

# H-Diplo ESSAY 246

Essay Series on Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars

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*"The Burden of Historians: A Sacred Trust"*

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ESSAY BY HOWARD JONES, UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA, EMERITUS

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My interest in history began during my junior year in high school, when (and yes, I am serious) I took U.S. History taught by the football coach in East Gary, Indiana. Granted, he focused on the subject only two or three days a week during football season. He usually devoted Monday to previewing the game on Friday, Tuesday to history, Wednesday to working on our notebooks in class (while he went to the teachers' lounge), Thursday to history, and Friday to discussing strategy for that night's game. Somehow, I learned enough history to like the subject.

In undergraduate school at Indiana University, I decided on a major field of study at least a half dozen times before settling on history in my junior year—and, much to my parents' surprise, having to return to campus an extra semester. I had taken a course on recent American history taught by a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian of the Old Northwest, R. Carlisle Buley,<sup>1</sup> who brought history to life in the classroom. I went on to major in Social Studies and to receive a BS degree in education. Mary Ann and I were married over the Christmas holidays in 1962, five years after our first date in high school and about a week before I accepted my first teaching position, a second-semester appointment in American history at a junior high school in Gary, Indiana. A semester later, I was hired to teach eleventh-grade U.S. history at another school in Gary, where I remained for six years and became the father of three children.

During that first full year of teaching, I made the decision to work on a Master's degree in history and applied for a summertime Eli Lilly Fellowship for teachers at Indiana University. In the course of my interview, I met Professors Robert H. Ferrell and Maurice G. Baxter, both of whom shaped my career and my life not only by their teaching and scholarship but by their humanity and character.

In the first of three summers in the program, I enrolled in three classes, one on European history, along with two diametrically opposed classes: Professor Ferrell's survey of recent American foreign relations and a seminar on Pearl Harbor with Professor Buley. I and several other graduate students in those two classes had to face a fundamental challenge of history—how to determine truth when the same facts led to markedly different conclusions. Professor Buley detected presidential conspiracy at Pearl Harbor; Professor Ferrell did not. Caught in these academic crosshairs, we graduate students had to maneuver around minefields when speaking out in class.

The three summers on campus, combined with four correspondence classes during the two academic years between, led to an M.A. degree in history and the decision to work on a doctorate at Indiana University. After admission to the program during my fifth year of teaching high school, I was selected for a teaching assistant position and received a government loan, thanks to the support of Professors Ferrell and Baxter. Then, in the spring of that same year, tragedy hit our family: An

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<sup>1</sup> R. Carlyle Buley, *The Old Northwest: The Pioneer Period, 1815-1840*, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1950. Reprint: Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964).

operation went wrong for our young son Howie. Mary Ann and I realized we could not return to Bloomington on a full-time basis as we had planned to do that coming fall. I telephoned Professor Ferrell, who expressed his sorrow and assured me that the same arrangement would be in place if we came the following year of 1969. Which we did.

While I worked on my graduate studies, Mary Ann mothered two young girls, Debbie and Shari, along with Howie, who was confined to a wheelchair. Amazingly, she also babysat young children during the day while managing to type the first draft of my dissertation.

Somehow, we made it through the program and I prepared to write a dissertation eventually co-directed by Professors Ferrell and Baxter. A week after passing my qualifying exams, I had not yet found a dissertation topic and went to Professor Ferrell's office for suggestions. As I sat before him, he turned around from his desk, pulled his textbook from a shelf, and began scouring the table of contents. "No, that won't work; someone is working on that issue." "No, not that one either; a book just appeared on that subject." Finally, he said with a grin, "The Webster-Ashburton Treaty—that would make a peach of a topic." A boundary issue, a slave rebellion, a murder: "What a great story you can tell." Plan on six months of research and six months of writing, he said, and you will have finished your dissertation. I heartily agreed and thanked him as I went out the door. The truth was I had never heard of that treaty—despite having taught U.S. History for six years at the high school level.

As I neared the defense of my dissertation (a little beyond the deadline), I still had not landed a college teaching position. Fortunately, I had not given up tenure at my high school and could return. After making the necessary arrangements, we purchased a house in Gary and returned to Bloomington to pack. I remember so well the help we received from classmates as we filled the U-Haul truck in the August heat and prepared to load the freezer as the last item when a graduate student friend, Don Zimmer, bicycled across the campus to our apartment in Tulip Tree with a message from the history department. The secretary had been trying to reach me but sent Don when she realized our phone had been disconnected.

Moments earlier, Professor Baxter had received a phone call from the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, offering me a one-year position in American foreign relations. The tenured professor in that position had received a grant and invited us to live in his house if we agreed to take care of Ebony—his cat. I called Professor Baxter for advice. My choice, it seemed to him, was whether I wanted to teach high school or college. Mary Ann and I agreed to take the offer.

In all the excitement, we noticed that Debbie, the older of our two daughters at eight, was sobbing over her shattered dream of living close to her cousins in Gary. Our three-year-old daughter Shari was also crying because Debbie was crying. I told Debbie it was a nice house and she would be able to walk to a neighborhood school. That did not work. Finally, I mentioned that a cat came with the house. And that did it—both girls were happy and agreed to go with us to Nebraska.

So we temporarily relocated in East Gary at my parents' house, where in their front yard we began separating our possessions into two categories: one load into a U-Haul trailer bound for Lincoln, the rest for storage in the basement of my childhood home in Indiana. Incidentally, several people stopped by as we were sorting through the materials to ask if this was a yard sale.

I managed to negotiate a second year at the University of Nebraska before accepting a tenure-track position at the University of Alabama, where I thoroughly enjoyed 39 years of teaching and researching in U.S. Foreign Relations and in the U.S.-Vietnam War. It was there I found truth in an adage quoted to me by my colleague in Asian history: "Find a job you like and you will never work a day in your life."

Nothing is more satisfying than sharing your research and knowledge of history with students. That in mind, my philosophy of writing history has been consistent: Tell a story. A traditional narrative, based on extensive research and fealty to my sources, has been my guide to reaching students, specialists in the field, and a general audience. If the story develops real life characters in real life situations, it should attract a wider readership than a scholarly tome on some obscure subject that shows no connection with the human condition. My advice: Find a subject that is interesting and meaningful to you

and your potential readers. In writing a book, you become virtually married to your subject for what could be years—the first thing you think of in the morning and the last thing you think of at night. Otherwise, you will have an unhappy marriage that can reveal itself in your writing.

In looking back at my career, I realize I could not have made it through the graduate program, as well as in the years before and afterward, without the loving support of Mary Ann, my best friend and confidante. Not once did she complain. Never did she lose faith in me and the importance of family. I owe her everything for sharing her life with me.

A few years ago, Mary Ann and I were among about thirty couples invited by Professor Ferrell to attend an all-expense paid visit to his home in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he wanted to see his former dissertation students and give us as many books as we wanted from his huge collection. What an honor it was to help celebrate his career.

If I had to do it all over again, would I choose the same profession? Unequivocally, yes—as I now return to Theodore Roosevelt ...

**Howard Jones** is University Research Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Alabama. He is the author or editor of more than a dozen books, including *To the Webster-Ashburton Treaty: A Study in Anglo-American Relations, 1783-1843* (University of North Carolina Press, 1977); *Mutiny on the Amistad: The Saga of a Slave Revolt and Its Impact on American Abolition, Law, and Diplomacy* (Oxford University Press, 1987, revised, 1997); *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War* (University of North Carolina Press, 1992); with Donald A. Rakestraw, *Prologue to Manifest Destiny: Anglo-American Relations in the 1840s* (Scholarly Resources, 1997); *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom: The Union and Slavery in the Diplomacy of the Civil War* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999); *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (Oxford University Press, 2003); *The Bay of Pigs* (Oxford University Press, 2008); *Blue and Gray Diplomacy: A History of Union and Confederate Foreign Relations* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010); *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness* (Oxford University Press, 2017). His present and future research plans include *Forged in the Fire of the Dark House: Theodore Roosevelt and the Role of Character in Statecraft*, and *Abraham Lincoln: Chief Diplomat in War*.