiography correctly.

So I had a lot of catching up to do. For starters, I needed to figure out what exactly was expected of me as a student. At Princeton, graduate education was a participatory enterprise that assumed a level of prior knowledge that I did not possess. In a desperate attempt to catch up with my classmates, I soon found myself reading hundreds of pages per day, thereby testing the patience of my young wife. She had just given birth to our second daughter and had her hands full at home. She needed and deserved more support than her preoccupied husband was able to give.

No less difficult was navigating through the snares of the seminar room. My initial inclination to maintain a posture of attentive silence worked only briefly. To sit there mutely was to pose an unwelcome question: *Why is he here?* But weighing in with my own views carried the risk of exposing my ignorance. I gingerly entered the fray.

My classmates were never less than kind. As apprentice historians they were leagues ahead of me. And they also seemed to enjoy our common pursuit. For them, graduate study seemed fun, whereas I found it a slog. They were convivial; I was merely earnest. I envied them.

The ranks of the department's senior Americanists then included the likes of John Murrin, who was obviously brilliant despite a meager record of publications, James McPherson, the charismatic historian of the Civil War, and Eric Goldman, who was clearly worn out and merely going through the motions. Taken as a whole, the faculty was mostly male, exclusively white, and seldom visible. Office hours were "by appointment." Except as required for classes, professors found better places to hang out than the coffeemaker in Dickinson Hall.

The diplomatic history portfolio belonged to Richard Challener. When I met him upon arrival, he said, "You're my student." I did not know what that meant but so I became. During World War II, Challener had served in the U.S. Army and was favorably disposed toward veterans. This I greatly appreciated. But he was then serving as department chair, a position he seemed to enjoy, so as an adviser he was somewhat distracted.

When I finally set out to write my dissertation, I would send him each chapter as it came out of the typewriter and hear nothing in return for weeks. Then a big package would arrive in the mail containing several chapters, with a note saying "Good—keep going." That was it. If nothing else, his approach to mentoring fostered self-sufficiency. Yet Challener opened my eyes to the complexities of U.S. civil-military relations, which became an abiding interest.

For me, far and away, the most influential of my teachers at Princeton was Arthur Link, the renowned (if today perhaps forgotten) Wilson scholar. In manner imposing and austere, Link took very seriously his responsibilities to develop students. I wrote my first graduate research paper for him—the topic had something to do with army opposition to Philippine independence—and remember with deep chagrin his correcting my spelling errors. His standards were extraordinarily high and he imparted them to all of us.

Although he nominally specialized in the Progressive Era, Link's mastery of American history from the colonial era forward was staggeringly comprehensive. He had seemingly read every book in the field and he remembered everything he had read. Yet Woodrow Wilson defined the epicenter of his intellectual universe. From time to time, Link would read aloud to us an extract from some speech Wilson had made or some document he had written. On those occasions it was as if the 28<sup>th</sup>

president himself had entered the seminar room. Although Princeton University by this time had long since left behind its Presbyterian roots, when Link conjured up the spirit of Woodrow Wilson, the experience had a quasi-religious aspect.

I did not succumb to Link's preoccupation with Wilson. My own interests now focused increasingly on identifying the taproot of American statecraft. The Vietnam War was still too close to me to allow for anything like disinterested study. Yet leaving Vietnam aside – in effect, ignoring the elephant in the room—I set out to understand the factors that caused the United States to do what it does in the world. If I were to approach Vietnam, it would be indirectly.

Influenced by the writings of Charles Beard (then very much out of fashion) and William Appleman Williams and other members of the “Wisconsin School” (in fashion, but for me deeply disconcerting), I came to the conclusion that Americans do what they do in the world because of who they are: a people summoned (in their own estimation) by God or Providence or History itself to remake the world in their own image while simultaneously claiming first dibs on all the goodies that freedom has to offer.

For me at least, here was a formula that sufficed to explain the Mexican War of 1846-1848, the annexation of the Philippines in 1898, the Americanization of the Vietnam War in 1965, and almost everything in between. It would also work a couple of decades later to help make sense of the Global War on Terrorism that was launched pursuant to a so-called Freedom Agenda. I have not yet found cause to amend that perspective.

As I neared the end of my second year at Princeton, orders arrived for us to pack up and report to West Point. I had completed all the requirements for the Ph.D. except for writing and defending a dissertation. The army had no particular interest in me completing that next step; I would depart Princeton with an M.A. in hand and that was a sufficient credential for me to teach cadets. Still, I had now immersed myself in the craft of history to the point that I was attracted to the challenge inherent in finishing my training despite no longer being in residence at Princeton.

When it came to identifying a dissertation topic, however, I was clueless. I flirted with the possibility of writing about Brigadier General Philip Faymonville, a West Pointer who, as military attaché in Moscow during the 1930s, acquired a reputation for being excessively impressed with the Red Army, which was then in the throes of being purged. Back in Moscow during World War II as a Lend-Lease administrator, he attracted yet more unfavorable attention in U.S. government circles for being pro-Soviet and allegedly gay. But since Faymonville's papers were thin I decided to look elsewhere.

A friend, another army officer then studying for a Princeton Ph.D., suggested that I consider Major General Frank Ross McCoy, yet another West Pointer. (The careful reader will note a somewhat cramped perspective on my part). Between the misnamed Spanish-American War and the aftermath of World War II, McCoy had enjoyed a long career as both soldier and diplomatic troubleshooter. His circle of associates included figures such as Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Stimson, John Pershing, George Marshall, and, most importantly (as I was to conclude), Leonard Wood. Best of all, McCoy's well-organized papers, covering just about every aspect of his life and career and stretching to 44 linear feet, were readily available in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

I can't say that I had a clear idea of where those papers might lead, but I now had a place to start. As I undertook my research, I soon came to realize that I ought to have written about Wood, who, among many other things, remains the epitome of the American proconsul. Like his friend Roosevelt, Wood was a larger-than-life figure. His own collection of papers is enormous. Yet I did not feel up to the challenge of tackling such a grand topic, as it then seemed to me. I was, after all, writing a dissertation largely for personal satisfaction, not because I imagined it ever leading to a job.

So I stayed with McCoy and ended up producing a serviceable study of American imperialism, both formal and informal, during the first half of the twentieth century. At least Challenger, Link, and Russell Weigley of Temple University deemed it serviceable when they signed off on my defense. A few years later the all-but-unrevised manuscript appeared between hard covers. Although the book itself disappeared with nary a trace, I remain fond of the title: *Diplomat in Khaki*.

By this time I was back serving in the field army, rotating between CONUS (the contiguous United States) and West Germany while serving in various troop units. I did not have the least inkling of what I would do once my time in the army ended. Not long after the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, my military career imploded. I was quite properly held responsible for a major command failure, and figuring out what would come next became an urgent priority.

Through the kindness of Eliot A. Cohen, I landed a position at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C. I remained at SAIS for six years, during which I did a bit of teaching and made myself useful in various ways. I also began to write, nothing remotely scholarly, but opinion pieces in political magazines and newspapers. I found that I enjoyed writing for a general audience and I also found that I liked getting paid for my efforts.

In 1998, an invitation to join the faculty at Boston University materialized. I readily accepted. Astonishingly, my appointment was at the rank of full professor, which my CV came nowhere close to justifying. But chairing the search committee that hired me was John Silber, longtime Boston University president and generalissimo. Silber took a shine to me and that was that.

Two things of crucial importance had now happened. First, moving from Washington to New England gave me much-needed distance to think critically about the course of U.S. policy following the Cold War. I found much about which to be critical. American imperialism was entering a new and notably rambunctious phase.

Second, appointment as a full professor relieved me of any need to worry about further promotion. I could write about whatever I wanted without having to worry about satisfying a higher authority. This I proceeded to do, primarily focusing on what I saw as the radical misuse of U.S. military power.

Soon thereafter, a young editor from Harvard University Press called me in my office. "If you ever decide to do another book, let us know. We'd be interested," he said. "Let me see if I can come up with an idea," I replied. Just past 50 years of age, I had now found my true vocation.

**Andrew Bacevich** is professor emeritus of history and international relations at Boston University. His new book, just out, is *The Age of Illusions: How America Squandered Its Cold War Victory* (New York, 2020).