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History Does Not Repeat Itself but it Often Rhymes

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ESSAY BY MELVIN SMALL, WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY, EMERITUS

I was born in the Bronx in 1939 to a first-generation mother and a father who spent the first eight years of his life in western Russia. When, during the Cold War, I had to fill out a biographical form for my Hewlett, Long Island, elementary school, I wrote that my father was born in Poland, which was not true. My mother, who graduated from Brooklyn College, was a homemaker for most of her married life until her divorce in 1956, after which she flourished working for philanthropic agencies. My father, who never quite finished City College of New York (CCNY), worked in his uncle's commercial paper business.

I can remember rationing cards and, especially, VE Day, when I tossed little bits of paper or confetti out of my window on the eighth floor of our apartment building and was surprised that I was the only one celebrating in that fashion. I also remember, in Parkchester, the huge middle-class development where we lived until our Long Island move, being patted on the head by the Yankees' Charlie 'King Kong' Keller who lived in the same development, something that never would have happened today given current baseball salaries.

I attended Woodmere (later Hewlett) High School, a very good school where more than 80 percent of its mostly middle-class Jewish students went to college. History courses were my favorite and my favorite teacher was Marie Underhill Noll. Some years later, she would endow a chair in her name at Cornell held by Walter LaFeber. I did like to write as well, if inelegantly, and served as co-editor of our school newspaper. Many years later, writing a bit more elegantly I hope, I reviewed most of the history books for the *Detroit Free Press* for several years until the newspaper strike of 1995 ended the paper's book-review page [sic]. It was challenging trying to write reviews in a more popular style than those that I did in our journals.

I arrived at Dartmouth in 1956 knowing I would major in history but not knowing or caring about a career. It was the booming Fifties. Dartmouth's history department was full of wonderful teachers. Only in graduate school did I realize that few of them had many publications when my professors at the University of Michigan told me that they had never heard of them. Which was a shame. John Adams at Dartmouth was the greatest lecturer or classroom thespian that I had ever heard and it was because of him that I leaned toward modern European history. We all accepted his draconian rule that he would personally lock the classroom door as the last Baker Tower bell sounded. I also took courses with John Gazley in French History and Herbert Hill in U.S. diplomatic history who used Tom Bailey's classic textbook.¹ Both were important in my development and trajectory.

More important, however, was my marriage. I had been dating a woman from Great Neck who was attending the University of Wisconsin. Sara made an inexplicable-to-me "Dear John" call to Hanover in 1958 in the middle of October in our junior

¹ Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955).

year. The next day I began two days of hitchhiking to Madison without telling her of my mission. In Madison, after a day and one half of discussion, we decided to elope, and no, she was not pregnant. We fled by Trailways Bus to Asheville, North Carolina, the nearest state that offered no waiting period. That was a wise choice since her parents had the FBI looking for us. I am revealing these personal details because of what they say about that period as well as my career choice.

When we returned by bus to Long Island to face the music, we had decided that were going to return to Hanover and its all-male campus. Neither of us thought of Madison as an option, even though it would have meant Sara continuing her studies and me being in a more prestigious department, rubbing shoulders with grad students like Walt LaFeber, Tom McCormick, Lloyd Gardner and other soon-to-be leaders in our field. The result was that my wife lost twenty years of her professional life as did those she could have helped. She took a few classes at Michigan and several at the University of Aarhus in Denmark and finished up with a Phi Beta Kappa degree and an MSW at Wayne State and a distinguished career as a psychiatric social worker.

In a related vein, when I returned to my twentieth high-school reunion in 1976, I discovered that several of the women at the top of my class had worked as teachers to help support their husbands through graduate and medical school. The ability of academically brilliant women, beginning in the seventies, to pursue other more lofty careers has been a plus for them and most likely a minus for our K-12 system.

At Dartmouth, Sara worked in the library with its unique Orozco murals and also at the local hospital while I progressed to my degree, working in the library stacks for fifty cents an hour. Now married, I decided to pursue a grey-flannel career in the insurance industry, having interviews with Mass Mutual, Connecticut General, and others in the late fall of 1959. In March, 1960, Herbert Hill, one of my mentors and department chair, wondered why I was not applying to graduate school. He had a friend at Michigan who told him that the Orla B. Taylor fellowship (\$1800 plus tuition) was still available. At the eleventh hour, I applied and started on my path as an historian.

My senior thesis was on the fall of France in 1940 with John Gazley.

When he invited us over for martinis at his lovely rustic home, full of books, and a roaring fireplace, I decided I wanted to live like him at a place like Dartmouth. That was not to be. Gazley, who had published his dissertation on American opinion of German unification, worked on Arthur Young, the British observer of France on the eve of French Revolution, for the rest of his career and published a fine biography after he retired.² Despite my interest in European history, I didn't like slogging through French sources, among other things, and selected American diplomatic history as my graduate field. This flirtation with French history did help in 1973, when I participated at a conference at the Italian Foreign Ministry in Rome. When the eminent French scholar Jean-Baptiste Duroselle rose to speak to an audience of one hundred or so, everyone, except me, removed their headphones. When I noticed the translator in the booth above was working only for me, I took off my earphones and nodded to him to stop, relying on my rusty Dartmouth French.

During that transition summer while working as a bartender, I helped Herb Hill with his quixotic Democratic senatorial campaign against the incumbent, Styles Bridges. Quixotic because New Hampshire then was as red a state as one could find. I did write his defense speech for him from briefing books provided by the DNC. The centerpiece was Eisenhower's Missile Gap. After JFK was safely elected, I discovered I had participated in a fraud when Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara admitted that the U.S. was way ahead of the USSR in missiles.

In the fall of 1960, I began studying at the University of Michigan with Alexander DeConde, a true gentleman and an exemplary scholar. But DeConde left for Santa Barbara the next year, taking with him his most senior mentee, Marvin Zahniser, whose path I would cross again in a few years. Before Michigan was able to hire Bradford Perkins away from

² John Gerow Gazley, *American Opinion of the Unification of Germany, 1848-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1926); Gazley, *The Life of Arthur Young, 1741-1820* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1973).

UCLA in 1962, I had no chair but enjoyed working with two young fill-ins, Wisconsin Schoolers Tom McCormick and Carl Parrini. I took classes with many memorable professors including Sidney Fine (with whom one of our sons earned an A twenty years later), Andrei Lobanov-Rostovsky (of the royal czarist family), Gerald Brown, Inis Claude, and Gerhard Weinberg.

Gerhard was among my favorites and I wanted to take an ancillary field with him. But other professors provided reading lists. Gerhard told me to go the Grad Library stacks and beginning reading from D or European history. He did compel his students to learn how to draw freehand the changing map of Europe during several periods of modern history. When I first began teaching American history, I looked for any reason to draw the map of Europe on the blackboard, my back turned to the class, then awaited their applause as I pivoted to face them, mission accomplished.

I enjoyed the sections I taught in the intro course to American history. On one occasion, I did a riff on Father Charles Coughlin. I remember being approached somewhat menacingly after class by the very large Bill Freehan, a star Michigan football and baseball player and later an All Star with the Tigers, who was disturbed that I was so critical of his gentle parish priest in Royal Oak. He did not know that the Church had finally silenced Coughlin in 1942 and that he had refrained from politics until he retired in 1966 when he then explained he had always been correct, Stalin was a greater enemy than Hitler. And now I live in Royal Oak, five blocks from the Shrine of the Little Flower. But that's not all. In the 1970's a retired podiatrist came to study for a Ph.D. at Wayne. He was Father Coughlin's podiatrist during WWII-- and he was Jewish and a member of the Communist Party. His Hippocratic Oath did not permit him to snip off the priest's toes. I again encountered Freehan, who was a good student, when I was a grader in John Bowditch's French history course, one of my fields. Not only did I grade the exams but I graded the book reviews, many of which discussed works that I had not read!

After the original Taylor Fellowship and two years as a teaching assistant, and with two children, I needed better paying work. J. David Singer, a political scientist, was looking for an historian for his Correlates of War Project, soon to become the preeminent project in the burgeoning field of quantitative international politics. I signed on to provide data on wars, alliances, diplomatic representation, and a variety of other variables that might correlate with war since 1815. This meant setting up realistic definitions for the collection of data on battle deaths, system membership, political systems, and military power.

Realistic was the key word here because Dave and his political science assistants often wanted to do things with the data that did not reflect historical reality—as I saw it. For two years, I entered data on code sheets that were punched on cards and run through the primitive computers of the day. I was a co-investigator of sorts from 1965 to roughly 1979, when my duties as a department chair precluded coming to Ann Arbor from Detroit to work with the team. Along the way, we published articles on diplomatic status and alliances and wars culminating in *The Wages of War* (1972). Dave was very generous with his assistants and co-workers in urging joint authorship. When, on occasion, the junior author did most of the work, Singer and Small became Small and Singer, as was the case with *Resort to Arms* (1980).³ I learned about quantitative international politics working on the project but did not use many numbers in my own research, although I did spend an unusual amount of space in books and articles on methodology.⁴ However, I was concerned about how the need for periodic grant renewals affected the research direction. On the other hand, unlike most of us, I had the valuable experience of working with co-authors and co-investigators.

³ J. David Singer and Melvin Small, *The Wages of War* (New York: Wiley, 1972); Melvin Small and J. David Singer, *Resort to Arms* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980).

⁴ See, for example, Small, "The Quantification of Diplomatic History," in Paul Gordon Lauren, ed., *Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory, and Policy* (New York: The Free Press, 1979): 69-78; Small, "When Did the Cold War Begin: A Test of an Alternate Indicator of Public Opinion," *Historical Methods Newsletter* VII (March 1975): 455-478; and Small, "Motion Pictures and the Study of Attitudes: Some Problems for Historians," *Film and History* II (1972): 1-5.

Brad Perkins became my chair in 1962. He was a model chair, good-natured, helpful, and wise. And considering that I later spent several decades as a restaurant reviewer for a Detroit weekly, I was thrilled to learn that his gracious wife, Nancy, was one of the editors of a family legacy, *The Fannie Farmer Cookbook*.

After the dreaded prelims, I began working under his guidance on what came to be titled “The American Image of Germany, 1906-1914,” a subject comparable to John Gazley’s thesis, a coincidence I only realized as I was compiling this article...or was it a coincidence? I contended that by examining books, magazines, and popular culture, as well as the minor diplomacy of the period, I could determine what Americans thought of Germany on the eve of the war. I discovered that contrary to what others had written, Americans had a mixed image of Germany, which, of course, would be far more positive than the images they held in 1917. I was proud of the hefty tome that I completed in the spring of 1965. However, to my great disappointment, I was unable to publish it despite help from Brad and later Forrest Macdonald, a colleague at Wayne State. This failure would have meant no tenure today but fortunately not then.

I didn’t know that when I began my job search in 1963. This was a time when jobs were not listed anywhere. Openings were often rumors spread behind potted palms at the AHA hotel. It was all word of mouth that depended on your professors’ connections.

I had an interview at Dartmouth, my idyllic dream job, in 1964, but the department decided to fill the open slot with Jere Daniell, a colonial historian. I visited the University of Minnesota, where after my job talk, a faculty member told me I was splitting infinitives. At the time, I had not heard of an infinitive. Kinley Brauer got that position. I did not visit the University of Washington for an interview. By mistake, they sent me my recommendation packet where I was amused to find that several Michigan professors had recommended Sara as well as a future charming faculty wife.

In the fall of 1964, I had an interview at Ohio State to replace the retiring Foster Rhea Dulles. Going in, my supporters told me I was in good shape. At lunch I was seated next to the esteemed Professor Dulles, who, in inquiring about my research, asked if I had examined the Ray Stannard Baker papers. When I said no, the whole table appeared to be astonished. I did not say anything more but I wondered why I should have looked at the papers of Woodrow Wilson’s biographer. Flying home on election day, I realized that Dulles had meant Newton Baker, the Secretary of War, whose papers I had examined. OSU hired DeConde’s student, Marvin Zahnhiser, who went on to fashion a distinguished career in Columbus.

In 1965, my two best job offers were the University of Vermont, close to my rustic Dartmouth ideal, and Wayne State. Although Vermont raised its offer several times finally to \$7,200, I chose Wayne with its magnanimous \$7500. About twenty years later, I met Mark Stoler at a convention and asked him how Burlington had been. He replied “mellow.” Detroit from 1965 to 1985 was far from mellow. At the time, Wayne was growing to 40,000 students while the department would soon have slots for forty historians, one of whom was a woman.

In the mid-sixties, the department hired a bunch of newly minted Ph.D.’s including Chris Johnson, Sam Scott, Lynn Parsons, and Athan Theoharis. Many were about the same age, most were married with two children, and were liberals concerned about tenure and the war and civil rights, not necessarily in that order. Although one could be awarded tenure at Wayne in a few years with a few published articles, the department was an autocracy that operated without transparent standards for promotion, tenure, and salaries. Scholars worthy of tenure were cast out, including Athan Theoharis, soon to be the country’s leading historian of the FBI, who was not kept on despite publishing two monographs in his last year in Detroit.⁵ The university, Detroit, and the nation were in ferment and the young radicals in the department were talking about a union and making public names for themselves in the city’s and state’s antiwar movement.

⁵ Athan G. Theoharis, *The Yalta Myths* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1970); *Seeds of Repression: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of McCarthyism* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1971).

I was a participant-observer much of the time. My wife was the activist winning an election for precinct delegate as a supporter of Gene McCarthy and attending innumerable meetings and protests. I was a skeptic who was not certain her activism was getting anywhere. That skepticism would later influence my decision to study the antiwar movement. In April 1968, on a day when she had a cold, I went in her stead to a memorial for Martin Luther King, JR., where, uncharacteristically, I was arrested, along with three other colleagues, for standing in a group outside a church thus violating Governor George Romney's order prohibiting such groups from gathering while he "gathered" in Atlanta for the funeral.

When I became the first democratically selected chair in 1979, I discovered in the department files that the dean wanted to fire us but was dissuaded by our chair. Those same files revealed that when I was out of the country for two years from 1972 to 1974, that same chair was recommending me, an associate professor with tenure, for jobs I had not applied for and did not know about. The files also revealed that several senior members of the department, all Democrats, were using anti-union data gathered from our unique Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs to defeat the union movement. They failed and Wayne State voted in 1973 to join an American Association of University Professors (AAUP) union, now the AAUP-AFT (American Federation of Teachers). Another attempt to foil the young radicals was to go on a hiring spree of distinguished older historians like Forrest McDonald, Grady McWhiney, S. William Halperin and Ray Ginger among others to create a conservative majority in terms of department politics. Despite this turn, I was able to convince my elders to introduce, perhaps prematurely, a course on the U.S. since 1945 and, in 1974, a course on the ongoing Vietnam War, which for a while, drew 200 students. What I lost in historical perspective I gained in having lived through the periods in question as a sort of eyewitness to history.

In 1969, I was fortunate to win an American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) fellowship to the Center for Advanced Research in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. The youngest member of that class, I devoted my year to reading about social science, opinion, and politics, a subject that would consume me for much of my career. It was a turbulent year on Stanford's campus. Indeed, I was called into the director's office to be reprimanded for putting announcements of demonstrations in other colleagues' mailboxes, including one featuring Joan Baez. Forty-seven years later, teary-eyed, I saw her sing again to a protesting crowd at a woman's march against President Donald Trump in San Mateo.

On 24 April 1970, the Center was firebombed. To this day, no one knows who did it although the perpetrators may have thought our think tank was the Stanford Research Institute, which did engage in classified studies. Our offices were arranged in a connected half circle, with the fires beginning at each end. Mine, in the middle, was untouched but the work of India's most prominent sociologist was burned. President Nixon publicly offered M.S. Srinivas support to find a way to reconstruct his burned material. When Nixon was walking through the Pentagon on May 1, a day after the Cambodian invasion, he talked of "campus bums" who were burning down universities. When those "bums" became even more enraged because of his comments, he claimed he was referring to the Srinivas affair at the Center the previous week. I didn't know at the time that I would have a long-term scholarly relationship with Nixon. As for Nixon connections, I also did not know that the Robert Odle, who had been in my class in 1966, would be the first person to testify to the Senate Watergate committee in 1973.

One of my colleagues at the Center was Howard Becker, a hip, piano-playing sociologist from Northwestern whose scholarly specialty then was the usage of marijuana. Howie urged me to jettison my gabardine pants for jeans. I had not worn 'dungarees' for twenty years. When I returned from the Left Coast wearing a beard, jeans, and sneakers, an older, somewhat eccentric, colleague said to me as I was walking down the hall, "Commander, this is not a gymnasium."

In 1972, I was offered an opportunity to teach at Aarhus University in Denmark's second city. For our family, it was a pleasant respite from the turbulence of the period. From Denmark, like many innocents abroad, I developed a better perspective on the United States. We traveled throughout Europe from the USSR to Spain and here is where our sons left some interesting if peculiar evidence for historians. In Vienna, in 1974, at Sigmund Freud's home, I happen to glance at the guest book. Apparently Willie Mays and the late Roberto Clemente had just visited Dr. Freud. We then discovered that over the previous two years, Mark and Mike had written the players' names in every guestbook in the many museums and churches we visited.

At Aarhus I could teach whatever I wanted in English although by the end the second year I was grading exams written in Danish, a language much easier to read than to speak. One class dealt with the concept of national security and U.S. entry into war. That class became the foundation for *Was War Necessary* (1980), a peacenik sort of book that led one reviewer in my college alumni magazine to ask whether the book was necessary.⁶

Denmark in 1974 was a sane and safe Social Democratic state where professors enjoyed good salaries, light course loads, and respect from the citizens. Although I had tenure there, we were concerned about our sons, who preferred baseball to soccer and, more importantly, what it meant to be an expatriate in that fairy-tale land. Whenever I mentioned Victor Borge, America's most famous Dane, to my colleagues and neighbors, they all responded, '*Han er ikke Danske. Han er Jode.*' He isn't Danish, he is Jewish. That was their designation for a distinguished "Danish" family that had been in the country for several generations. Had we stayed, we would always have been Americans.

But we had wonderful experiences, hosting a dinner at our house for Jens Otto Krag, the most famous living former prime minister, who was going to talk to my class about the 1973 Yom Kippur War. What would we say to him at dinner? He broke the ice by asking whether we had seen "The Last Tango in Paris," a not surprising question since his wife Helle Virkner was Denmark's most famous actress. (We had seen the X-rated film in Paris!) We also made a lifelong friend of Peter Hansen who went on to become a senior UN official who was able to wangle an interview for me with Vietnam's ambassador to the United Nations in 1983. As I knocked repeatedly on the door of an ordinary East Side apartment that bore no identification plaque, I feared I was in the wrong place since I thought I heard "General Hospital" blaring on a television set. When I was finally admitted to the living room of the 'embassy,' I immediately noticed a television set on the far wall over which hung a portrait of Ho Chi Minh.

Upon returning from Denmark, after an unfinished project on Americans and the USSR during WWII⁷, I turned to the work that would engage me for the rest of my career, the Vietnam War, presidents, and opinion and politics. It was not easy being department chair from 1979 to 1986 during a period of severe cutbacks for our university, going to work every day in a coat and tie from 9 to 5 to deal with the other suits as I tried to manage a small failing business. We made only two tenure-track hires during that period but John Bukowczyk and Sandra Van Burkleo were keepers.

Over the next two decades I published *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (1988), the co-edited *Give Peace A Chance* (1992) a memorial to the late Chuck DeBenedetti, a good friend and the dean of movement historians, *Covering Dissent* (1994), *Democracy and Diplomacy* (1995), *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (1999), *Antiwarriors* (2002), and *At the Water's Edge* (2005).⁸

Of these books, I was especially proud of the Nixon volume in the Kansas series. For me, Nixon was the Trump of the seventies, although that comment is too kind to Trump. In 1974, I hoped to fly to Atlanta to stand outside the federal prison in order to make faces at him through the barbed wire. Then Gerald Ford pardoned him. Thus it was that I took

⁶ Small, *Was War Necessary: National Security and US Entry into War* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980).

⁷ Small, "Buffoons and Bravehearts: Hollywood Portrays the Russians," *California Historical Quarterly* LII (Winter 1973): 326-337.

⁸ Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988); *Give Peace a Chance* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), edited with William D. Hoover; Small, *Covering Dissent* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Small, *Democracy and Diplomacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996); Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Small, *Antiwarriors* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2002); and Small, *At the Water's Edge* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2005).

pride in the fact that twenty-five years later, several reviewers felt I had been too harsh with him, others thought I was too easy, while most admired my balance and fairness.

In an otherwise favorable review of *At the Water's Edge* in 2006, Marilyn Young suggested that I was writing a “multi-volume account” of the Vietnam War.⁹ I took a hint. I retired in 2010 at the age of 71 and quit cold turkey, except for the editing of *A Companion to Richard Nixon* (2011), published thirty-nine years after my last Wiley book.¹⁰ When I had dinner with Marilyn in Washington at a Vietnam conference several years before her death, she was surprised that I took her comment to mean that it was time to turn off the spigot. But it was time.

I wish I had more space here to talk about my colleagues, academic friends, and students and the conference, conventions, and tennis courts where we met over a fifty-year period to consider the American experience. It has been a good run, which, among other things, has allowed me to write about two of my heroes, one from childhood Ray Goulding of Bob and Ray, and one from adulthood, wine maven Alexis Lichine.¹¹ Alas, I never got the call for Charlie Keller.

Melvin Small, the author or editor of fifteen books, taught at Wayne State from 1965 to 2010. He won the university's award for excellence in teaching in 1979 and was president of the Council on Peace Research in History (Peace History Society) from 1991 to 1993. Along with Jeffrey A. Bader, prominent diplomat and Asian scholar, for whom he babysat, he was elected to the Hewlett-Woodmere High School Alumni Hall of Fame.

⁹ *The Historian*, LXVII (Winter 2006): 844-845.

¹⁰ *A Companion to Richard M. Nixon* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

¹¹ *The Scribner Encyclopedia of American Lives* (New York: Scribners, 1998), 343-345, 535-537).