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Telling One Historian's Tale

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My love affair with history began when I was in the 7th grade in Evergreen Park, Illinois, a Chicago southside suburb. My middle school teacher inspired my interest in the American Civil War. He organized a competition between teams of students who answered questions alternately and when correct placing an 'X' or 'O' in a tic-tac-toe box. I not only learned a lot, but thoroughly enjoyed the competition. I also had a terrific teacher in eighth grade who placed history—especially World War II—at the center of his curriculum. But then I rather slept through an unpleasant high school experience, graduating in three years.

I earned my Bachelor of Arts degree at Lake Forest College, located about thirty-five miles north of Chicago. My brother and I were the first in our parents' wider families to attend college—my four grandparents were born in Eastern Europe. When I arrived there in September 1966, I realize now, to my embarrassment, that I did not know much about anything. My father was a cement mason and my mother a seamstress who raised me in a rather sheltered environment—I did not travel on an airplane until I was twenty and had not done very much reading. Racism was part of my family's worldview. For example, my parents moved us from Chicago proper when I was eight years old to a bordering all-white suburb so that their sons would not have to attend school with "Negroes."

I decided to become a history major during my sophomore year at Lake Forest—after I earned an 'A' on my first midterm in a course on Revolutionary France! I went to see Thomas Moodie, the instructor of this class, and asked if I should major in history. His answer, of course, was an enthusiastic "yes." Shortly thereafter I decided to become a college professor. I suspect, however, that I would have pursued a career as a teacher at some level in any event because my parents instilled in me their belief that education was the key to realizing a productive and fulfilling life. They most certainly were right.

My college years (1966-1970) coincided with the escalation of the Vietnam War. When I started college, my politics were a virtual blank slate and I had limited knowledge of world affairs. But the emerging U.S. disaster in Vietnam changed that—it politicized me, as it did so many other young people at the time. I quickly became convinced that the war was not only unwinnable, but morally wrong. I participated in anti-war demonstrations and, in response to a professor's request, gave a presentation describing the history of American involvement in Vietnam at a teach-in on 15 October 1969—the War Moratorium.

I had excellent professors at Lake Forest College, including Arthur Zilversmit, author of *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North*,¹ and political scientists Jonathan Galloway and Robert Steamer. Lake Forest College had a

¹ Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967).

small student body (no more than 1,200) and so the classes also were small. History faculty did lecture, but there was a heavy emphasis on reading and discussing primary sources. Carol Moodie, who taught Russian History, was a master at leading classroom discussion, providing me with a model for emulation when later I would be teaching my own classes.

My main advisor was John G. Sproat, author of *The Best Men: Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age*.² He introduced me to the leading scholars in U.S. foreign relations at the time. The most influential were Ernest May, Walter LaFeber, and Theodore Draper. Sproat also provided direction for me in writing my undergraduate thesis titled “The Genesis of Soviet-American Animosity” which described how U.S. recognition of Russia in 1933 led to mutual disappointment that contributed to the emergence of the Cold War. Meanwhile, in December 1969, the draft lottery yielded number 10 for my birthday and the prospect of fighting in Vietnam in a war that I found abhorrent loomed. I joined the National Guard to avoid the draft, after horrifying my parents with talk about fleeing to Canada or going to jail.

Plans for graduate school led me to apply, at the recommendation of Professor Sproat, (in order of preference) to Cornell University, the University of Virginia, Indiana University, and Rutgers University to study under respectively LaFeber, Norman A. Graebner, Robert H. Ferrell, or Lloyd Gardner. I also applied to Princeton University. At that time, History Departments were reducing their number of acceptances because of a decline in job openings. An acceptance letter came only from the University of Virginia; since it had not reduced its number of admittances, my class was very large, including students who would become super historians like Drew McCoy, Suzanne Lebsack, Joan Jacobs Brumberg, and Lawrence Cress. Already studying at Virginia when I arrived were David L. Anderson, Joseph A. “Andy” Fry, and Donald S. Spencer, all of whom would become outstanding diplomatic historians.

In August 1971, when I began my graduate studies, I did not know many members of the faculty, with the exception of biographers Merrill D. Peterson (Thomas Jefferson³) and William H. Harbaugh (Theodore Roosevelt⁴). My interest in Soviet history led me to take a course offered by Thomas T. Hammond, only to discover to my chagrin that he was a conservative and intensely anti-Soviet Cold Warrior. William G. Shade, who was a visiting professor, gave me an entirely different and unflattering assessment of Andrew Jackson. Training in American colonial history came from D. Alan Williams. The interpretive approaches for all of these instructors were decidedly traditional, essentially top down history.

Without question Norman A. Graebner had the most decisive impact on my development as a historian of American diplomacy. The New Left-Wisconsin School Revisionism of William Appleman Williams and his students had shaped my earlier thinking about the U.S. role in the world, but Graebner’s emphasis on a realistic framework of analysis resonated with me. His assessment of the connection between ends and means in judging the wisdom of U.S. policies abroad I found utterly convincing. I soon learned why Graebner’s *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* and *Ideas and Diplomacy: Readings in the Intellectual Tradition of American Foreign Policy* were classics in the field.⁵

Naturally, I took Graebner’s diplomatic history classes during my first year. He was by far the best lecturer I have ever heard. And that certainly was not my view alone, as he was a legendary instructor at the University of Virginia. When I arrived in January for the second half of his two-semester sequence, 700 students were there in a classroom with 400 seats to take his

² John G. Sproat, *The Best Men: Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

³ Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁴ William H. Harbaugh, *Power and Responsibility; The Life and Times of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961).

⁵ Norman A. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1955); Norman A. Graebner, *Ideas and Diplomacy: Readings in the Intellectual Tradition of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

class—Graebner held another section for the overflow. That first year, I took a readings seminar with Edward E. Younger, author of *John A. Kasson: Politics and Diplomacy from Lincoln to McKinley*.⁶ From him, I received serious training in historiography for the first time. My Master's thesis on Sino-American relations in the 1950s grew out of John Israel's research seminar. Soon, I was searching for a dissertation topic and found a very good one after remembering an event from my undergraduate years.

It was the summer of 1969 and I had just completed my third year at Lake Forest College. At a neighborhood picnic, an argument erupted, as was common at the time, about the Vietnam War. In response to my bitter criticism of the conflict, a family friend defended U.S. military action to stop Communism by shouting that "it was just like the Korean War." Since I knew virtually anything about that conflict, his comment shut me up. That fall, I asked one of my professors to recommend a book about the Korean War that would fill this gap in my knowledge. He recommended I. F. Stone's *The Hidden History of the Korean War*,⁷ a famous revisionist account that made the case for a conspiracy between South Korean President Syngman Rhee and U.S. General Douglas MacArthur that provoked a North Korean attack to invite U.S. military intervention. Six years later, I remembered my introduction to the Korean War and decided it would be a worthy subject for my dissertation.

At first, I planned to investigate the war years from June 1950 to July 1953, but soon learned that this was not possible because U.S. government documents remained classified. However, the archival materials for the prewar era were accessible, with records for the year 1950 soon to be declassified. Charlottesville is only 120 miles from Washington, D.C., so I had relatively easy access to the National Archives, traveling there frequently during 1975 and 1976. There, I had the pleasure to meet Robert J. McMahon and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, who also were researching dissertations, establishing long-standing friendships with each. I also visited the Truman Presidential Library, MacArthur Library in Norfolk, and Princeton University Library. I did not conduct any research abroad while in graduate school, but did work at the Public Records Office in London in the early 1990s.

In August 1977, I completed my dissertation titled "The Reluctant Crusade: American Foreign Policy in Korea, 1941-1950." By then, I had held two replacement teaching positions at Delaware State College and Glenville State College in West Virginia, but worked during the 1977-1978 academic year as a bartender and liquor store clerk—a humbling experience. Fortunately, I published my first article—the first chapter of my dissertation—in *Diplomatic History* in 1978⁸ and this helped me secure one-year replacement positions at California State University, Bakersfield and the University of Texas at Arlington. Finally, in August 1980, New Mexico State University hired me on the tenure-track—it helped that Graebner had written a favorable review of the department head's recent book!

My wife and I enjoyed living in New Mexico very much, where we raised our two children. A majority of students at NMSU were first generation and forty percent were Hispanic. I was fortunate to direct sixteen Master's theses. During my first years there, I revised my dissertation, which the University of Hawaii published in 1985.⁹ A couple of years earlier, I delivered a paper at an Organization of American Historians conference in Philadelphia. George C. Herring was the commentator and, after the session ended, he told me that he had submitted a very favorable referee report on my

⁶ Edward Younger, *John A. Kasson: Politics and Diplomacy from Lincoln to McKinley* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1955).

⁷ I. F. Stone, *The Hidden History of the Korean War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1952).

⁸ James I. Matray, "An *End to Indifference*: America's Korean Policy during World War II," *Diplomatic History* 2:2 (1978): 181-196.

⁹ Matray, *The Reluctant Crusade: American Foreign Policy in Korea, 1941-1950* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985).

manuscript. Naturally, I was elated. In the years thereafter, my research on the Korean War has resulted in publication of book chapters, journal articles, and an historical dictionary on the conflict.

Numerous historians have influenced my thinking about U.S. foreign relations. I remember well how impressed I was with John Lewis Gaddis' *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947*.¹⁰ His study helped me reconcile the differences between the realist and New Left interpretations of the sources of the Soviet-American confrontation. George C. Herring's *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*¹¹ did the same regarding the Vietnam War. Michael H. Hunt provided me with a more nuanced conception of Sino-American relations, while Akira Iriye's description of culturalism deepened my understanding of U.S. interaction with Asia. In addition to his study on wartime China, Michael Schaller's *The American Occupation of Japan: The Origins of the Cold War in Asia*¹² further illuminated for me why the United States was so reluctant to abandon South Korea during the years after World War II. Later, Kristin Hoganson introduced me to the role of gender and Eric Love to race in the making of U.S. foreign relations.

Certainly the most important reorientation in my assessment of the origins, course, and consequences of the Korean War came after the fall of the Soviet Union when the Russian government released primary sources related to the conflict. Especially influential in how I would evaluate this information was reading Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War*,¹³ the first major study examining these new sources. I was pleased to learn that the evidence did not contradict, but in fact confirmed my speculation in *The Reluctant Crusade* that Kim Il Sung had persuaded Joseph Stalin to approve his plan to invade South Korea. Moreover, I was right that the attack was preemptive because Kim feared that with U.S. aid, South Korea eventually would emerge as economically and militarily more powerful and thus capable of absorbing North Korea.

Choosing the origins and conduct of the Korean War as the focus of my research was fortuitous because I never have tired of examining the topic and always have found new aspects of the conflict worthy of investigation. I also have developed solid professional friendships with other Korean War scholars, notably William Stueck, Bruce Cumings, Chen Jian, Steven Hugh Lee, and Allen R. Millett. My interpretive approach remained essentially traditional, despite the emergence of the cultural turn. I did expand my interests beyond Korea, however, writing in 2000 *Japan's Emergence as a Global Power*.¹⁴ Publication of my *Historical Dictionary of the Korean War*¹⁵ provided me with good training to prepare the two volume *East Asia and the United States: An Encyclopedia of Relations Since 1784*.¹⁶ And then, with Donald W. Boose Jr., I would publish *The*

¹⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

¹¹ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: John C. Wiley and Sons, 1979).

¹² Michael Schaller, *The American Occupation of Japan: The Origins of the Cold War in Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹³ Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Matray, *Japan's Emergence as a Global Power* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Matray (ed.), *Historical Dictionary of the Korean War* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991).

¹⁶ Matray (ed.), *East Asia and the United States: An Encyclopedia of Relations Since 1784*, 2 vols. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002).

Ashgate Research Companion to the Korean War in 2014.¹⁷ Over a hundred top scholars readily agreed to make contributions to these works.

Much to my surprise, my *The Reluctant Crusade* made me something of a celebrity in South Korea. I learned that South Koreans were very grateful to any foreign scholar who wrote about their country. In 1987, I visited that country for the first time in response to an invitation to present a paper at a conference on the Korean War. While there, to my great surprise, I watched mass public demonstrations against military rule that would lead later that year to democratic reform. This experience led to my shocking realization that I did not know much about Korea's history, culture, and people. As a result, a shift occurred in my research focus to looking at events more from the bottom up. I have devoted much of my research agenda since then to investigating anti-Americanism in South Korea. More recently, I have investigated and written articles on the North Korean nuclear crisis. In 2016, ABC-Clio published my *Crisis in a Divided Korea*.¹⁸ While I remain a specialist in U.S. foreign relations, I now also consider myself a scholar of modern Korean history.

In August 2002, I became chair of the Department of History at California State University, Chico, resuming my regular faculty position in August 2008. I have continued to publish, even now in half-retirement. I have had a genuinely wonderful career. Looking back, I became a history professor because of my desire to teach. Working with students remains the primary source of joy in my professional life. I have been productive as a publishing scholar, but, truth be told, my commitment to research and writing initially was a source of secondary satisfaction and a requirement to secure an academic job and earn tenure. To be sure, I never tire of seeing my name in print. But I find much more satisfying and fulfilling the knowledge that I have helped many students become productive members of society.

James I. Matray is emeritus professor of history both at California State University, Chico, and New Mexico State University. His publications focus on U.S.-Korean relations during and after World War II. He has written or edited nine books, as well as publishing more than fifty scholarly articles and book chapters. Matray was co-recipient of the Stuart L. Bernath Article Award in 1980 and received the Phi Alpha Theta Best Book Prize in 1986, the Donald C. Roush Award for Excellence in Teaching in 1988, and Professional Achievement Honors at California State University, Chico, in 2015. His current research project investigates the Battles of Pork Chop Hill. Since 2013, he has served as Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*.

¹⁷ Matray and Donald W. Boose Jr., eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Korean War* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2014).

¹⁸ Matray, *Crisis in a Divided Korea: A Chronology and Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2016).