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Peace Is My Profession

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On June 1, 1968, I received both my BA diploma from Rice University with a major in history and my I-A draft card from the Selective Service. Unforeseeable to me then was that my career as a historian and the American war in Vietnam would be thereafter interconnected. On that beautiful spring day in Houston, Texas, I was not expecting to become a historian, and, if someone had forecast that I would eventually publish a dozen books on any subject, I would have said he or she was crazy. Like other young men in America at that time, I was keenly aware that official notice of reclassification for military induction with a half-million other Americans already in Vietnam posed some troubling possibilities. For the moment, however, I had been admitted to law school at the University of Texas and planned to begin work on a law degree in the fall.

As a small boy, I loved learning about American history. My mother's father gave me a magazine-sized picture book of presidents from Washington to Truman. There were two presidents on a page with portraits and brief biographies. The back of the book had the text of the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights. Also, because World War II had just ended, there was a final section showing the insignia for all of the ranks of all the military services. I read the book over and over, basically memorized it, and still have it.

Despite the early and life-long fascination with American history (I had virtually no exposure to world history before high school), I never contemplated being a historian as I grew up. I enjoyed every subject in school and really had no favorite. I always assumed I would go to college. My father was a petroleum geologist and was the first and only member of his immigrant family to go to college. His father came from Denmark and met his German wife in Wisconsin. It was a farm family, and my father was the baby of five children. His oldest and never-married sister was one of the few in the family with regular work during the Depression as a federal government stenographer, and she loaned him interest free the money for tuition to attend the University of Colorado. He could not find a job after graduation and began graduate school at the University of Wisconsin. Finally offered a job with an oil company in Tulsa, Oklahoma, he left Madison without a graduate degree and was thereafter an exploration geologist primarily in West Texas and Eastern New Mexico. He met my mother in Pampa, Texas. She was an intelligent and independent farm girl who had managed restaurants in the Texas Panhandle. Neither she nor any of her family ever attended college. She was a homemaker, and their only child was born in 1946. In contrast to my father's ancestry, my mother's family descended directly from Scottish and English settlers who were in America at the time of Jamestown.

Although I did not anticipate becoming a geologist like my father, I assumed when I was in high school in Midland, Texas that I would be a scientist or engineer. I felt fortunate to gain admission to highly competitive Rice University and entered its well-regarded science-engineering curriculum. Although I successfully completed the trial by ordeal known as freshman calculus, I decided one sunny spring afternoon in chemistry lab that I just could not see my life's work in a laboratory. I spent sophomore year exploring the humanities curriculum and took one course each in history, political science, English,

economics, and French. With a youthful and 1960s-style panache, I selected history to be my major without serious thought of how I might eventually make a living.

Without fully appreciating it at the time, the training I received as a budding historian in the Rice History Department was first rate. My advisor was Louis Galambos (later of Johns Hopkins and the Eisenhower Papers),¹ whose American economic history course was a boot camp on scholarly research and writing. A fully documented essay was due every two weeks, and he returned each paper immediately, covered with red ink to prepare us to improve on the next one. Only about half of us stayed in the grind to the end of the term. Charles Neu (later of Brown University) introduced me to the history of U.S. foreign relations and to the works of the leading authorities in the field, including Norman Graebner. Ira Gruber, military historian of the American Revolution, taught me the rewards of primary-source research and the satisfaction of spending an entire day crafting a single paragraph. The history faculty and those in modern languages (six semesters of French), political science, and economics to which Galambos directed me required an avalanche of reading. Almost all of this course work was in U.S. history and politics, but John Ambler's comparative government course made sure I read at least a book a week on systems outside of America. I even got an informal introduction to World War II in Europe from Dr. Kolodziej, my introduction to economics professor who, as a young Polish cavalry officer, had led a charge on horseback against German tanks in 1939.

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The reading to which Neu had directed me, including the transcripts of the public hearings on the Vietnam War that were organized by senators J. William Fulbright and John C. Stennis, had persuaded me that the war was a strategic mistake. My parents were New Deal Democrats in the liberal mold of Lyndon Johnson, including a strong Cold War outlook on the world. I was antiwar but no radical, and I attended campaign rallies for Senator Eugene McCarthy in 1968. As the war expanded in scope, I had innocently assumed the large-scale deployment of young Americans there would be over before my educational draft deferment ended. To his surprise my father had been given an occupational deferment in World War II, and although all of my uncles had served in the 'Big War,' I had not grown up with any expectation of volunteering for service through ROTC or otherwise.

During my senior year at Rice, I consulted with my history professors about career plans. I enjoyed my academic work and was doing well, but I was also very active in student government and campus life. The message I got from my faculty mentors was that I probably was not suited for long hours in the library and the tedious research realities of a history Ph.D. Almost to a person they advised me to go to law school (which may give some indication of what they thought of law school). After acceptances from the University of Texas and University of Chicago law schools, I almost succeeded in what is known as "military avoidance" of the draft. A U.S. Navy recruiter secured for me a rare opening in the Judge Advocate General (JAG) program that would have made me a reservist in law school with an obligation to be a JAG attorney after obtaining the law degree. It was not to be. Someone with political influence intervened, and the Navy detailers assigned this coveted appointment to someone else. The recruiter was livid but powerless. With monthly draft calls at their wartime peak, ROTC filling non-combat specialties, and my nearsightedness making most Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard officer billets unavailable to me, my military avoidance options narrowed.

During my first week of classes at UT Law School, I received orders to report for induction into the U.S. Army. Coming from a family tradition of when called you serve, I began basic training in October 1968. The drill sergeants urged me to go to Officer Candidate School (OCS), and that option remained available, likely in a combat branch. Ordered to advanced training at the Electronic Warfare School at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona, I decided to take my chances with remaining an enlisted man in communications-electronics—it was not the infantry—and get back to school in two years. As the controversial war continued, the army was having trouble retaining noncommissioned and junior officers. I quickly advanced to sergeant as a communications instructor and expected to serve my two years in Arizona. Given this time out of school to reflect on the future, I decided not to return to law school but rather to pursue my lifelong love of history and seek a Ph.D. I also found that I very much enjoyed teaching, even if it was in an army training center where I could order inattentive students to drop

¹ Louis P. Galambos, ed., *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, vols. 6-21 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978-2001). Alfred D. Chandler Jr. coedited volume 6, and Daun Van Ee coedited volumes 14-21.

and do pushups. I sat in the post library and prepared a flurry of graduate school applications sent to programs that were strong in diplomatic history and constitutional history, thinking those fields might bring me some insight into how I had arrived where I was in a uniform. Before the acceptance letters started coming in, however, I was in Vietnam. That change of fortune now made diplomatic and military history a more urgent interest.

I arrived in South Vietnam in January 1970 as a replacement in the 1st Signal Brigade, despite President Richard Nixon's much heralded steps to reduce U.S. forces through Vietnamization, that is, turning the fighting back over to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). I went for a brief time to a unit at Cam Ranh Bay that was tasked with preparing ARVN signal officers to take over management of high-technology electronic sites for which they were ill prepared. U.S. planners seemed not to have considered the language barriers in such instruction, but a shrewd operations sergeant realized that I could speak some French. With no training for the task, I became the interpreter upon which Vietnamization hinged in that unit, since the ARVN captain who was being trained spoke French but little English. The unit had no authorization for a linguist, however, and the brigade headquarters transferred me out with no one to fill the language void. I went to Phu Bai where I became the 1st Signal Brigade's quality assurance NCO for the five northern provinces of the RVN, with duties that included tracking the progress of Vietnamization of the highly sophisticated communication system upon which, like air mobility, all military operations had come to depend. It was clear that Washington's political goal to accomplish Vietnamization in a few months was hopeless. My most recent book, *Vietnamization*, examines this final phase in U.S. Vietnam policy and includes an autobiographical chapter on my personal observations.²

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While in Phu Bai, I accepted the offer of admission to the University of Virginia to begin a history Ph.D. I was not scheduled for discharge until October, but the army granted an early release for school and mustered me out in September, a whole ten days before classes began. It was just enough time to get home to West Texas and drive to Charlottesville, where I experienced the culture shock of going so quickly from the battlefield to a campus that, like many others, was still recovering from the aftermath of the Kent State shooting. I had selected UVA from a number of offers for a variety of reasons, and it was clearly the right choice. On the first day of classes in a seminar on Asian-American relations, I met Helen Fleischer, who had been studying at Kent State with Larry Kaplan and working as a residence hall director on May 4. For understandable reasons she left Kent with Larry's recommendation and transferred to UVA to complete her Ph.D. Soon we will have been married for 50 years and have often reflected on how two of the worst times of our lives brought us together. I returned to Vietnam for the first time in 2010 with Helen. We went to Phu Bai—where green fields and orchards cover the once barren terrain of the combat base—and other places and have since revisited the country several times.

I had known of Norman Graebner's work since Charles Neu had assigned the reading of *Ideas and Diplomacy*.³ At Virginia, Norman became my mentor and friend. That first year he directed me into a modern Europe course with Oren Hale and a twentieth-century U.S. course with William Harbaugh, both of which were foundational for my future work as a historian. I informed Mr. Graebner (at Mr. Jefferson's university the faculty were addressed that way) that I wanted to do a dissertation on the Vietnam War. He dissuaded me with the argument that such a currently evolving topic was not good training for a historian. Looking back, I could have argued for something like French colonialism, but he did accept my counter that I wanted to make Asia my focus. John Israel was teaching the first-year seminar on Asian-American relations in which, in addition to meeting Helen, I began what has been a career interest in East and Southeast Asia.

² David L. Anderson, *Vietnamization: Politics, Strategy, Legacy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

³ Norman A. Graebner, *Ideas and Diplomacy: Readings in the Intellectual Traditions of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

Ultimately, I settled upon research on the eight U.S. diplomatic ministers who resided in Beijing prior to the Open Door Notes, and that work became my dissertation and first book, *Imperialism and Idealism*.⁴ Norman was a veteran of World War II and the occupation of Japan, and he may have detected my sense of urgency to earn my degree as quickly as possible after two years in uniform and out of academia. Along with the other committee members—John Israel and Shao Chuan Leng of the international relations department—he allowed me to concentrate my research in the diplomatic and consular records in the National Archives and the diplomats' personal correspondence, which was primarily in the Library of Congress. He did not require me to study Chinese or try to translate the traditional Chinese used by the Qing foreign office. I have at times regretted that I never had some formal instruction in Chinese or Vietnamese. While I was revising the dissertation for publication, Helen (for whom Chinese was her research language) and I had the opportunity to spend some time in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1977. We took students from the University of Montana, one of the first American groups to tour the PRC after the Cultural Revolution. Since that trip, we have visited the PRC many times. I have been able to acquire a bit of the language but not research level, and I was honored in 1994 to be named a visiting professor of history by Anhui Normal University.

My first job after graduate school was as a visiting assistant professor at the University of Montana. My mentors at Virginia counseled me not to mention my Vietnam service on my C.V., which reveals a lot about attitudes toward Vietnam veterans in those days. For seven years I had one-year visiting contracts at Montana, Texas Tech, Sam Houston State University, and California Polytechnic State University before beginning a tenure-track appointment at the University of Indianapolis, where Helen also began teaching world history. I stayed there for 23 years and eventually became dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. During those early years, the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations sustained me as a professional base and network. Armin Rappaport mentored my first scholarly publication, which appeared in the founding volume of *Diplomatic History*.⁵ Through SHAFR and especially its annual meetings (I was present at the first one at Georgetown) I developed lifelong friendships and collaborations that have shaped my career. During those years of job searching, I have no idea how many letters of recommendation George Herring wrote for me. He once told me that he held me up as an example to his own graduate students that yes, it was possible through persistence to have a career as a diplomatic historian. I ended up as a dean and professor of history at California State University, Monterey Bay, and after retiring from there began teaching the history of U.S. foreign relations and the making of American national security policy at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School (NPS). Helen taught research and writing for national security at NPS, and we had offices across the hall from each other.

After publishing the dissertation, I still had a strong personal need to study formally the Vietnam War. I knew how I ended up there—I was drafted—but I wanted to know how the United States as a nation ended up there. My goal was a modest one, to craft an article, possibly for *Diplomatic History*, on some potentially seminal event or decision. President Eisenhower's posting of J. Lawton Collins to Saigon in 1955 as his personal representative seemed to be a promising possibility. Over lunch in Indianapolis with Professor Robert Ferrell of Indiana University, I chanced to mention my idea for the article, and Bob responded with "would you like to meet General Collins?" I said, "certainly," and a few days later I received a short letter from Bob with the contact information for General Collins' daughter and son-in-law and confirmation that I was welcome to arrange an appointment. I had a delightful and rewarding conversation with the general and was given privileged access to his personal Vietnam files that were at the National Archives awaiting transfer to the Eisenhower Library. His family connected me with a number of old Saigon hands residing in the Washington area and through them I got to know others, including the legendary General Edward Lansdale, of whom Collins did not have particularly fond memories. Meanwhile, the State Department began releasing *Foreign Relations* volumes on policy in Vietnam in the 1950s and with them the supporting decimal files from which they were drawn. With the help of a timely sabbatical, my article on 1955 morphed into a book, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-*

⁴ Anderson, *Imperialism and Idealism: American Diplomats in China, 1861-1898* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

⁵ Anderson, "Anson Burlingame: American Architect of the Cooperative Policy in China, 1861-1871," *Diplomatic History* 1 (Summer 1977): 239-55.

1961.⁶ Columbia University Press chose it for its series edited by William Leuchtenberg, and he gave valuable advice for the final revisions. It has been gratifying to follow the work of today's generation of historians with the language skills and archival access to fill in the Vietnamese side of this research.

The book received some acclaim, and invitations followed from Columbia and other publishers (Kansas, Kentucky, Palgrave Macmillan, and Scholarly Resources) to write books or assemble anthologies on the war. I will always be grateful to the many distinguished colleagues who accepted my invitations to contribute to these projects. This body of work has placed me firmly in the orthodox school of Vietnam War historiography. Before I went to Vietnam, while I was there, and in the course of my writing, I have believed that it was a strategic mistake from the beginning for the United States to be involved so deeply and so long in that conflict. A reviewer once described my work as 'non-ideological,' and I was proud of that comment. In Vietnam I knew a woman who did laundry for American troops and had lost four sons in the ARVN. I did not have the language skill to explore her thoughts about the war, but knowing her made me slow to judge whether Hanoi, Saigon, or Washington was the origin of her sacrifice. It was probably all three. I am antiwar but am not a pacifist and have always considered my own military service honorable. My father-in-law was a career Air Force officer who liked to say that "peace is my profession." I like to think that idea also describes my career.

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⁶ Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).