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From American Diplomatic History to American Foreign Relations to International History: The Progress of a Discipline as Viewed from the Back Benches

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As an undergraduate at the University of California, Santa Barbara in the mid-1950s, I was excited by the teaching of Robert Kelley, a young and vibrant teacher and who was making his mark in the profession with his accounts of intellectual and cultural influences on past American and British politics¹. When I arrived as a graduate student at UCLA in the later 1950s, Bradford Perkins was also lecturing about Anglo-American relations while he was working on his renowned trilogy of books dealing with the run-up to the War of 1812.² Like Kelley, Perkins in his teaching spoke learnedly and amusingly not only about his specialty in Anglo-American relations but also about U.S. relations with the entire world. He inspired me to take up diplomatic history in part because the field was so broad that I could read almost anything I wanted and call it work.

Among us graduate students it was rumored that the history faculty at UCLA referred to Perkins as “Young Brad” and considered him somewhat audacious. Well, audacious he was. He suggested strongly that my dissertation topic should be the Jay Treaty of 1794, whose negotiation just preceded the period of Anglo-American relations he was working on. The only problem was that the leading monograph on the Jay Treaty was written by Samuel Flagg Bemis³, the dean of diplomatic historians who, along with Brad’s father, Dexter Perkins, was the exemplar of what at the time was the *sine qua non* of diplomatic history, multi-archival research. Ah, but Bemis’s monograph had been written in 1923, Perkins said, and was ripe for a revisit. (It is disconcerting to realize that my own work on the Jay Treaty is older as of 2020 than Bemis’s was in 1970.)

So, with a small grant and the generosity of my wife Sara in sharing a small inheritance she had received from her late aunt, our family settled for a few months in Washington D.C. and London to perform the expected multi-archival research in the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the British Museum, the Public Record Office, and other smaller document collections. When I could not find one important document in the British records that Bemis had used, I wrote with great trepidation to him asking where I might find it and trying to hint that I was writing a mere supplement to his work as opposed to a replacement. I must have written four or five expensive pre-postmarked air mail letters, tearing up one after

¹ Robert L. Kelley, *The Transatlantic Persuasion: The Liberal-Democratic Mind in the Age of Gladstone* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969); *The Cultural Pattern in American Politics: The First Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979).

² Bradford Perkins, *The First Rapprochement: England and the United States, 1795-1805* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955); *Prologue to War: England and the United States, 1805-1812* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961); *Castlereagh and Adams: England and the United States, 1812-1823* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964).

³ Samuel Flagg Bemis, *Jay’s Treaty: A Study in Commerce and Diplomacy*, revised ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962).

another for fear it was not phrased respectfully enough. I ultimately received a very gracious response informing me of the document's location and beginning with the salutation, "I received your unsigned letter...."

My fondest memory of my research in England was a visit to the papers of Lord William Wyndham Grenville, the British Foreign Secretary in 1794 and Jay's counterpart in the treaty negotiations. The papers were kept at Grenville's former estate, Boconnoc, near Lostwithiel in Cornwall. Grenville's descendant, George Grenville Fortescue, Esquire, strapped by the post-war economy, lived with his wife in just three rooms of Boconnoc's great house, which had enough rooms along with its adjacent village to have housed an entire American division prior to the Normandy landing. Fortescue stored Lord Grenville's documents in a tiny attic room upstairs under a low slanted roof line that forced me to bend sideways at the desk where I copied what was needed from the papers. I revisited Boconnoc three years ago and was happy to find that Fortescue's descendants had restored the great house to a wonderful condition. On a nearby ferry during that same trip I sat next to an elderly gentleman who was obviously a native of those parts. He asked me what I was doing in the vicinity and I told him that I was revisiting Boconnoc, where in 1963 I had done research in the papers of an eighteenth century British foreign minister at the invitation of George Grenville Fortescue, Esquire. "Oh," the gentleman responded. "That old bastard used to shoot at my dogs."

Ultimately, I did complete the dissertation, but as I feared, there were no major new discoveries to be found in the archives that the meticulous Bemis had already mined. My one chance for new discoveries was in the Jay manuscripts held at Columbia University that had been unavailable to Bemis in 1923 and were now being edited by Frank Monaghan. But when Monaghan discovered that the Columbia University librarian was allowing me to look at those papers, he shut me down before I had been through a quarter of them. Thus, the dissertation's main claim to originality was aligning the evidence to dispute Bemis's contention that Jay could have negotiated much better terms if he had not been undermined by Alexander Hamilton's subversive communications with the British. Otherwise, the work was pretty much in the tradition of what critics said was the problem with diplomatic history: it was just what one clerk said to another. My dissertation supervisor, the great historian of early America, Page Smith, who had taken over when Perkins left UCLA for the University of Michigan, praised my work and said that he devoutly hoped no one would ever have to write about the subject again.

The generous recommendations of Perkins, Smith, and Kelley landed me a job at San Francisco State University. I was overjoyed. Except for Ernest May, who had gone from the UCLA graduate program to the Harvard history faculty, almost none of my contemporaries had received positions at Research I institutions and San Francisco State was a good university in a beautiful area where I had grown up and where my family still lived. Moreover, it turned out to be a wonderful place to teach. The student body was very diverse, not only in terms of ethnicity and gender but also in age and experience. Many students were the first in their family to go to college and they were joined by a large number of mature men and women who were coming to the history department to earn a teaching credential after raising their children or being disillusioned with their jobs. The average age of our undergraduates at the time was 26 and the older students set the tone for the classroom. I remember asking a veteran of World War II why the Depression of 1929 had been so much more influential on the political attitudes of the country than the war and he said, "Because we knew the war would end."

The first years of my teaching at San Francisco State were marred by the devastation of faculty comity caused by the university strike of 1967, a strike that produced the first college of ethnic studies within any university in the country. My own feeling was that there was much good will in the faculty and some of the administration toward ethnic studies and that a peaceable compromise could have been worked out but for the fifteen "non-negotiable" demands of the strikers and the S.I. Hayakawa administration's resort to police intervention. The strike divided the faculty to such a degree that for a decade many of us retreated to our classrooms and our research and had little to do with one another either intellectually or socially. Fortunately, the wounds healed over time and our own history department prospered to such a point that in the 1980s and 90's we sent almost twice as many master's degree students to history Ph.D. programs as any other stand-alone master's program in the nation.

At the California state colleges during this time, faculty taught a four-course load. Tenure and promotion rested far more on teaching than research, for which there were very few resources. Some of our faculty accepted their role as teachers and most did a wonderful job of it. Others sought to 'write their way out' and concentrated on the level of research that would get

them to a Research I university. I decided to balance the two imperatives by emphasizing teaching while satisfying myself with two or three books over the course of my career and not worrying about playing in the big leagues of our profession. In British parliamentary terms, I would be a back-bencher.

My first task was to revise my Jay Treaty dissertation for publication. In doing so, I was part of a movement in the profession to broaden diplomatic history from what one clerk said to another to include intellectual, cultural, and economic analysis in the diplomatic narrative. I did so by adding an intellectual and cultural analysis of each of the major decision-makers in the negotiations and debates surrounding the Jay Treaty, including George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Jay himself. That addition brought the University of California Press to reverse itself and accept the manuscript for publication. Afterward, I received a letter from the Pulitzer Nominating Committee notifying me that the book had been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in history. I have never found out what that really meant—whether there were six or six hundred books nominated. Of course, I did not win the prize but I thought the nomination looked good on my resume. In retrospect, however, the limitations of the book with regard to the progress of the discipline can be seen in the very subtitle of the book, “Political Battleground of the Founding Fathers.” No history from the bottom up here, no class, race, or gender concerns, just a straightforward study of elite, white, male decision-makers.

The next big thing in the discipline of American history was quantitative history. I decided that I could join this wave by analyzing the signers of the flood of petitions to the House of Representatives for and against the Jay Treaty to see how their positions on the treaty correlated with their occupation, wealth, status, residence, and political party. Unfortunately, the Library of Congress informed me that almost all of those petitions had been stored in the White House when the British burned it down during the War of 1812.

Casting about for another research topic, I decided that with little money or time for multi-archival research and limited foreign language knowledge, it might be a good idea to write about the historiography of American diplomatic history. The books I would need were in English and almost all were available at the magnificent University of California library in Berkeley. Also, the topic played to my interest in intellectual history. I thought that critical thinking was the most important aspect of reading or writing about history and felt shortchanged that many diplomatic history books were not straightforward about the arguments they were making. Many times you could tell that the author was arguing with someone but could not tell who the argument was with or just what the argument was about. So I set about reading every serious diplomatic history book from the earliest days of the nation to the early 1980s and in 1983 published *American Diplomatic History: Two Centuries of Changing Interpretations*.⁴

In that book I studied the changing and conflicting interpretations among historians about the major crises in American diplomatic history and found that the arguments were often centered around lessons historians believed they had learned from the crises of their own times. I theorized that the most recent authors had been affected by their experiences of the Cold War with the Soviet Union and the Vietnam War and had divided into three schools of interpretation—Nationalists, who justified U.S. policy as successfully balancing American ideals, power, and interests; Realists, who thought the United States had intervened excessively abroad in pursuit of ideals and interests that exceeded American power to achieve; and Revisionists, who believed that American foreign policy had always been realistic, aggressive, and imperialistic rather than idealistic. Judging by the reviews and discussions with my fellow historians, many historians very much appreciated the organization and analysis of the various schools of interpretation and absolutely detested being assigned to one or another of them.

Like my previous book on the Jay Treaty, my historiography reflected the limitations of the time. It emphasized the intellectual history of elite decision-makers. It did not reflect the movement toward history from the bottom up, including an emphasis on class, race, and gender, that had become dominant in other fields of history, and the lack of which in

⁴ Jerald Combs, *American Diplomatic History: Two Centuries of Changing Interpretations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

diplomatic history had been much criticized from outside the field. Diplomatic historians took up the challenge in great numbers and the field began to call itself “The History of American Foreign Relations” to reflect the expanding concerns of the discipline.⁵

I tried to cope with the changing terrain of the discipline by writing a survey text of the entire sweep of *The History of American Foreign Policy*⁶ and then updating it every few years. I wrote the text initially to incorporate historiographical essays into the narrative of American diplomatic history on the premise that such essays would help students think critically about the historical narrative they were being taught. Then, as edition followed edition through 2012, I tried to incorporate the new research into both the narrative and the historiographical essays.

While it was easy enough to include the new histories from the bottom up in the historiographical essays, I found it more difficult to incorporate them into the narrative. I think I was more successful incorporating the new books based on increased research into foreign archives beyond those of the United States, a trend that led the discipline toward international rather than America-centric foreign relations. The end of the Cold War brought the opening of at least some of the archives in the former Soviet Union and China. Suddenly, the Cold War between the great powers could be studied from the records of America’s adversaries as well as the United States itself and this led to a plethora of outstanding and much-read books on the subject. Soon those studies expanded beyond the concentration on America, the Soviet Union, and China to the archives of many of the Third World nations in which raged hot wars that were the offshoots of the Cold War between the great powers. The discipline moved more and more toward a truly international history, led by what I think is the best book in our discipline written during my lifetime, Odd Arne Westad’s 2007 *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*.⁷

Although the historiographical essays in the most recent editions of my text made some attempt to extend my original work on the historiography of our discipline, they are not adequate to encompass the changes and new works on American Foreign Relations and International History. I will not be producing such a book. In my retirement I have moved from the back benches to the bleacher seats of our profession and will be eagerly watching from there for the new book that will properly describe the wonderful progress of our field.

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⁵ For a good summary of this trend, see Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2016).

⁶ Combs, *The History of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986)

⁷ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).