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Maybe You Can Go Home Again

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My home town in Texas has two claims to fame. Cotulla, founded in 1881 and located halfway between San Antonio and Laredo, quickly became notorious for its feuds, shootouts, and murders: it was, the *El Paso Times* reported five years later, “the toughest place” in the state.¹ In due course, though, it settled down, and by 1928 when the twenty year old Lyndon B. Johnson arrived to teach in its segregated “Mexican” school, Cotulla was on the way to earning its second claim—its very own chapter in Robert Caro’s epic biography.² It was, by then, a placid backwater. Or would have been if it had rained more often.

I was born there in 1941. My parents grew up a block from one another. My brothers and I walked to school past only two houses, each occupied by relatives. Our dad’s drugstore, whose soda fountain made it the town’s social center, was three blocks in the other direction, past the telephone exchange where operators still asked, when you picked up your phone, “Number please?” None had more than three digits, and no calls came through during nap time. Lonely whistles from steam locomotives on the main line to Mexico lulled us to sleep at night and woke us in the morning. Thornton Wilder, who had just finished *Our Town*, would have felt right at home in Cotulla—if he’d spoke Texan.

An uncle had a barbeque camp under great trees on the Nueces River, and my family had a farm fifteen minutes east of town which, at only 4,000 acres, didn’t qualify as a ranch. We spent summers there in the days before air-conditioning, each with our own horse and an abundance of wildlife. The Cotulla house, every fall, became a menagerie: not just dogs, cats, chickens, pigeons, and parrots smuggled from Mexico (one of my mom’s specialties), but also armadillos, fawns, rabbits, horned toads, and surprisingly affectionate road runners—known to us as *paisanos*—who would follow her to school where she taught.

“Don’t even think about staying here,” our parents always told us, because they knew that the Cotulla we knew could not last. Neither the drugstore nor the farm was reliably profitable. The “Anglos” who ran the town wouldn’t always do so: there were already three times that many “Mexicans,” some of whose ancestors had been original settlers. LBJ hadn’t yet told the nation of the “poverty and hate” he had seen in Cotulla,³ but an upheaval was clearly coming. Which our mom quietly

¹ *El Paso Times*, January 16, 1887, accessed at <https://texashistory.unt.edu/explore/collections/TDNP/>.

² Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 166-173.

³ He did so in what was arguably the best speech he ever made, his address to Congress on March 15, 1965.

welcomed. She must have been the only subscriber in town to *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, a radicalism I suspect she got from the iconoclastic folklorist J. Frank Dobie, who had grown up on a ranch nearby and visited us frequently.⁴

Sputnik, in October, 1957, was the last straw. On the night after the launch, I climbed, with a friend, onto the second story roof of our big old house—this was risky, but parents in those days didn't coddle. From there, we could see sunlight reflected off the rocket's third stage as it tumbled across a clear sky (still no rain). "Rooskies!!" we shouted, bug-eyed. "Over Cotulla!" I was sixteen but my future was set: something had to be done.

But what? How? Where? The answer was STEM, even though that acronym wouldn't be invented for another half century. And Cotulla High School, whatever its other virtues, wasn't teaching that. So I was packed off for my senior year to a San Antonio prep school, but it regarded me as a first-year student subject to all the usual hazing, a distraction that limited learning to basic survival skills. That was enough, though, to get me into the Rice Institute, as it was then called, where I spent two years struggling with calculus, chemistry, physics, and biology. I was good at dissecting frogs, but not much else.

Facing the humiliation of flunking out, I transferred at the beginning of my junior year to the University of Texas at Austin to study library science. At home my mom doubled as the high school librarian, and at least that would be practical skill, if not particularly effective in regaining Cold War momentum. But you couldn't major in that, so as a default I chose history, a subject I had always enjoyed.⁵ By my senior year, I was on track to become a librarian, and to remain one for the rest of my life.

But then two surprising things happened. The first came from a period I misplaced while typing a catalog card: computers wouldn't do that for another decade. While I was inserting a new card into the old standard typewriter we were supposed to use, something snapped. "No!" I said, although I'm not sure anyone heard me. "Not another card! *This isn't* how I want to spend my life."⁶

The second surprise came at about the same time I had been taking a lecture course in Tudor-Stuart history with Stanford E. Lehmborg, a young professor still in his first teaching job. He gave us the option of writing a research paper using original sources. I was intrigued to learn that Texas had records of the "Mystery, Company, and Fellowship of Merchant Adventurers for the Discovery of Unknown Lands &c," better known as the Elizabethan era Muscovy Company. I wrote on that, and turned the paper in.

It came back, astonishingly, not just with an A but also a note from Professor Lehmborg suggesting that I publish it.⁷ So for the first time ever as an undergraduate, I went to see a professor during office hours. "How could I do that?" I asked. "Why not go to graduate school and get a Ph.D.?" he replied. "But where?" I asked—it being too late to apply to most schools, and, even if it hadn't been, mine was a decidedly undistinguished undergraduate record. "Why not here?" he said.

So I made inquiries, found that this might be possible, applied, got in, and only then told the folks back in Cotulla. I could hear brows furrowing over the phone: how could I make a living doing history? By then, though, thanks to cheap tuition and

⁴ Steven L. Davis, *J. Frank Dobie: A Liberated Mind* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 167.

⁵ Thanks in no small part to the principal of Cotulla High School, the eponymously named Jon Cotulla, who taught history entrancingly. The books of Will and Ariel Durant became my favorites, as did Carl Sandberg's on Abraham Lincoln and Churchill's World War II memoirs.

⁶ It's not that my library science training was useless. It taught me precision in bibliographic citation, something that's been useful in many ways, and that I now inflict on my students. It's just that I needed some broader spectrum of professional satisfaction.

⁷ I never did, but instead filed it away in a secure location, and as a consequence seem to have lost it.

library jobs, I was financially independent. So I was able to say what I was going to do without having to seek my parents' help. Seeing that I was happy, they hoped for the best.

Getting all my degrees in Austin was indeed the best choice. The Ph.D. took five years—1963-68—a pace that seemed normal then but that startles graduate students now. The History department was small enough to provide individual attention, inside and outside of class. The faculty could have held their own anywhere: Robert A. Divine for American diplomatic history, William H. Goetzmann and H. Wayne Morgan for the pre- and post-Civil War eras, Willard A. Fletcher for modern European history, and Oliver H. Radkey for Russia (even if he rarely got much beyond 1917). We had visiting eminences, among them Hans Kohn and Geoffrey Barraclough, a particular graduate student favorite. And we were, ourselves, a closely-knit group: one among us, Barbara Jackson, became my wife of thirty-one years and the mother of my sons Michael and David.

We were also fortunate, I think, in two other ways. One was that we *were not* on the east or west coast during the 1960s, and so weren't as much distracted by protests. That moderated what might otherwise have been life-long shrillness. The other was that we were allowed to do big topics. Divine, my dissertation supervisor, let me shift its title, at the last minute, from "Domestic Origins of United States Policy toward the Soviet Union, 1943-1946," to the less clunky "The United States and the Origins of the Cold War." And with that, I could finally feel that I was doing my part in the national recovery from Sputnik.

My first teaching job, in 1968, was at Indiana University Southeast in Jeffersonville (later relocated to New Albany), but I stayed there for only a year before moving to Ohio University in Athens, where I remained—with occasional years off elsewhere—for the next twenty-eight. Barbara and I loved this small town nestled in the Hocking hills that hosted a big university. Alonzo Hamby, then finishing his first book on the Truman administration, was there to welcome me as a colleague, and together we made post-World War II history a departmental specialty.⁸

By the time I arrived in Athens, my dissertation had already been accepted, as had Lon's, for the Columbia University Press's Contemporary American History series, edited by William E. Leuchtenburg. Bill took his editorial responsibilities very seriously, so much so that he made me add two new chapters, thereby delaying the book's appearance by that many years.⁹ It seemed worth it, though, on the day the phone rang in the office I shared with Lon: "Congratulations, Professor Gaddis, your book on the Cold War has just won the Bancroft Prize." "Thanks," I replied, while whispering to Lon: "What's the Bancroft?"

There followed an invitation to teach, as a visitor, at the Naval War College in Newport. Its new president, Admiral Stansfield Turner, was determined to shift the "Strategy and Policy" curriculum from its traditional focus on theory to the study of history and the classics. I would be running seminars for mid-career Navy and Marine officers, some from friendly foreign countries, and would be younger than all of my students as well as my teaching partner, a Marine colonel back from several tours of duty in Vietnam. And what was I, with no military experience, expected to teach them? Why, Thucydides, of course, followed by Clausewitz, Mahan, Corbett, Liddell-Hart, Brodie, and Huntington. None of whom I had read.¹⁰

⁸ Faculty colleagues came to include Charles Alexander, Alfred Eckes, Michael Grow, Katherine Jellison, Steven Miner, and Chester Pach, and among graduate students, Alessandro Brogi, Campbell Craig, Lorenz Lüthi, Jeremi Suri, Jonathan Winkler, Shu Guang Zhang, and Qiang Zhai.

⁹ John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

¹⁰ William Appleman Williams's *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* had been on the list, I was told, but had to be taken off because the war college students found it too convincing. I've described how we used Thucydides in *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 60-62.

That year—1975-76—was a frantic scramble, worse than preparing for orals in Austin had ever been. But I got through it with help from fellow visitors, among them David Schoenbaum and Richard Ned Lebow, and that produced an invitation to stay for a second year, by the end of which I had acquired a new specialty: grand strategy. And an idea for a new book, which would apply that discipline's principles to the diplomatic history in which I had been trained. This became *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, published by the Oxford University Press in 1982 and still occasionally used as a war college text.¹¹

Strategies, in turn, led to George F. Kennan. I had interviewed him for the book, and had worked in his papers, which had recently opened at Princeton. So I sent him draft chapters, expecting the worst: he was known not to suffer historians gladly. To my surprise, though, there arrived one day in Helsinki—where I was spending a year as Bicentennial Professor of American Studies—what I can only call a fan letter: “You have understood my views better than anyone else ever has.” “That’s encouraging,” I replied: “Thank you.” Then another, hand-written: “*You* have understood . . .” “Thanks again,” I wrote back. And finally a third, at which point I began to think he might be angling for a biography. So I asked: “Is anyone doing one?” “Oh,” he replied, “it had never occurred to me that anyone would want to do *my* biography. But since *you’ve* asked, let’s talk about it.”

So we did, discovering quickly that we wanted the same thing: a posthumous life done with Kennan’s cooperation that he would never read. He was well into his career as a historian by then, and didn’t have to be told that no biographer can function with his subject looking over his shoulder. So, in 1982, we set up the arrangement. George¹² was seventy-eight. The biography, we both assumed, would be out within a decade.

Apart from teaching, I spent most of my time over the next few years interviewing Kennan, his family, friends, colleagues, and critics. I transcribed everything myself, and after checking with my interviewees for accuracy, filed what they had said with the promise that Kennan would never see it. He never did, and I didn’t return to the transcripts until after his death in 2005, when I actually started writing.¹³

Meanwhile, the nature of the Cold War was changing, but hardly anyone seemed to be noticing. So I set out to grapple with this paradox, first in an *International Security* article entitled “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System,” published in 1986, and then the following year in a book that included this and other articles I’d done over the previous decade.¹⁴ None foresaw the end of the Cold War, though,¹⁵ and so in 1992 I pulled together still more retreads in a book too cleverly titled *The United States and the End of the Cold War*. Nobody read that one: events were moving too fast, by then, for historians to catch up.

¹¹ There had been, in between, a second book, Gaddis, *Russia, the Soviet Union, and the United States: An Interpretive History* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), which appeared in a series Bob Divine was editing, but it attracted less attention than the first and third ones.

¹² I’d begun calling him George after provoking smirks from his older sisters while interviewing them: “What was Professor Kennan like as a baby?”

¹³ The full transcripts are now online through the Kennan papers at Princeton.

¹⁴ Gaddis, “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System,” *International Security* 10:4 (Spring 1986): 99-142; Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Although I did do an article for the November 1987 issue of *The Atlantic* entitled “How the Cold War Might End,” which came nowhere close to getting it right.

Even so, we did better than the international relations theorists, some of whom refused even to acknowledge new evidence emerging from the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China, much of it as yet untranslated. So my friend William Taubman of Amherst College (fluent in Russian, but not in the other necessary languages) and I (fluent in none) persuaded the MacArthur Foundation to fund a Cold War International History Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington which would collect, translate, and disseminate as widely as possible this wealth of new material. CWIHP has been doing this ever since, and I'm proud of having been, with Bill, one of its founders.¹⁶

CWIHP's founding coincided with a year I spent at Oxford as Harmsworth Professor—1992/93—and the consequent obligation to deliver eight public lectures on a topic of my choice. So I scooped up what CWIHP was turning up, found it to be well received, and expanded it into *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, published in 1997.¹⁷ That book made even historians nervous. Wasn't it too soon to "know," some asked? Wasn't I rejecting claims I had made earlier, others wondered? The answer was "no" in the first instance—what I said then has held up, I think, pretty well. And "yes" in the second, for what's the point of new evidence if it can't correct old misconceptions?

Meanwhile, back in Ohio, the Contemporary History Institute my colleagues and I had created was thriving, but I wasn't: after three decades my marriage was falling apart. I'd had many invitations over the years to move elsewhere, but had rejected them all, not wanting to uproot the family. Now, though, the children were grown and my wife would be moving elsewhere. So when Robin Winks, the chair of the Yale History Department, called one day to say "we'd like for you to come,"¹⁸ it suddenly seemed like the right thing to do. There was hardly any negotiation at all. I just said "Yes."

Thinking I'd be coming alone, I bought a house just off the Yale campus and began my last round of classes at Ohio University. At which point, in January, 1997, I had a purely professional lunch with a colleague, Toni Dorfman, the director of OU's School of Theater. At which she mentioned that *her* marriage of thirty years was also breaking up. So we agreed to have dinner. And then a second and a third. At the fourth, two weeks later, I proposed: she, on the spot, accepted, without having seen the house she'd be occupying, and without any assurance of a job at Yale. I was 55, she was 51. One of my students, when informed, observed tactfully: "Well, at that age, I guess it has to happen that way."

This certainly was the right thing to do. Toni loved the house, and Yale quickly found her a job in its undergraduate Theater Studies program, which she was soon running. My lecture course on Cold War history began attracting hundreds of students, my graduate students were superb,¹⁹ and my colleagues Paul Kennedy, Charles Hill, and I found a way to bring the Naval War College "Thucydides" curriculum to Yale as "Studies in Grand Strategy," a year-long course that is now widely emulated elsewhere. All of us, to this day, relish Yale's emphasis on *teaching*: it's more often our students about whom we talk when we see each other socially²⁰ than it is our scholarly research.

I've never seen teaching as being at odds with research. The Newport seminars propelled me into writing about grand strategy, and others at Ohio and Yale got me interested in historical methodology, a topic I lectured on while back at

¹⁶ Along with its early organizers, Samuel F. Wells, Jr., at the Wilson Center, James Hershberg, CWIHP's first director, and Christian Ostermann, who has most ably served as its director for the past quarter century.

¹⁷ Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁸ After clearing up my initial impression, which was that he had just wanted me to do a lecture.

¹⁹ In addition to Lüthi, Suri, and Winkler, who did Ph.Ds at Yale after working with me in Ohio, my doctoral students included Hal Brands, Charles Edel, Gretchen Heefner, Sulmaan Khan, William Inboden, Erez Manela, Victor McFarland, Christopher Miller, Michael Morgan, Lien-Hang Nguyen, Aaron O'Connell, and Zachary Wasserman.

²⁰ As we do frequently. Paul Kennedy and I share a back yard, and Charlie Hill is just two blocks away.

Oxford, in 2000/01, as Eastman Professor. The resulting book was *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (2002), an effort to refute social scientists who claim that history isn't a science.²¹ Ours is closest, though, to the evolutionary hard sciences—geology, paleontology, anthropology, climatology, astronomy—that know better than to seek independent variables, there being no such thing. The book won me no plaudits from political scientists, but students seem to like it, even if some feel that they have to read it secretly, late at night, by the light from their iPhones.

I've mostly avoided commentary on current events, but 9/11 was too big to ignore. So when invited to lecture on its significance,²² I agreed to do so. The result was a short book, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (2004), the reception of which was itself surprising.²³ Condoleezza Rice, a longtime friend, was national security adviser at the time, and she invited me to the White House one day to brief her staff on what I had written. When I finished, she asked casually: "Could you spare a few moments for the president?" I said I thought I could, and was immediately ushered into the Oval Office where the President Bush and Vice-President Cheney were patiently waiting. I'd expected only a photo op, but Bush, waving his heavily marked copy of the book, said: "Sit down. Tell me more about Bismarck."

So I tried desperately to remember what I'd said on that subject, which wasn't much apart from knowing the advantages of "shock and awe," but also knowing when to stop. "That's really interesting," Bush said, and a rapid-fire conversation then ensued, for which I was, to say the least, ill-prepared. It turned out to be the first of several, most mini-seminars with three or four other historians focusing on the lives of previous presidents but also, as Bush was preparing to leave office, one on how to write a memoir.

None of this went over well with my academic colleagues. Friends stopped speaking to me. Some blow-torched my next book, *The Cold War: A New History* (2005).²⁴ I got suggestions, although never from Kennan himself, that I had disqualified myself from writing the biography. And I found that when I did publicly criticize the administration,²⁵ I got few responses, as if potential readers hadn't read what I'd written because they knew, or thought they knew, what I was going to say.²⁶

All of which soured me, pretty thoroughly, on punditry. By this time, though, I was in the final stages of writing the Kennan book, a reliably rewarding diversion. It appeared, mostly to favorable reviews, in 2011, and in the following year snagged the Pulitzer Prize for biography—I didn't have to ask what that one was. My Yale seminar celebrated, on the day after the announcement, with a prank. I walked into our classroom, found it totally empty, and sat there forlornly for about ten minutes until the students charged in with celebratory balloons, cake, non-alcoholic champagne, and hearty cheers. It was a high point in what was becoming an alarmingly long career.

²¹ Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²² By the New York Public Library in its Joanna Jackson Goldman Memorial Lectures series.

²³ Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

²⁴ Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005).

²⁵ As in "Bush and the World: Grand Strategy in the Second Term," *Foreign Affairs*, 84 (January/February 2005), 2-15; and "Ending Tyranny," *The American Interest* 4 (September/October, 2008), 6-15.

²⁶ For what the administration made of what I did say, see Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown, 2011), 290-292; and Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 371-372.

“What will the next book be?” people began asking. “There won’t be one,” I took to replying. “I’m quitting while I’m ahead.” “But you can’t,” they kept insisting, and it turned out that they were right. There was yet another, drawn once again from teaching. This was *On Grand Strategy* (2018), my distillation of the Yale course Kennedy, Hill, and I had been collaborating on for the past two decades.²⁷ I didn’t try to make it a collaborative book, though, because I knew we would never agree on what was to be in it, just as we had disagreed on almost everything in front of the students. I don’t know, to this day, whether Paul or Charlie have read it, but I do know the importance, with close friends, of not asking.

And another book after that? I doubt it. I’m now 79, and as Kennan said when he was that age—and continued to say for the next quarter century—“it can’t be much longer now.” But I do have a project which, in a way, completes a circle: I’m going back to Cotulla.

I’m doing it by way of the Texas Digital Newspaper Program,²⁸ which allows instant online access to hundreds of newspapers dating back to the days of the Texas republic. Typing “Cotulla” in the search box produced over 19,000 hits, from the town’s founding to the present. Cotulla has long had its own weekly paper, but few early issues survive, perhaps because their editors didn’t. Two were assassinated, along with a sheriff, before 1900.

But daily newspapers in major cities covered small towns thoroughly, down to the level of who was visiting whom, and who was staying in which hotel. From these, it is possible not just to triangulate, but to multi-angulate local history, frequently with the bonus of colorful prose. My home town had all the eccentric violence of a Coen brothers’ movie—think *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*. So I’m chronicling this, possibly for publication in some form, maybe just for the family. I’ll close with one vignette, from the recollections of another Cotulla inhabitant who, like LBJ, went on to great things.

He’s the young Edward M. House, not yet promoted to “Colonel,” who in his twenties was sent to the region to manage family ranch properties. He recalls waiting for the midnight train to Austin in Cotulla’s “so-called” hotel when a ferocious fight broke out. “[A] general killing came very near taking place. I do not believe any of us would have left the room alive had it occurred. . . . I took my Winchester, went to the head of the stairs where I could survey the entire room, and waited for the fray to begin. Fortunately, a peacemaker poured oil upon the troubled waters and quiet was restored.”²⁹

I like to think that a career began, at that moment, in that little town. As did, at other moments, several others.

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²⁷ Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

²⁸ See footnote 1.

²⁹ Edward M. House Papers, Box 298, Series 2, Diaries, 1858-1926, Folder 3, Sterling Library, Yale University. House was made a “colonel” by Texas Governor James Stephen Hogg in 1893, for political services rendered.