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Childhood and Career Choice

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I arrived in New York Harbor in the autumn of 1942 as part of a group of 100 Jewish refugee children from France. We were off-loaded furtively at night after the immigration officials made themselves scarce. Once ashore we were dispersed to orphanages. I had been kicked around and was in poor health and stunted in growth. To assist in my adoption the agency assigned me a birth date commensurate with my size. It worked. I was quickly adopted by a Jewish couple who had married in 1927 and were unable to have children. They were wonderful parents and I was extraordinarily fortunate in every step of my war-time journey, especially the final one.

My choice of profession was all but determined from early childhood. I wanted to know why this had happened to me and other children, many of whom had more traumatic experiences. Forest Hills, Queens, where I grew up, was friendly and secure but the War still impinged on daily life. There was rationing, 'dimouts,' and the delivery of milk by horse cart instead of truck to save on gasoline. Lots of people were in uniform, including several fathers and sons on our block. Some of my neighbors were refugees and had very close escapes from the Nazis. My friend Charlie M. and his family had been torpedoed by a U-boat in the North Atlantic and adrift on a lifeboat before being picked up by a destroyer. My schoolmate Alan who lived a few blocks away, was English and came over during the Blitz. His family's London flat was bombed, he was badly burned, and his face badly scarred.

The Nazis were far away but I was still frightened of them. This fear is hard to describe. It was diffuse, not constant, and not associated with any direct physical threat. But I knew people were dying, among them, I suspected, my original parents. Another part of me viewed the War as more like a baseball game, and I was a great Brooklyn Dodgers fan. I and everyone I know – even those awful Yankee boosters – rooted for the Allies and assured me that they would win. I remember waking up early one morning before my parents and drawing Swastikas with black and red crayons on pieces of paper and then hiding them under my bed. I was not aware of the significance of what I was doing at the time and only years later after having read Freud did I come to understand it as a way of acting out and thereby reducing my fear.

I knew we were also fighting the Japanese and Italians, but the Germans were what everyone in the neighborhood focused on, and not surprisingly since many of them were refugees from the Fascists or Nazis. The three largest refugee communities were Jews from almost everywhere in Europe, but mostly Germany and Austria; Italians who were anti-Mussolini; and non-Jewish Germans, mostly Social Democrats from Bremen, Hamburg, and Berlin. We had a common political agenda and were in and out of each other's homes and eating one another's food.

My most direct visual encounters with the War were the occasional drive down the east side of Manhattan on local roads that were removed in the postwar era to make way for the FDR Drive. There were 750 piers in New York harbor and a long line of them on both sides of Manhattan from its tip to midtown. We would drive slowly by and sometimes stop to look at merchantmen. They flew flags from their home countries, many of which were now occupied. It was exciting to see the flags and the guns on these ships and to wave at their brave sailors. Dad put up a map of Europe on my wall so I could identify the

countries whose ships I had seen. One morning he summoned me into their bedroom to listen to the radio. The Allies had landed in Normandy and my parents were very excited. So too was the radio announcer and we all lay in the bed for I don't know how long.

The European map in my bedroom had different color tacks that we used to chart the progress of the war. The red tacks were the Red Army, slowly advancing in the east. The Germans were gray tacks, which I now recognize must have been hard to find. The blue tacks were the Americans, British, and Canadians, and made their appearance on the map a few days later, as Dad did not have time to do this until the weekend. After D-Day we tracked the advance of allied armies across France, up the Italian peninsula, and towards Germany from the east. I learned a lot of geography and developed a life-long interest in it, military strategy, and European and alliance politics.

A few weeks after President Franklin D. Roosevelt's death, the carrier *Franklin* made its way up the East River to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, New York, where it arrived on 28 April 1945. The *Franklin* had been badly damaged by Kamikaze attacks but made its way first to Pearl Harbor and then to San Diego for repairs. She was patched up in both places but the navy decided that *Franklin* should go to Brooklyn via the Panama Canal because all of the repair yards on the West Coast were overloaded with damaged warships. Thousands of people lined both sides of the East River for a glimpse of the warship and stared in total silence as it pulled into its dock. I was present and had a good view on Dad's shoulders.

On the morning of 8 May, VE Day (Victory in Europe Day), I was reading in the living room of our house and Mom was vacuuming. She looked at the window and gasped. A staff car had stopped across the street, and as far as we knew, there was only one reason for such visits: to bring bad news to the family of a dead or missing serviceman. We watched as an officer got out of the olive drab car and walked up to the door of the family, directly across the street. Mr. R. was a carpenter, a non-Jewish, anti-Nazi refugee, as was his wife. Both their sons were in the army air force. The officer disappeared into their house and after some time emerged and returned to his car and drove off. Mrs. R. came out of her house screaming. My mother, whose nails were digging into my arm where she was gripping me, thankfully let go and rushed outside to embrace Mrs. R. in the middle of 65th Avenue. There was so little traffic in wartime that this was not a problem. The two women hugged and I stood silently watching the scene by the front door, which Mom in her haste had not closed. She finally returned in tears, which took her some time to fight back. It was good news. Everyone on the block knew that both boys had been reported missing in action. The British and American forces had liberated the Stalags (prisoner of war camps) where they had been held. Prisoners of war and the wounded were given the highest priority for shipment home and the officer promised Mrs. R. that they would both be on the next crossing of the *Queen Mary*.

There was a block party that night and everyone congratulated our neighbors on their good fortune. There was lots of good food, and some of it from the 'victory garden' in the lot at the top of the block. The government encouraged everyone to grow as much of their own food as possible and victory gardens sprung up in empty lots in and around many cities. We grew the usual vegetables but also zucchini, thanks to the Italians. The fathers would garden every weekend of the growing season and we kids were given the job during the week of plucking 'Fascist' weeds. I was only a tot but trailed along with the older kids – we ranged from three to eight – with Allen B., the oldest, acting as our leader and distinguishing weeds from vegetables. There were never enough weeds to go around for everyone to dig out and being among the youngest I was often relegated to the role of spectator.

Fast forward to university in the late 1950s and early 1960s. I was a keen student of modern history and wanted to study international relations. The University of Chicago did not disappoint. I studied and worked as a research assistant for Herman Finer in comparative politics and then Hans Morgenthau and took or audited courses and seminars from a score of interesting faculty. They included Saul Bellow (author), Reuel Denney (poet and co-author of *The Lonely Crowd*), Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Sol Tax (anthropology), Richard McKeon (philosophy, especially Aristotle), and Joshua Taylor (art history).

I went from Chicago to Yale for my Ph.D., where I studied with Karl Deutsch and Hajo Holborn. Yale and I did not get on, but that is another story. I finished my degree at the newly opened program at the Graduate Center of the City University or

New York. Here I was fortunate enough to study political theory with Mel Richter and Isaiah Berlin, comparative politics with Ed Brown and Dankwart Rustow, and international relations with John Herz and John Stoessinger.

I wrote my doctoral dissertation on British perceptions of the Irish and their policy consequences. I conducted my research at the height of the civil rights movement when prejudice was generally explained in Freudian terms. It was assumed to be difficult to overcome because of the deep-seated needs it fulfilled for prejudiced people. *White Britain and Black Ireland: The Nature of Colonial Stereotypes* argued that much prejudice served to reduce dissonance. Stereotypes removed the Irish, Black Americans, and other colonized peoples from the domain where accepted values and practices applied, making it easier to treat them differently.¹ This is why stereotypes of diverse colonial peoples were so similar. Once developed, these stereotypes were innocently assimilated by others but could be overcome through learning. My research in Ireland coincided with the emergence of the northern Irish civil rights movement and I became drawn into contemporary problems in that province. My field experience and research led to a co-edited book on divided nations and partitioned countries and an article on sectarian assassination in Belfast.

In the spring of 1968 Henry Kissinger interviewed me for a postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard. We met in the Fifth Avenue apartment of Nelson Rockefeller just across from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. 'Rocky' had thrown his hat in the ring for the Republican presidential nomination and Kissinger was his chief foreign policy advisor. The reception room had glorious art on the walls but there was no opportunity to do anything but cast a sidewise glance at it. Kissinger asked me a few questions about my research and I told him how much I would enjoy a postdoc that would let me write my dissertation as a book. Much to my surprise, he explained that the job in question was working for him, and not at the center he ran at Harvard. He would likely become national security advisor and was putting together a staff to work for him in Washington.

I was taken aback by this bait and switch but intrigued by what was now on offer. I had the temerity to suggest that Rockefeller appeared likely to lose the nomination to Nixon. Not to worry, Kissinger assured me, Rockefeller would hand him over to Nixon if this happened. The Republicans would almost certainly capture the White House and he would become national security advisor.

I told Kissinger that I had read an article of his published some months before in which he made an analogy to France and Algeria. President Charles de Gaulle promised to keep Algeria French but once in office granted the former colony its independence and withdrew French troops. The next American President, Kissinger suggested, should follow this precedent as de Gaulle and France rose in stature in the aftermath. Kissinger leaned across the coffee table that divided us and said in his thick German accent: "Young man, do not believe everything that you read." He explained that he had written the article with Rockefeller in mind. But as he would likely be working for Nixon such a policy would not pass muster. His boss to be would be more inclined to escalate the war before winding it down.

I asked if he felt comfortable with that course of action. He smiled. I confessed that I was an opponent of the war and would be happy to work with him to end it but not to extend it. He reiterated his belief that escalation would be the most likely response of the next administration. I politely declined his job offer. We parted on friendly terms and when my book was published he wrote me a nice note.

My encounter with Kissinger had an unanticipated positive effect on my intellectual growth and subsequent research. It drove home to me the compromises people will make to climb what Benjamin Disraeli called 'the greasy pole' of office. Ethics and personal beliefs are put on hold when they are inconvenient. Kissinger's years in office, first as National Security Advisor then as Secretary of State, were characterized by his extraordinary consolidation of power over foreign policy, isolation of the State Department and other relevant institutions, spying on his staff and ordinary citizens, dramatic

¹ Richard Ned Lebow, *White Britain and Black Ireland: The Influence of Stereotypes on Colonial Policy* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Social Issues, 1976).

escalation of the Indochina conflict, interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, and disregard for all the well-established procedures for policymaking.

Beginning with *Between Peace and War* (1981), my research on foreign policy and international relations might be described as an anti-Kissinger project.² It is highly critical of *Realpolitik*, questions the emphasis on power versus that on influence, and explores the role of self-restraint and common projects in fostering the latter. It also examines the ways in which leaders delude themselves that their foreign policy projects will succeed. The emphasis on ethics is more pronounced in *The Tragic Vision of Politics* (2003), which opens with a short story about what happens to Richard Nixon when he arrives in hell.³ It goes on to recapture the wisdom of what I termed “classical realism” through the writings of Thucydides, Carl von Clausewitz and Hans Morgenthau. *A Democratic Foreign Policy* (2019) stresses the subjective nature of national interests, rejects American claims of hegemony as unrealistic and antithetical to global order, makes the case for deep cuts in the military budget, and argues for foreign policies that are consistent with domestic values and international norms.⁴

Hans J. Morgenthau, my former mentor and later, colleague and friend, wrote his famous *Politics among Nations* (1948) to offer realism as an alternative to idealism.⁵ He wanted Americans to shed any naïve hopes that goodwill, cooperation, and supranational institutions would do away with, or even significantly reduce, interstate conflicts. By the time of the Vietnam War -- which he opposed from the outset -- he worried that Americans had overlearned this lesson, had misread his text, and came reluctantly to admit that it might unwittingly have been a contributing cause to the appeal of *Realpolitik*. My writings on foreign policy offer the kind of corrective of which, I believe, he would very much have approved. They make his argument, albeit in a very different way, that foreign policy does not stop at the water’s edge. It must be informed by and responsive to domestic values and politics, and seek ways of defending and advancing them commensurate with the interests of other states and political actors.

Foreign policy must be embedded in ethics for two fundamental reasons. It is a source of influence for diverse reasons. Of equal importance, it encourages self-restraint, which great powers historically find it difficult to exercise. Their decline or downfall is almost invariably the result of self-inflicted injuries. These two reasons are of course related because others are more inclined to follow your lead when they understand your objectives to be in their interests. Ethical policies are more likely to be successful policies, and it is this claim I attempt to document in my most recent book, *Ethics and International Relations: A Tragic Perspective*, which Cambridge will publish later this year.⁶

My initial focus in international relations was on deterrence. I initially accepted the conventional wisdom that World War II could have been prevented if only France, Britain, and the U.S. had stood up to Hitler instead of practicing appeasement or isolation. At the time I also thought that the Soviet Union was an aggressive state against which the line needed to be held. I was curious about why deterrence sometimes failed. By the time I finished *Between Peace and War* I was critical of deterrence and the view of the Soviet Union that justified it. I found evidence in a eight of the thirteen brinkmanship crises I studied that deterrence had been practiced as stipulated by theorists but had nevertheless failed to prevent a challenge. More troubling still, in some of these conflicts deterrence appeared to have helped to provoke the very behavior it was intended to prevent. This revelation did not sit easily. At first I tried to assimilate my findings to deterrence theory but found this

² Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

³ Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests, and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 1.

⁴ Lebow, *A Democratic Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2019).

⁵ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1948).

⁶ Lebow, *Ethics and International Relations: A Tragic Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

impossible; it was clear that deterrence had been practiced by the textbook. When I finally allowed myself to conclude that the theory was the problem, not the evidence, a new set of questions arose that led me to political psychology in search of answers. I want to describe this process of doubt, search for new ways of ordering my data, and the path of discovery to which it led because it generated a research program I fleshed out over the next two decades.

Looking back on this process I realize that my first doubts about deterrence arose in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis. If leaders were rational and backed down in the face of overwhelming force why did Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev deploy missiles to Cuba in the first place? Deterrence theorists wiggled out of this contradiction by assuming that President John F. Kennedy had not imparted credibility to keep Soviet offensive weapons from entering Cuba. Alternatively, they argued that Khrushchev thought he could circumvent deterrence by a secret deployment. If the missiles were not discovered before they became operational, the Soviets would for the first time have the ability to target the U.S. mainland with nuclear-tipped missiles. The Americans might be compelled to accept a new status quo. But a secret deployment was a huge gamble and the consequences of being found out were likely to be grave indeed given the overwhelming American conventional military advantage in the Caribbean. Would a rational leader have assumed such a risk unless something absolutely critical to his country was at stake? If American analysts were right, and Khrushchev was acting for offensive reasons – in the hope of spreading Communism in Latin America – as these analysts insisted he was, then his behavior still made little sense.

Either way the secret missile deployment was a deterrence failure. Kennedy had drawn a line in the sand, built up conventional forces in the Caribbean, and Khrushchev had promised in a letter to respect his concerns. Kennedy critics, and even some analysts of the crisis who were friendly to Kennedy, nevertheless placed the blame at the president's feet.⁷ They allege that he did not stand up to Khrushchev at their Vienna summit, failed to respond forcefully enough to Communist infiltration in Laos, and allowed Khrushchev to get away with building the Berlin Wall. As far as I know, I was the first to argue that such claim was myth and not history, had no evidence in its support, and was invented to sustain the efficacy of the strategy and theory of deterrence. Janice Stein and I would later author a counter-narrative on the basis of interviews with former Soviet officials.

The link between Cuba and Vietnam was very much in my mind at the time. President Lyndon Johnson's buildup began in 1965. The Indochina disaster offered a new perspective on the 'victory' in Cuba and one that, in retrospect, made me more willing to challenge the conventional wisdom. My reading of this conflict was heightened by a visit to South Vietnam I made in the early 1970s. It offered the opportunity of first-hand observation of the war and local politics in Saigon, Danang, and Hué in the north, and Cần Thơ in the Delta. First-hand is no exaggeration as we—I was traveling with my partner, later wife, Carol Bohmer—were shelled in Danang and our small plane from Saigon to Cần Thơ was riddled with groundfire. I was officially sponsored by the US Information Agency (USIA) and used the opportunity to speak out against American military involvement in diverse venues. Most American officials and military officers I met shared my point of view. A rare exception was a low-ranking State Department official who picked us up upon arrival at Saigon airport. In the ride to our hotel she accused me of being a "traitor."

Our most interesting encounter was in Hué, a city that had been devastated by the Tet Offensive. We were hosted by the public affairs officer, the highest ranking USIA official in the province. We later learned that he had been sent to what was recognized as a particularly dangerous posting because he was gay. The State Department wanted him out of sight. Like all American officials in the provinces he received a sizeable budget for security. His colleagues used the money to fortify their compounds; we had visited several elsewhere in the country that had high walls topped by barbed wire fences and often with strategically placed pill boxes staffed by impressively armed local guards. Our host did nothing of the kind. His house was entirely exposed and had no guards or weapons. He used his defense budget to support a soup kitchen on his lawn that twice a day offered free meals to needy locals. The Viet Cong gave him and his compound a bye when they overran Hué during the

⁷ This story originated with Kennedy himself. For the strongest statement of it, see Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 235-37.

Tet Offensive, presumably because of his local popularity. They killed every other American and Vietnamese collaborator on whom they could get their hands.

One night our host organized a dinner party for us to which he invited the Marine general in charge of the northern region of Vietnam, an elderly Buddhist priest, and a young local businessman. The four men met regularly, in part because of shared a common interest in classical Chinese literature. Fortunately for us, we discussed other topics, including the likely outcome of the war. There was no disagreement. The three local guests were convinced that Washington would withdraw its troops but step up its bombing. North Vietnam would wait for an appropriate moment to invade and take over the South. It was all so predictable. They lamented collectively that the parties involved could not agree to this outcome and save all the lives that would be lost in bringing the inevitable about.

At the end of the evening, the general, who had a car and driver, offered to take the priest home. The businessman had his own auto. Once they had departed our host asked us who we thought these people actually were. We looked at him quizzically. He explained that the general was indeed whom he appeared to be but that the elderly monk was a spokesman for the Viet Cong, and the businessman the regional representative of North Vietnam. “Does the general know this?” I asked. “Of course,” came the reply. “This is one reason they meet regularly.” His compound was a useful venue for them to exchange information and work out local agreements to reduce the loss of life. The Pentagon knew nothing about this, but then it had become abundantly clear to us that the Pentagon and the White House knew little in general about what was happening in the country. American policy was based on assumptions that bore little relationship to Vietnamese realities, simplistic understandings of the complex relationships among North Vietnam, China, and Russia, and grossly exaggerated the consequences to the U.S. of a Viet Cong-North Vietnamese victory.

The Indochina conflict indicated to me that the power to punish had become severely constrained by post-war norms in democratic countries. The air and ground war aroused enormous opposition at home, in large part because of its collateral damage, evident every day on television. Public opinion ultimately compelled a halt to the bombing and withdrawal of U.S. forces from Indochina. The bombing exceeded World War II in total tonnage but was also more restricted. The US refrained from the indiscriminate bombing of civilians – but killed many of them in any case -- and made no effort to destroy North Vietnam’s elaborate system of dikes. The use of nuclear weapons was never considered. “Restraint” was a response to ethical and domestic political imperatives. Similar constraints limited U.S. firepower in Iraq in the Gulf War of 1990–91 and enabled the Republican Guard and Saddam Hussein to escape destruction.

The ability to absorb punishment derives even less from material capabilities and may be inversely related to them. One of the reasons why Vietnam was less vulnerable to bombing than Thomas Schelling and Pentagon planners supposed was its underdeveloped economy.⁸ There were few high-value targets to destroy or hold hostage. Without many factories, highways, and railroads, the economy was more difficult to disrupt and the population was less dependent on existing distribution networks for its sustenance and material support. The US won every battle but lost the war because its citizens would not pay the moral, economic, and human cost of victory. Washington withdrew from Indochina after losing 58,000 American lives, a fraction of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese deaths even by the most conservative estimates.

A comparison between South and North Vietnam is also revealing. The Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN) was larger and better equipped and trained than the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese and had all the advantages of U.S. air power, communications, and logistics. The Republic of South Vietnam crumbled because its forces had no stomach for a fight. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese sustained horrendous losses whenever they came up against superior U.S. firepower but maintained their morale and cohesion throughout the long conflict. Unlike ARVN officers and recruits, who

⁸ Thomas Schelling’s *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale, 1966) was based on three lectures he gave at Yale in 1964. He proudly told his audience of mostly graduate students that the U.S. could readily compel Hanoi to stop aiding the Viet Cong because the air force and navy could drop more bombs on the country than all combatants had used in World War II. In the Q & A following one of these lectures Janice Gross Stein asked Schelling what he could possibly target with all the ordnance, and Schelling had no answer to offer.

regularly melted away under fire, more Viet Cong and North Vietnamese internalized their cause and gave their lives for it. At the most fundamental level, the Communist victory demonstrated the power of ideas and emotional commitments.

This insight too became central to my research. In contrast to realist and rationalist approaches I have stressed people's beliefs, how they interact with their emotions, and what consequences they have for political behavior. Such an approach, of necessity, turns to psychology and the humanities for insights, and recognizes the generally determining nature of context. Our theories are at best starting points for narratives that attempt to explain the past or forecast the future.

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