

# H-Diplo ESSAY 189

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*Between Samuel Flagg Bemis and Perry Miller*

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In the fall semester of 1964 I took two graduate seminars at Berkeley in the subfields of American history I was then considering as a specialty. One was in diplomatic history, taught by Visiting Professor Gerald Wheeler. He was substituting for the Department's on-leave Armin Rappoport, whose two-semester lecture course I had taken the year before as a first-year grad student. The other was Robert Middlekauff's seminar in colonial history, or as we would say now, British North America. That seminar was largely intellectual history simply because much of it was devoted to the works of Perry Miller. Reading Miller and participating in Middlekauff-led discussions made it clear to me that intellectual history was the path I wanted to take.

Yet both diplomatic and intellectual history were more broadly international than other subfields of American history, so it was not difficult for me, later in my career, to maintain my interest in what colleagues were doing in the diplomatic field. Eventually, I found myself directing dissertations in the "US and the World" mode (especially those by Nils Gilman, Daniel Immerwahr, and Gene Zubovich) and working closely with other doctoral students with similar interests (such as David Engerman and Max Friedman). Indeed, late in my career I even joined the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, and found that several works of mine, especially a book of 2017, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America*, were welcomed as contributions to diplomatic history.<sup>1</sup>

This eventual integration of my kind of intellectual history with diplomatic history was made possible by remarkable changes in the professional culture of diplomatic history, at least as I observed it. In 1964, the fields were at polar opposites. Wheeler's syllabus included topics with titles such as "Did We Back the Wrong Horse in the Far East?" That week's readings addressed the development of American policy toward China and Japan during the half century prior to World War II. The treatment of China and Japan as animals on whose relative strength "we" (I noticed this nationalist, if not ethnocentric conception of the field, too, beyond the demeaning characterization of two great nations) Americans had assessed, wisely or unwisely, struck me as odd. But it was routine, and consistent with the rest of the course.

The intellectual history I encountered through Middlekauff was less complacent, politically, and displayed a more capacious sense of what human beings were and of what it meant to be a historical actor. Wheeler and Rappoport were both decent

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<sup>1</sup> The books based on these dissertations are Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Gene Zubovich, *The Global Gospel: Christian Human Rights and the Fracturing of the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming, 2020); David Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Max Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign against the Germans of Latin America in World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). My own book mentioned here is David A. Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

men, but most of the graduate students saw them as lightweights compared not only with the young and morally intense Middlekauff, but also with mid-career scholars like Henry May, Carl Schorske, Joseph Levenson, William Bouwsma, Nicholas Riasanovsky and Martin Malia, all intellectual historians of distinction and formidable figures around the Department. The senior diplomatic historian on the European side, Raymond Sontag, was also a man of stature and authority, but culturally he was quite narrow, and politically had defended the Loyalty Oath in Berkeley's great political conflict of scarcely more than a dozen years before. The most telling emblem of my early experience with these two subfields was the contrast between the two giants of the previous generation whose work we students were assigned to read: Samuel Flagg Bemis and Perry Miller.

Some of what I report was local to Berkeley. No doubt I would have experienced a less stark contrast between the two subfields had I been at Cornell, for example, where I would have encountered Walter LaFeber, but I think it is fair to say that the field of diplomatic history revolutionized itself in the late twentieth century, encompassing a much broader range of human behavior and expanding its methods, making it easier for intellectual history specialists to engage it and to be counted as collegial contributors. Intellectual history changed, too, but not as dramatically. Andrew Bacevich's work is a fine example what diplomatic history looks like today, but reading his contribution to this series I was conscious of how different his professional origins are from mine. Bacevich got into diplomatic history as a military officer and indeed as a Vietnam veteran. In those Vietnam years, I was a registered conscientious objector and was active in the anti-war movement. It is interesting that Bacevich's views and mine are now so similar. I see both of us are quoted to the same effect on the dust jacket of Immerwhar's *How to Hide an Empire*.<sup>2</sup>

I don't know how many diplomatic historians of my generation were conscientious objectors, but among intellectual historians I know at least that Paul Boyer, Lewis Perry, Ronald Numbers, and Daniel Rodgers in addition to myself obtained that Selective Service classification. Among the Berkeley graduate students in diplomatic history, one was, like Bacevich at Princeton, a military officer: Air Force Lt. Col. Robert Hayes. Another in that cohort was Thomas Paterson, notorious for being a Republican (and a good sport about wisecracks from the rest of us), at least when he arrived in Berkeley from New Hampshire. Paterson then made a great career out of diplomatic history and was one of the people who, like Bacevich, broadened and deepened the field. More important for me personally, I met Martin Sherwin, who was an Acting Assistant Professor for a brief time at Berkeley and gave me a very different sense of what diplomatic historians could be like, politically and culturally. Sherwin became a life-long friend. Both diplomatic and intellectual history were overwhelmingly male in demographic composition and style, but there, too, there was an important difference. Berkeley had Adrienne Koch, who taught popular seminars on Jefferson and the Enlightenment. Henry May was proud of having taken the lead in hiring Koch, the first woman to be a member of the Department. And she did intellectual history.

My vocational sense was also affected by having Medieval England as one of my exam fields. It was an odd choice for someone specializing in modern US, but I had liked medieval history as an undergraduate and simply wanted to learn more of it. Once I got into the monographic literature—especially articles in *Speculum* and the *English Historical Review*—I was captivated by the *Wissenschaftliche* style, with sharp analytic focus on specific research questions. I did not find these qualities as often in the U.S. history scholarship in which I was immersed in exam preparation, which was more influenced by opinion and ideology, yet, paradoxically, less controlled by clearly articulated arguments. Or so it seemed to me. I decided I would try to write modern U.S. history as it might be written by a medievalist, striving for a measure of detachment. Hence throughout my career I published much of my research in analytic essays, often with such titles as “The Problem of Pragmatism,” and “The Question of Ethnoracial Mixture,” treating history as an inventory of highly particular research problems presumably shared by a professional community of inquirers. I was struck with how medievalists, especially those with a German focus, often referred to “advanced problems” in their field. The U.S. historians I knew did not talk that way.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Immerwhar, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019).

The work of Miller's that most influenced me was, indeed, a collection of essays (he called them "arguments") on what might be called "advanced problems" in American history, *Errand into the Wilderness*.<sup>3</sup>

In later years I might not have kept up with diplomatic history as much as I did were it not for the responsibility of teaching the survey course in US history, especially during the 1980s at Michigan. Although I put more intellectual history into my version of the survey course that most colleagues, I was determined to do full justice to political and diplomatic history and in keeping with that ambition consulted often with my Ann Arbor colleague, Bradford Perkins. Relying on his suggestions about what to read, I tried to help my undergraduates understand American foreign policy and even military history. I took special pride in a lecture on the Pacific War, featuring the Battle for Leyte Gulf as illustrated with a huge map of the Philippines. My teaching assistants were amused that a professor then writing about William James and Lionel Trilling attributed such great historical significance to decisions made by admirals and generals.

My interest in SHAFR and H-Diplo in recent years has followed in part from that crowd's willingness to engage a vital part of history that too many colleagues avoid: the part of history made by admirals and generals, secretaries of state, the diplomatic corps, and, God Save the Mark, presidents! The cataclysmic consequences of the decisions made by President Donald Trump should remind us that presidents are too important to be left to the writers of the popular biographies that dominate airport bookstores. Who holds power and how it is exercised really matters. The expansion of social history during the last half century has been a great plus in many respects, but I worry that it has pushed side aspects of political and diplomatic history that demand sustained attention. Power is not the whole of history, but it is an important part, even when the empowered parties are unattractive to us and we find it easier to identify with the powerless. "Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne," wrote James Russell Lowell, and if it were not for SHAFR and H-Diplo I fear that our discipline today would be even more narrowly focused than it is on recognizing historical actors who were on the scaffold. It is they whom we most often should admire, absolutely.<sup>4</sup> But much of the history we need to understand was made by people on the throne. What is now called "U.S. and the World," a subfield broader than the one developed by Bemis, has helped the profession as a whole to take account what happens on the throne, however we may evaluate it ethically.

Intellectual history never experienced the degree of marginalization that diplomatic history did. There were important and salutary changes in the cast of characters, to be sure, expanding the canon to include unjustly neglected individuals and groups of thinkers, especially women. But in that context my co-editor Charles Capper and I had no trouble gaining widespread collegial support for *The American Intellectual Tradition*, a sourcebook that has gone through seven editions since we began it in the late 1980s and is now doing as well as ever.<sup>5</sup> American intellectual history has always been a subset of the intellectual history of the North Atlantic West, analogous to British, German, or Russian intellectual history, so intellectual historians were ready to join in the "U.S. and the World" enterprise when it replaced Bemis' style of "diplomatic history," although I, like most people, continue to use label interchangeably with "U.S. and the World."

My own participation in the partnership between intellectual and diplomatic history became gradually less Eurocentric. I began by studying American philosophers and writers who were full participants in the learned life of England, especially, but also Germany and to some extent the rest of the Continent. The diversifying effect of Jewish emigres and their descendants was among my major concerns for several decades. By the early 1990s this engagement had led me to study the diversifying movements then coming to be called "multiculturalism," which in turn led me to think about how the public life of the United States had been affected by peoples and ideas from beyond the North Atlantic West. I hit upon Protestant

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<sup>3</sup> Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956).

<sup>4</sup> James Russell Lowell, "The Present Crisis," first published 1842, accessible at <https://poets.org/poem/present-crisis>.

<sup>5</sup> David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper, eds., *The American Intellectual Tradition: A Sourcebook*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

missionaries as vital players in this process of cultural expansion. While studying that topic I immersed myself in the literature on American relations with China, Japan, Thailand, and other non-European nations, and was delighted that my email inquiries to diplomatic historians were quickly and helpfully answered. By the time *Protestants Abroad* was completed, I was a regular contributor to H-Diplo and a member of SHAFR.

In all of this, from the time of graduate study at Berkeley through the present, my scholarship has been driven by a single preoccupation which grabbed me when reading about Chinese intellectual history. After being led to intellectual history by Middlekauff and May (under whose supervision I wrote my dissertation), I read the magisterial book of May's good friend, Joseph Levenson: *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*.<sup>6</sup> I did not study directly with the great sinologist, who died just as I was reading his works. But his compelling account of how Chinese history could be seen as a world-historical dialectic with the modern West led me to read other works of his, especially an essay of 1967, "The Nation, the Province, and the World: The Problem of Chinese Identity," which got me hooked on the tension between provincialism and cosmopolitanism.<sup>7</sup> Almost everything I have written in my more than fifty years as a publishing scholar owes its thematic inspiration to this essay of Levenson's. Just how does the drive for inclusion, for taking as much of the world as possible into account, relate to the need to define what it is into which the world's diverse particulars are being incorporated? In what sense is the human species capable of acting on common interests, or even identifying what they might be? With whom should one struggle to form a community, and for what purposes? How do the particulars of a given people facilitate or inhibit merging with another demographic group? On whom can one most count, and to whom does one owe the most? How can the drive to include be reconciled with the need to define? I came to call this "the problem of solidarity." *Protestants Abroad*, like another recent book of mine, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire*, is an extended meditation on this problem.<sup>8</sup> U.S. and the World? Yes, I think so.

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965).

<sup>7</sup> Joseph R. Levenson, "The Province, the Nation, and the World: The Problem of Chinese Identity," in Albert Feuerwerker, Rhoads Murphy, and Mary C. Wright, eds., *Approaches to Modern Chinese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 268-288.

<sup>8</sup> David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism and Modern American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). See also, David A. Hollinger, "From Identity to Solidarity," *Daedalus* (Fall 2006), 23-31.