

# H-Diplo ESSAY 195

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## *Doing History*

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Like most roads in life, my path to becoming what was traditionally called a 'diplomatic historian' was full of *chances*. Even my survival as a 4.5 lb. preemie born in a 'birthing home' in Sheridan Wyoming in 1944 was a roll of the dice. As a (female) child, raised in Billings, Montana, during the 1950s with a working father and a stay-at-home mother, I had vague aspirations with no particular goal except to go to college and see the wider world. I ended up at the University of Nebraska, a university from which my older sister, mother, two aunts, grandmother, and grandfather had graduated and was therefore touted in our family as a great school in 'the East.' My first clear professional interest emerged in a geology class. I asked my professor how I could become a geology major, and he laughed at the fact that I did not know women could not be geologists because only men could do the required field work. Silly me.

Chance #1 took the form of my taking a diplomatic history class taught by David F. Trask. I became a history major, was the only woman invited into an advanced undergraduate seminar in the history department, and did a senior thesis with Trask that required primary research. I was hooked. I was also hooked into marriage, after meeting Norman Rosenberg, another Nebraska history major who had gone to law school for one year and then decided, instead, to pursue an MA in legal history.

Meeting Norm on a blind date had constituted Chance #2. Unlike every other man I had dated, he embraced the idea that I might have aspirations equal to his own. I taught high school history for a year while he received his MA in history, and we plotted how we could both pursue Ph.D.s in history. It was 1967. Norm and I had both turned against the War in Vietnam. To me, nothing seemed more important than studying the history of U.S. international policy, and I was avidly reading Bernard Fall, publications from the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), and material by other critics of the war.<sup>1</sup> The war in Vietnam became the paramount factor pushing me toward the field of diplomatic history.

Chance #3 again involved David Trask, who had left Nebraska to join the new Department of History at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. He knew that I was a serious student. To most men in charge of university graduate school admissions, my application was doubly problematic: I was a woman, and I was married to a person considered the "real" applicant—i.e., my husband. Norm was admitted everywhere; I was admitted to Stony Brook. Trask bestowed even more good fortune: Stony Brook offered us BOTH National Defense Education Act Fellowships. We could both afford to pursue Ph.D.s there.

The field of U.S. diplomatic history was, at that time, polarized between more establishment approaches (Norman Graebner, Ernest May, and many others) and the so-called Wisconsin School of New Left historians (Williams A Williams,

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard B. Fall, *Street without Joy: Indochina at War, 1946-1954* (Harrisburg, PA: Stockpole Co, 1961). The most important collection of documents and writing was [Marcus G. Raskin](#) and [Fall](#), eds., *The Viet-nam Reader: Articles and Documents on American Foreign Policy and the Viet-Nam Crisis* (New York: Random House, 1965).

Walter LaFeber, Lloyd Gardner, and others) who emphasized economic interest ('open door' policies) and highlighted the nation's expansionist, imperial past. Although Trask continued to be supportive personally, his intellectual influence faded as his research veered toward military history and I gravitated toward the New Left. My true academic mentors ended up being people whom I never knew in graduate school—Williams, LaFeber, Richard J. Barnett of IPS, Gabriel Kolko, Marilyn Young, and many others.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the economic roots of America's global expansion became glaringly evident to me as I did archival research for my dissertation on U.S. policy in Latin America during World War I. It seemed clear how the trajectory of economic interest pushing for 'open door' global dominance ultimately connected to America's ill-fated war in Vietnam and its many covert actions during the 1960s and beyond.

U.S. Diplomatic History became an exciting arena in the late 1960s. Interpretations and personalities clashed; meetings featured fierce and meaningful debate. The contemporary policy stakes of various interpretations of the past seemed very real, at least to me. Understanding the United States as an often ruthless, expansionist power pursuing economic interest led to very different policies than understanding it primarily as a peace-loving purveyor of freedom and democracy. The field was, to be sure, very male dominated, but that did not deter me from wanting to join in and working to develop the credentials that would make my voice heard. The field of women's history was growing rapidly by the end of my graduate study, but I felt that some women needed to stake out a presence in male-dominated fields. I began publishing material from my dissertation as articles, including one in the new journal *Diplomatic History* (DH).<sup>3</sup>

What my specific contribution might be, however, became problematic. With a dissertation, several articles, and co-authorship of a U.S. history textbook in hand, I approached the (horrible) job market and, more than ever before, hit the wall so common to women of my generation. I had two memorable (to me) job interviews, both with all male hiring committees. The very first question in one was "What will your husband do if you are hired in our department?" The first question in the second interview (gasped out by one of the profession's most distinguished scholars) was "Are you pregnant?" I was a woman, a married woman, a woman married to another historian, and, yes, now a pregnant woman married to another historian. My academic future seemed pretty bleak. Luckily, Norm had secured a temporary position at Central Michigan University, and I taught a couple of classes there too. Even as we made wonderful friends at CMU, we both continued to apply for permanent jobs.

Chance #4 intervened, and once again it involved David Trask. He had become head of the Office of the Historian at the Department of State and had urged his brother, Roger Trask (also an accomplished diplomatic historian), to likewise leave academic life and take a position with a federal historical office. Roger Trask resigned from his position in the History Department at Macalester College, and both David and Roger urged me to apply for the vacancy. Macalester's all male History Department exhibited none of the prejudice that I encountered elsewhere in the job market, and in 1974 I was hired and welcomed. A year later when Norm nearly accepted a job that would have taken us elsewhere, we worked out with Macalester an unusual job-sharing arrangement in which the two of us would jointly occupy one tenure-track position. We job-shared, enjoying all of its great advantages and also experiencing its disadvantages, from 1975 until 2006. Then, following the retirement of Keith Nelson, I accepted a position at the University of California, Irvine (UCI). There, I later had the honor of serving as chair of an extraordinary department. Norm left Macalester in 2007 to embrace retirement in Southern California. Throughout the years from our marriage in 1966 until today, Norm and I collaborated on parenting,

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<sup>2</sup> Especially influential were William A Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Chicago: Delta, 1962); Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire; an Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963); Richard J. Barnett, *Roots of War* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973); and Marilyn Blatt Young, *The Rhetoric of Empire; American China Policy, 1895-1901* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Emily S. Rosenberg, "Anglo-American Economic Rivalry in Brazil during World War I," *Diplomatic History* (Spring 1978): 131-152; "Economic Pressures in Anglo-American Diplomacy in Mexico, 1917- 18," *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs* (May 1975): 123-152.

teaching, and discussing/writing history. We did not stop wars or change the world, but we lived many dreams that were almost unimaginable when we had first met at Nebraska in 1964.

With small children at home (one born in 1972, twins in 1976, another in 1978) and one shared salary, I needed to postpone any post-dissertation project involving ambitious archival research. Instead, my views on ‘diplomatic history’ pushed me toward writing an interpretive synthesis, *Spreading the American Dream* (1982), that conceived the field of ‘foreign relations’ in a broad frame.<sup>4</sup> During an era in which U.S. dollars and mass culture were flooding the globe, it seemed that the influence of private actors of all kinds—economic and cultural as well as strictly political—needed to be incorporated more thoroughly into any analysis of U.S. policy and international relations. The Wisconsin School, of course, had pushed the field toward the interpretation that the U.S. pursued an ‘open door’ world—that is, a world open to (and then dominated by) American trade and investment. Based on my own research, I now identified centrally with that position. A book from the field of mass communications, however, helped me broaden and deepen that vision: Herbert Schiller’s *Mass Communications and American Empire* (1969) examined the doctrine of ‘free flow’ in a way that, to me, seemed to match the New Left’s ideas about the ‘open door.’<sup>5</sup> I sought to write an interpretive history of the foreign policy ideology of ‘free flow,’ intertwining the arenas of both economics (trade and investment) and culture (information and media). ‘Free flow’ was rhetorically linked to advancing freedom, of course, but when power disparities are great, it advances monopoly, hegemony, and empire. Spreading the American dream, therefore, actually spread an American hegemony that contributed often to unfreedom for the weak. This thesis leaned heavily on William A. Williams’s *Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, but bringing in the dimension of America’s enormous cultural influence—communications, movies, consumerism—reframed ‘American diplomacy’ as ‘American foreign relations’ by refocusing on the importance of a greater variety of private sector international actors. I quickly learned that Frank Costigliola, whose work I found immensely useful in writing *Spreading*, was pursuing a similar direction in his *Awkward Dominion* (1985).<sup>6</sup> Costigliola and I, though we did not know each other early on, became career-long allies in intertwining cultural and economic themes.

Chance #5 emerged after *Spreading* was published. The book garnered enthusiastic endorsements from Williams, LaFeber, Young, and others, but I had never met these scholars and so had no well-known mentors in the field. That would change after Akira Iriye read *Spreading* and, without ever having met me, began promoting the book in all kinds of ways. He assigned it for years to successive classes at Harvard, and it gained an academic audience in Asia, probably because of Iriye’s own distinguished reputation. For more than twenty years, *Spreading* was assigned in hundreds of classrooms across the country and the world. Ironically, had I labored over publishing a narrow monograph out of my dissertation (which ultimately did come out in offprint form in the 1980s), my work would have had far less influence. In future years, Iriye and I would collaborate on two projects— one on Pearl Harbor in historical memory (resulting in my book *A Date Which Will Live*, 2003) and one reconceptualizing World History for a multivolume series by Harvard and Beck publishers (resulting in *A World Connecting*, 2012, and *Transnational Currents in a Shrinking World*, 2014).<sup>7</sup> As Iriye also embraced the

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<sup>4</sup> Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> Herbert I. Schiller, *Mass Communications and American Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Frank Costigliola, *Awkward Dominion: American Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations with Europe, 1919-1933* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003; paperback, 2005; translated into Japanese, with a new introduction, Hosei University Press, 2007); Rosenberg, ed., *A World Connecting: 1870-1945*, vol. 5 of Akira Iriye and Jürgen Osterhammel, gen. eds., *A History of the World* (English ed., Cambridge: Harvard University Press; German ed., Munich: Beck, 2012) 6 vols. [translated into German, Chinese, Korean, Italian]; *Transnational Currents in a Shrinking World, 1870-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014) derives from my section of the above edited volume.

importance of cultural themes in diplomatic history, we worked on parallel tracks. One of the most influential historians of his generation, he was also the most generous of mentors.

I began attending SHAFR conventions after publishing *Spreading*. It was the early 1980s, and hundreds of men I did not know filled the auditoriums. At my first meeting I counted in attendance three women (whom I also did not know)—Sandra Taylor, Linda Killen, and Anna Nelson (Betty Unterberger had not come that year). SHAFR turned out to be less intimidating than I had feared. A cohort of people shared my views of the field: Frank Costigliola, Melvyn Leffler, Michael Hogan, and others became intellectual companions. Hogan would become the editor of *Diplomatic History* and broadened the scope of articles the journal would publish. As social and cultural history became ascendant in history departments, many of our generation felt that SHAFR and *DH* should acknowledge how those fields linked to politics and policy. Our field could only benefit by analyzing a wide spectrum of actors, not just diplomats, in the international sphere and by considering new interpretive tools from cultural studies (both literature and anthropology), gender and race studies, theories related to discourse (Michel Foucault) and narrative (Hayden White).<sup>8</sup>

In 1989 David Thelan, the editor of the *Journal of American History*, planned a symposium on new approaches in the field of American Foreign Relations. Chance #6 emerged after he asked me to contribute an article on ‘liberal developmentalism,’ a term around which I had organized the interpretation in *Spreading the American Dream*. Because I felt I had already covered that theme in my book, I proposed a different essay, one simply called ‘Gender.’ Gender had not yet been advanced as relevant in any way to the field of foreign relations, although today the clearly gendered nature of diplomacy and the field makes that assertion seem laughable. Moreover, I actually had no idea how one might write a meaningful essay about the relevance of gender to international relations. Now directing The Women and Gender Studies program at Macalester, however, I took this task as a personal challenge. Thelan consulted one of the respected scholars in the field, Thomas Patterson, as to whether such an essay was possible. Many others in the field might have said no, but Patterson was encouraging: why not give the green light and see what came of it?

I like to think that the publication of “Gender” in the *JAH*, 1990, helped open a space for other historians of foreign relations to think more deeply both about the many ways in which women acted in the international realm and about how gendered discourses shaped and naturalized power relationships.<sup>9</sup> It roughly coincided with Cynthia Enloe’s and Ann Tickner’s work in political science. IR was another male dominated field that, although once resistant to the relevance of gender analysis, was changing. Both SHAFR and IR were by now attracting more women.

My particular challenge was whether using the lens of gender might alter my own current research on U.S. international banking and dollar diplomacy during the early twentieth century. My new archival research suggested that American international lenders cooperated closely with governmental officials in granting loans to certain nations that were poor market risks but that the government deemed strategically critical. Collaborating with the State Department for nearly twenty years after 1907, American bankers devised ‘controlled loans’ (a practice later called ‘conditionality’ when exercised by the IMF) that exchanged their private bank loans for forms of American-directed supervision. This practice of dollar diplomacy—embedding dependency relationships in almost invisible private-sector contracts—avoided protectorate treaties or other executive agreements that Congress and the public might scrutinize. As I went through State Department files to accumulate the texts of these early twentieth century controlled-loan contracts and all of the negotiations that surrounded

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970); Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Rosenberg, “Gender” in “A Round Table: Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations,” *Journal of American History* 77 (June, 1990): 116-124.

them, I drew on Norm's expertise in legal history and his understanding of the then-new Critical Legal Studies movement. Together, we jointly authored a *JAH* article on what we called the practice of "colonialism by contract."<sup>10</sup>

The actors in the drama of dollar diplomacy—the politicians, the bankers, and the emerging profession of economic advisers—were all men, but how could gender be said to have shaped their actions? Having recently been elected as the second woman president of SHAFR in 1997, I used my presidential address to suggest how this dollar diplomacy emerged as part of a turn-of-the-century discourse of masculinity (using discourse in the Foucauldian sense). Looking around the room at the largely male audience as I delivered the talk, I surely detected skepticism. But gender, race, discourse, and narrative structure (added to the traditional concerns with geopolitics, economics, and grand strategy) were now clearly on the table at SHAFR and would not go away. Having been drawn into the field initially because of the debates, controversies, and high emotions over the Vietnam War, I never shirked from disagreement. Critique and argument invigorate conferences and make books worth reading. SHAFR could and should be a big, contentious tent. *Financial Missionaries to the World* (1999) was economic history, but it also interpreted early twentieth century financial advisory missions through cultural lenses of gender, race, and nature.<sup>11</sup>

Over time, support grew for expanding the field, and the look and programming of SHAFR conferences changed dramatically. The naming of the field also shifted away from 'diplomatic history' and even away from the 'history of American foreign relations' toward 'U.S. international history' and 'America and the world.' Now in retirement and marveling over the combinations of chance that brought me to be authoring this essay, I celebrate the vibrancy of the past few decades. In many respects, judging from SHAFR conferences and *DH*, the field seems to be thriving.

Ultimately, however, I also recognize that the chance of my birth date had allowed me the fortune to work in a kind of golden age for higher education. I worry about the future. The research and debates among SHAFR historians should be more relevant than ever to the country and to the educational mission of higher education, but there are structural issues in the academy that have intertwined to send history enrollments and jobs in history departments—especially in our field—plummeting.

Not only have public defunding of higher education and rising tuition costs propelled students to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and other fields perceived as providing more direct paths to future jobs, but students interested in America's international role now have more programs from which they may choose classes. As just one example, a course such as 'U.S. empire' may be found in several different divisions, taught by people trained in American studies, political science, anthropology, gender studies, a variety of area studies, and more. Accompanying these changes have come a proliferation of journals, conferences, and personal identifications that allow scholars themselves to choose from a growing array of affiliations and publication venues.

Yet the research of SHAFR historians remains important—and differs substantially from the scholarship of most of those in the other fields that deal with international and transnational America. Despite interpretive and methodological disagreements over the years and despite the important contributions made by interpretive synthetic works, most SHAFR historians still share a core value: the need to anchor scholarship in critical archival research. Archives, of course, by no means give rise to neutral, objective, or self-evident history. They are always structured and biased. They make some things visible and others invisible. They give voices to those with power and obscure the voices of many. Good mentors have always taught students to read archives against the grain, look for 'archives' in unofficial places—even beyond the written word—

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<sup>10</sup> Rosenberg and Norman L. Rosenberg, "From Colonialism to Professionalism: The Public-Private Dynamic in United States Foreign Financial Policy, 1898-1930," *Journal of American History* 74 (June 1987): 57-82. A revised version of this essay was reprinted in Paul Drake, ed., *Financial Advising in Historical Perspective* (Scholarly Resources, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999; paperback, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003)

and surround archival use by all kinds of other non-archival context and methodology that will allow for critical understandings. But international and global relationships simply cannot be understood well *without* complicated and often tedious involvement with archives. Although my own career, like that of most historians, has involved both the production of interpretive syntheses as well as archival work, it is the deep and critical dives into archives that have most surprised, complicated, and enriched my historical interpretations.

If a declining job market endangers our field, threats to archival preservation and access are perhaps just as grave. The world we enter is filled with digitally driven fakery; the proliferation of too much information and distraction-providing entertainment; climate-change-driven threats and wars that endanger repositories of all kinds; and brands of cultural chauvinism that devalue and destroy the records and heritages of others. It is scary to acknowledge that preserving, accessing, and assembling pieces of the international past is contingent upon such disruptive, fast-changing phenomena. The sound and fury generated by the various interpretive disagreements of my generation may now seem insignificant compared to the challenges to come. As I end my career, I cannot help but feel that *chance* has entered a whole new—and even more chancy—realm for our field.

**Emily S. Rosenberg**, emeritus professor and former chair of the History Department at the University of California, Irvine, specializes in recent U.S. international and transnational history. An award-winning teacher, she previously held a titled chair at Macalester College. Major books include *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (Hill and Wang, 1982); *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930* (Harvard University Press, 1999); *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory* (Duke University Press, 2003); and *Transnational Currents in a Shrinking World, 1870-1945* (Harvard, 2013). She has edited *A World Connecting: 1870-1945* (Harvard and Beck, 2012) and co-edited *Body and Nation: the Global Realm of US Body Politics* (Duke University Press, 2014). She has authored over 80 articles, served as president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, co-authored several widely-used U.S. History textbooks, served on the board of the Organization of American Historians and the editorial boards of *Diplomatic History* and the *American Historical Review*, and co-edited the “American Encounters, Global Interactions” book series for Duke University Press. She received SHAFR’s 2018 Norman and Laura Graebner Award for lifetime achievement.