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What a Long, Strange Trip Its Been[1]

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I entered Northwestern in the fall of 1969 certain that I would become a lawyer. I was a dedicated debater in high school. Northwestern had an excellent debate program, and many of its majors in Public Address & Group Communication had gone on to top law schools.

One year later, I faced a difficult time finding classes. Sophomores registered last, and nearly everything I wanted had no seats left. After exhausting all possibilities, I left registration one course short. Chance intervened. I had a job as a dishwasher in Frances Willard Hall (a plum position: at the time it was an all-girls dormitory). Another dishwasher, a senior, wanted to drop one of his courses because it was at 8AM and its instructor was reputed to be a tough grader. I bought the computer punch ticket (the course seat) from him for $10—the best Hamilton I ever spent. The instructor was Richard W. Leopold and the course American Diplomatic History.

I got off to a rocky start, as Professor Leopold rather gruffly made clear that his course was not for lowly, unprepared sophomores. He was not overly pleased with my goatee and curls, either. But I loved the course, which he ran as a large, discussion-only seminar. By the end of my junior year I had taken every one of his offerings and admitted to him that I would have liked to have taken more as a senior. He replied, "Why not?" and invited me to take reading courses with him.

Senior year is applications time. I put in for law schools, but decided to try for some graduate programs in history, since I had ended up taking more history than public address courses by then. It was a choice between head and heart. I had taken on a good amount of student debt (for the times). I had no hope of help from my divorced mother and a brother and sister with college aspirations of their own. I had spoken with lawyers and knew that they made good money, albeit at the cost of a demanding career path. Yet the professors I knew loved their work and I was sure I would, too.

The problem with applying to doctoral programs turned out to be twofold. You can't just gush about your enchantment with history. You have to present yourself as a serious scholar-to-be. That means saying something intelligent about the particular aspect of the past that you want to study, a very preliminary thesis prospectus or at least a reasonably well focused sub-field. At the time, I thought this de facto requirement perverse. Law schools don't demand instant specialization, quite the opposite. I still think it perverse, but few of my colleagues seem to agree.

[1] Apologies to Jerome J. Garcia, Philip Lesh, Robert H. Weir, and Robert C. Christie Hunter.

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I had only the vaguest idea of a possible field of specialization. To be sure, it would be in American foreign relations, but when and where? I had just finished reading *The Diplomats: 1919-1939*,[2] edited by Gordon Craig and Felix Gilbert, so trotted out a proposal to work on aspects of American-West European relations in the 1930's, maybe with an emphasis on economic and financial issues. Professor Leopold was unimpressed. The emerging field was American-East Asian relations. Prospects for research support—and eventual positions—were much better there, and probably much better for a topic in the Cold War era than the thirties. He assigned me Akira Iriye's *After Imperialism* and *Across the Pacific*[3] in hopes I'd find inspiration.

I did find it. I came across a reference to James Crowley's *Japan's Quest for Autonomy*[4] and started reading it around the same time that I took Conrad Totman's survey of Japanese history. Great material! But, for some reason, Crowley's work ran only to 1938. Surely there was more to be said about the next three years. As it turned out, indeed there was. A battery of Japan's best scholars had produced a mammoth, multi-volume study: *Taiheiyo senso e no michi* [The Road to the Pacific War.][5]

I was sure I had found my specialization, but it came with a very daunting obstacle: the Japanese language. I had no training in it at all and no prospects of getting any as an undergraduate. Northwestern began its program in 1975, two years after I graduated. So I would have to swear in my application that I would learn Japanese in addition to my pre-dissertation program requirements. Ulp! And Double-Ulp!: Languages did not come easily to me. My high school French grades had swiftly replaced my grammar school penmanship marks as by far the worst on my record. If I had trouble picking up French, how would I do with Japanese?

Given these circumstances, it was a wonder that any doctoral program in history accepted me, but two did, doubtless the result of a very considerable expenditure of academic capital on Professor Leopold's part. I could go to the University of Chicago and work under Professor Akira Iriye, or Harvard under Professor Ernest May. Mentor Leopold gently urged me to Chicago. I would be among Iriye's first swath of graduate students. He was a rising star in precisely the field I would be entering, and he already had a reputation as a terrific teacher. May was an accomplished scholar with a proven track record with his doctoral students in all aspects of the history of international relations, though not with a specialization in American-East Asian ones.

As a glance at my vita will reveal, I picked Harvard. For a young lad, first in my family to go to college, its name and reputation were hard to resist. But there was another factor at work, too. After four years in Evanston, I had had my fill of midwestern winters and wanted to decamp for the relatively balmier clime of Boston.

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[2] My copies were Gordon Craig and Felix Gilberts, eds., *The Diplomats 1919-1939: Volume One: The Twenties* (*The Diplomats 1919-1939): Volume Two: The Thirties* (New York; Atheneum, 1953).

[3] Akira Iriye, *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American-East Asian Relations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1967); Iriye, *After Imperialism: The Search for a New Order in the Far East, 1921-1931* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

[4] James B. Crowley, *Japan's Quest for Autonomy; National Security and Foreign Policy, 1930-1938* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

[5] These volumes have since been selectively translated into English as a series under the editorship of James W. Morley. They are: *Deterrent Diplomacy: Japan, Germany, and the USSR, 1935-1940* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976); *The Fateful Choice: Japan's Advance into Southeast Asia, 1939-1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); *The China Quagmire: Japan's Expansion onto the Asian Continent, 1933-1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); *Japan Erupts: The London Naval Conference and the Manchurian Incident, 1928-1932* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); *The Final Confrontation: Japan's Negotiations with the United States, 1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

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This turned out to be a terrific move, personally even more than professionally. At a first-week mixer for first-year doctoral students in history, I met my future wife, Janet, who would shortly find herself examining interwar Germany. I met Ernest May, too, soft-spoken, incisive, and inspirational, as well as a veritable cornucopia of fellow students such as Brad Lee, William Fuller, Mark Susser, William Kirby, and David Kaiser.

May gave his students broad rein, and I began my work with him completing a paper on American public opinion during the Manchurian Crisis of 1931-2. It was frankly an unimpressive beginning, but it did lead me to better appreciate the emphasis May set on the importance of domestic and bureaucratic politics in the making of a nation's foreign policy. As it turned out, this appreciation would take center place in my dissertation, but on the Japanese side of things.

I began that dissertation in the aftermath of the great Oil Crisis of 1973-1974, an environment that encouraged attention to the economic underpinnings of international relations. While my initial interest was in textile disputes between Washington, London, and Tokyo, it didn't take long for me to realize that the critical commodity in play was oil, not cotton. Tracking down Japanese concerns about oil led me to the officers of the Imperial Army and Navy and, eventually, to a dissertation much more about Japan, and much more about its military, than I had anticipated.

Rather innocently, I entered the academic job market as an historian of American foreign relations. My thesis had chapters on those relations, and I fully intended to return my focus to policy-making in Washington. Things did not turn out that way. The thesis morphed into a book entitled *Japan Prepares for Total War*.[6] Its reviewers focused on the Japanese chapters. Lucky for me that, by then, I had a tenure-track job at SUNY-Stony Brook, mainly teaching the history of American foreign relations, and my colleagues did not seem to mind the apparent disconnect between my courses and my research.

I meant to mend this disconnect with my second monograph, which was to be an examination of the establishment of a global network of American military bases during and after the Second World War. While I was tempted to write on Japan's story after Pearl Harbor, which I had mischievously planned to name *Japan Prepares for Total Peace*, I was determined to get something out to establish my standing as a student of the United States.

This was not to be, again for reasons both personal and professional. The personal was the arrival of our son. Given the costs of living on Long Island (housing near campus was far beyond our means), Janet (who had academic offers, but even two assistant professor salaries just did not cut it) had decided to try her luck in Manhattan. She began a highly successful career using her writing and analytical talents that came with her doctorate, first as a writer for a financial newsletter on Wall Street, but soon after as a market research analyst at think tanks and advertising firms. She returned to work eight weeks after Adam arrived. It was pretty clear to me that extensive travel and research on my bases project was going to be on hold for quite a while. (It later transpired that the largest grant application I ever wrote turned out to be one enabling Adam's day care facility to move from the crowded basement of a church to a custom-built conversion of a warehouse, a center that still operates today.)

Three professional factors intervened as well. One was a phone call from Anthony Cheung, a human stick of dynamite, one of Akira Iriye's students who had founded his own publishing company and was now determined to start *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*. He needed an inaugural editor and had chosen me. Anthony had mastered the Lyndon Johnson by-the-lapels technique, but I was interested anyway, and editing, while demanding, did not require travel. Anthony even threw in a complimentary fax machine to ease things along.

A second was a letter from John Gooch, then at Leeds and then himself editing a series of books on "International Relations and the Great Powers." He wanted an interpretive survey of Japanese foreign relations since the Meiji Restoration. Well, no

[6] Michael A. Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

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travel involved there either. I could write with Adam on my lap. The result was *Japan and the World Since 1868*[7] six years later.

The disconnect between my writing and my teaching was growing wider, but my colleagues at Stony Brook had a fix: Why not offer courses in modern Japanese history in addition to your U.S. offerings? It was hard to say "no" even after getting tenure. The 1980s and early 1990s gave extraordinary attention to the Japanese success story. "The Cold War is over; Japan won," as presidential hopeful Paul Tsongas proclaimed. Undergraduates streamed into Japanese language courses—anything Japanese—even history! I couldn't knock first year chemistry out of the largest lecture hall on campus, but I came close.

Which turned out to be the third factor. The more I taught undergraduates, the more I liked helping them learn. One of the first things I had learned myself was to never treat lectures as monologues. I encouraged and later in my career demanded that students ask questions, stop me in mid-sentence. I inserted "coachable moments" into those lectures, where I'd stop myself and ask them questions. My enrollments were large, gratifying itself, but I also found really excellent students who would take every course I offered.

It was a pretty heady feeling, but there was no storybook ending here. Every instructor has been asked to write letters of recommendation. I was no different. Nor did my students deviate much from expected patterns. Practically every one of my letters were for law or business schools or postgraduate programs from international relations to social work. But once, in my forty years of teaching, I had that Leopold moment. Splendid course work, a magnificent senior thesis, already several years of Mandarin, and great ideas for doctoral work on Sino-American relations. He got nowhere after two years of applications. Discreet inquiries produced a common denominator: insufficient indication that students from four-year publics like Stony Brook could succeed. He went to law school in the end, becoming a highly successful attorney in New York.

This disappointment compelled me to reassess my own teaching priorities. It had been gratifying to work with my splendid students, but what of the others? The point was brought home in a brief conversation arising from a chance meeting with one who had been in my course as part of Stony Brook's Federated Learning Communities program, one which bundled a set of courses for about forty students and arranged a special, for-credit seminar for them to discuss linkages among those courses. The program was particularly distinguished, in my eyes at any rate, because it did not go out of its way to select distinguished students. The student I had met was literally mediocre, earning a "C" in my course for the semester. But he confided to me that he rarely missed any of his classes that term and then, quite wistfully, admitted that if he had encountered the program earlier he might have decided to continue to pursue his degree. Perhaps not a loss to the profession, as my senior honors student surely was, but a loss nevertheless.

As I pondered how to catch such students earlier, and develop in them a love of learning, I was asked by my colleagues to take on a new course for me, on the history of the Second World War. Richard Kuisel, who had taught it, was leaving Stony Brook. He had enjoyed large enrollments; hopefully, I would, too. During the first semester I taught it, I decided to try an experiment: a zero-credit, strictly voluntary course that would meet once a week for an hour for about six weeks, with about a dozen students drawn from the lecture course. The students would be assigned to national teams and would use a commercial game, with several modifications I added, to simulate the origins of the war from 1936 to 1939. I was worried that I would not get enough volunteers to make the simulation work. My real problem turned out to be dealing with the nearly forty students who did sign up. Most were consigned to observer status. To my amazement, they were regular attendees too. The zero-credit course had zero absentees.

My worries vanquished, the next time I offered my lecture course I added a one-credit seminar, to meet all semester. Its thirty spots filled at once. As a for-credit course, it was subject to formal student evaluations, which were ebullient. Armed

[7] Barnhart, *Japan and the World since 1868* (New York: Edward Arnold, 1995).

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with these, I went to chair and dean and proposed a three-credit seminar, meeting immediately after my lecture course on the war, which would simulate *Great Power Rivalries* from 1936 to 1947. I offered this tandem for over twenty five years until retiring this semester.

My colleagues marveled at the students' enthusiasm, which often spilled into the hallways of the department and lasted long after the class period ended. But what was marvelous to me was the performance of those not-so-splendid students. They attended every class. They thrived. Students who uttered not a word in regular class discussions proved themselves capable of spirited orations in the simulation seminar. While not all student journals were works of art, quite a few were. My personal favorites include one student-Stalin's daily letters to his fictional mistress and a student representing Chinese Nationalist Wang Jingwei, who penned a postcard after every class from his latest place of exile.

My happy experience with *Rivalries* led me to discover other instructors, such as those affiliated with the "Reacting to the Past" project based at Barnard, who have used their own and others' simulations to teach. It also led to my current book project, tentatively titled *Can You Beat Churchill?,* that hopes to show how any teacher can use, modify, or design history simulations for their own classes.

My career trajectory has not been typical. I did not write a research monograph in my primary teaching field. That teaching field bounced around over the years, never leaving the history of American foreign relations entirely, but with frequent forays fairly far afield. I never became an established authority on a given sub-field, topic, or time period. Still, to draw from a Norman Rockwell painting showing two children eating corn-on-the-cob, I like to think I'm the one with kernel bits and butter all over his face, along with a very wide smile.

Michael A. Barnhart is Distinguished Teaching Professor in the Department of History, Stony Brook University. He is founding editor of *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, is currently completing a short book on how to use historical simulations in the classroom, and hopes to finish a long-promised study to his colleagues on the history of American foreign relations from Jamestown to Trump.

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