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Roads Less Traveled

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I thought of myself as calm. Competing for a grant that paid for three years of graduate study at any university in the nation seemed straightforward, even though \$100,000 was at stake and I had at most \$500 in savings. The interview should have been easy, plus I was hard to rattle.

My nerves did not forewarn me that they were not in agreement.

On the flight to San Francisco in 1983 I reviewed what the panel might ask. I needed to explain why I wished to earn a Ph.D. in history even though my major and minors had been in literature, philosophy, and political science, and I had taken only three electives in history. The professor who taught those three classes was the most interesting one I had ever had, and he convinced me to switch disciplines for graduate school. Everything had been in preparation for the study of U.S. foreign relations, a bright and promising endeavor where I could apply all my tools.

My instinctive confidence sprang from difficult but useful experience. I grew up as the middle child in a San Diego construction family of nine (natural training for a diplomat!), but paternal abuse forced me to leave home at the age of fourteen. My first job, which I got by lying about my age, was at Taco Bell. Then I worked for a drug-abuse education organization for teens. Then I became publications coordinator for a women's center, where I started a national feminist newspaper, a program to prevent teenage pregnancy, and an apprenticeship for young journalists—one of whom is now managing editor for the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. By the time of my 1983 interview, I had been self-sufficient a long time and had a decade of experience as an organizer for youth and women's rights. I had petitioned grantors before, including the Rockefeller, Ford, and Rosenberg Foundations. I had appeared on the *Today Show*¹ and been featured by the *New York Times*. An interview for a college scholarship? Snap.

Pride goeth before a fall.

My interview for a Mellon Fellowship in the Humanities took place in an obscure downtown high rise. It started well, but halfway through the interview, the man in the middle of the troika asked with an air of pity and regret, "So why do you want to go into a dying field?"

¹ <http://elizabethcobbs.com/time-capsule>

I opened my mouth. To my surprise, only a hoarse croak came out. I cleared my throat and coughed. I started again, but all I got was a raspy whisper. For the first time in my life, my voice had vanished. I asked for a glass of water, stalling for time, and thinking rapidly.

It was a dying field? Professor Armin Rappaport, a founder of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAHR) and first editor of Diplomatic History, hadn't mentioned anything. Why was the field dying? Had I made the wrong career choice? If I had taken other history courses I might have known that not all scholars saw the same rosy glow around the subject. Why had Professor Rappaport not alerted me?

I swallowed and took another sip of water. I looked again at the middle interviewer, and then at the two grey haired professors who flanked him. They wore the expression of bystanders at Marley's funeral. And Marley was dead. There was no doubt whatever about that.

The determination to forge ahead—and the passion for truth and justice—that had driven me since my truncated childhood welled up. I needed that scholarship. More importantly, there was only one conceivable answer.

“That's exactly why I want to study diplomatic history,” I said in a husky but firm voice. “Because it is too important to let die.”

My academic career began then. Few things were more obvious to me than the necessity of Americans understanding their role and responsibilities in the world. If the field of diplomatic history had fallen into trouble, there was no more vital mission than contributing to its revival. The interviewer had done me a favor. My answer to his question, off the cuff and in a pinch, was an exact representation of how I truly felt. The ambition seems grandiose now, but I was twenty-seven.

When I arrived at Stanford that fall to study with David Kennedy (the best advisor any human could have and later a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for *Freedom from Fear*), I learned that social history was the profession's darling.² When most Americanists bothered to think of diplomatic history, they dismissed it as the elitist study of what one white, male, English-speaking government clerk inside the beltway 'said to another.' I also found a dearth of scholarship on the Third World, as most diplomatic historians then focused on the great power conflicts of the Northern Hemisphere, except when those rivalries sparked military interventions elsewhere, carried out with the collaboration of 'local puppets.'

That knowledge became my compass: point due south until I crossed the equator, pack a foreign language, and scout for research topics focused on nongovernmental actors. Keep a weather eye for puppets. Find stories that haven't been told.

In Brazil I discovered the tale of two Americans who had worked with local scientists, farmers, bankers, and industrialists who were already bending every effort to advance economic development. The dissertation that became my first book, *The Rich Neighbor Policy*, explored the outcomes of binational cooperation spearheaded by Nelson Rockefeller and Henry Kaiser with Brazilian associates.³ A liaison to Latin America under Franklin Roosevelt and later vice-president of the United States under Gerald Ford, Rockefeller had started the International Basic Economy Corporation in 1947 to model equitable partnerships between local and foreign entrepreneurs. A self-made industrialist who founded the nonprofit Kaiser Permanente that still provides low-cost health care for workers, Henry Kaiser sought to implant an automobile industry in 1952 with majority local ownership. His son Edgar and a group of Brazilians started the nation's first car company, Willys-Overland do Brasil, rolling out jeeps for the country's rugged terrain.

² David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford, 2001).

³ Elizabeth Cobbs, *The Rich Neighbor Policy: Rockefeller and Kaiser in Brazil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

I ploughed through corporate records, personal letters, foundation archives, and government collections in Rio de Janeiro, New York, Berkeley, and Washington. I conducted oral histories in Portuguese and English. I studied microloans for the poor and capital investment funds for the rich. I learned about the effect of the Green Revolution on hybrid corn and the color of my eggs at breakfast. I received the gift of a fountain pen mounted on a small square of green marble adorned with a bronze jeep, swag for the nation's first car dealers and now swag on my desk. The book won the Stuart Bernath Prize from SHAFR, which would have pleased Armin Rappaport. More surprising was the Allan Nevins Prize, for which my dissertation competed against other fields of American history.

Then, on another plane flight for a first job interview, it occurred to me that the faculty would ask about plans for a next project. Thinking through possibilities, I ginned one up in my head. I did not get the position, but the idea stuck. I decided to point my compass southeast and follow the trail of nongovernmental actors of humbler means. From my previous career I knew that efforts to change the world often begin at the bottom rather than the top, and with volunteers.

All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s looked at First and Second World volunteers to Third World countries.⁴ This time I widened the scope to a multinational perspective. It turned out the U.S. Peace Corps (founded in 1961) was the third such organization of its type, preceded by Australian Volunteers International (1951) and British Voluntary Service (1958) and followed by dozens more around the world. Canadian volunteers started the same month as those from the United States. Both landed in Ghana, where they found a welcome mat laid by President Kwame Nkrumah, instigator of the Organization of African Unity and no one's puppet. This research took me not only to Ghana, but also Canada, England, France, and The Hague. There I discovered the ways in which decolonization, the Cold War, and "the problem of the color line" sparked a spontaneous and global youth movement.

Following this I wrote two more monographs. *American Umpire* was a reconceptualization of U.S. foreign policy from President George Washington to Barack Obama that explored the connection between America's federal structure and its later propensity for international "umpiring."⁵ It sprang from my instinct, based on traveling and living in foreign countries, that the historical profession had, with dangerous consequences, glommed onto "empire" as a handy but fundamentally wrong paradigm for the United States' relationship with the world. My husband James Shelley, a film director and producer, helped me turn the book into a PBS documentary with veteran television anchor Jim Lehrer in 2016.⁶ The film did well, but to my disappointment I found that most historians had little interest in rethinking assumptions that dated to the Cold War revisionism of William Appleman Williams. As Thomas Bender argued, the U.S. "had long been understood as some kind of empire" and always would be.⁷ I still cross my fingers that a new understanding may eventually catch on.

For my next monograph, I found an untold tale to honor the centennial of America's entry into the First World War. *The Hello Girls: America's First Women Soldiers* excavated the forgotten experience of uniformed Signal Corps operators in France, while simultaneously revealing the foreign policy considerations behind President Woodrow Wilson's support for women's suffrage.⁸ The book took me past my first intellectual home, namely feminism, at which it was a delight to wave.

⁴ Cobbs Hoffman, *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998, 2000).

⁵ Cobbs Hoffman, *American Umpire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁶ "American Umpire," Shell Studios and WETA-Washington (2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyUQcnkAlSM>.

⁷ Thomas Bender, "America Not An Empire? Really?," *Books and Ideas*, 18 July 2013: <https://booksandideas.net/America-Not-An-Empire-Really.html>.

⁸ Cobbs, *The Hello Girls: America's First Women Soldiers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

Throughout my career I maintained an interest in literature, my undergraduate major. It inspired forays into commercial publishing with three historical novels: the first on Charles Francis Adams (*Broken Promises*), the second on Alexander Hamilton and Elizabeth Schuyler (*The Hamilton Affair*), and the third on Harriet Tubman (*The Tubman Command*).⁹ My goal was to bring history to the sort of people I grew up with, who had rarely, if ever, darkened the doorway of a college library. It tickled me to find my novels in Target stores and airports. (Beach reading!) I also co-edited four iterations of *Major Problems in American History*, a lower division reader. Oddly enough, my newest project is headed towards social history, which feels more interesting now that that field is less dominant and ours quite vibrant.

In the decades since I began it has become common rather than unusual for historians to mine foreign-language archives, highlight nongovernmental actors, and explore the global exchange of goods, technologies, and norms—not just diplomats. I especially appreciate scholarship that takes the agency and autonomy of other countries and peoples as seriously as I have tried to. Among the many works from which I've drawn inspiration are, in order of publication date, Kyle Longley's *The Sparrow and the Hawk*, Geir Lundestad's *Empire by Integration*, Daniel Rogers's *Atlantic Crossings*, Mark Atwood Lawrence's *Assuming the Burden*, Erez Manela's *The Wilsonian Moment*, Pekka Hämäläinen's *Comanche Empire*, Lien-Hang Nguyen's *Hanoi's War*, Dan Doyle's *The Cause of All Nations*, and Susan Pederson's *The Guardians*.¹⁰

I wish Armin Rappaport had been around to discuss these innovative books with me. He made me laugh. He told me I had a talent. He steered me away from political science and towards the study of history (so much more *real*, he said), and provided the recommendations that opened the door to Stanford and the bursary of the Mellon Fellowship. And then he died of a brain tumor my first month of graduate school. I said good-bye to him in a quiet hospital room in San Francisco, not far from where I had interviewed earlier that year.

I owe so much to Armin Rappaport, who wrote and edited nine books on U.S foreign relations.¹¹ I will always be grateful for his help. But why hadn't he spared me some embarrassment and told me the field was dying? Was it because he couldn't face the prospect that his own career might have been wasted? Or was it because he didn't want to discourage me? If the latter, he need not have worried.

In life there are few things better than a good challenge in the service of an important need. As I approach the age Armin was when we met, I think he surely must have known that when he kindly pointed towards the unexplored path ahead.

⁹ Cobbs, *Broken Promises* (New York: Ballantine, 2011), *The Hamilton Affair* (New York: Arcade, 2016), and *The Tubman Command* (New York: Arcade, 2019).

¹⁰ Kyle Longley, *The Sparrow and the Hawk: Costa Rica and The United States During the Rise of José Figueres* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1997); Geir Lundestad, *Empire by Integration: The United States and European Integration* (New York: Oxford, 1998); Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1998); Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005); Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford, 2007); Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale, 2008); Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2012); Dan Doyle, *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the American Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); Susan Pederson, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹¹ In addition to a slew of scholarly articles, Armin Rappaport wrote several textbooks and sourcebooks on American foreign relations, one still on my shelf at Texas A&M. Rappaport's original monographs include *The British Press and Wilsonian Neutrality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1951); *The Navy League of the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962); and *Henry Stimson and Japan, 1931-1933* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

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