

# H-Diplo ESSAY 248

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*Connections across Boundaries*

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Whenever I am talking to students or now, to younger scholars, I admonish them not to use my career path as any kind of model. It looks relatively straightforward: an undergraduate degree in history and international relations, a year off to work, a graduate degree in History, a couple of years of adjuncting, a tenure track position at small liberal arts college, then a tenure-track position at a state university focused equally on research and teaching. I've published at a slow but steady rate, had a couple of grants, and am privileged to co-edit *Diplomatic History*. This summary appears to tell a story of the usual path of accomplishment. But as good historians, you may already be wondering what disjunctures and detours the summary hides.

My intellectual journey as a historian in some ways starts with my earliest memories, because my family likes to tell stories. Many of those stories are of us, but of us in the world. Our family ranch in Washington state is now part of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. My great-grandfather, an East Tennessee preacher who nonetheless was on the side of biology, took the whole family to observe the Scopes Trial, and my grandmother's childhood memories rendered the event as being like a circus. My grandparents received the cold shoulder from many residents of Hood River, Oregon in the late 1940s, when my grandfather refused to join any of the local organizations that did not admit Japanese-Americans. My other grandparents were part of the exodus from the Midwest to California in the 1950s, where a wise real estate investment helped catapult them into the middle class. I never thought I would be a professional historian, though. History is just part of who you are, not what you do for a living.

I went to college with the intention of joining the Foreign Service, or doing some other kind of work that would allow me to travel. I had traveled all over the United States, but at age 18 had only been outside the United States once, on a school trip to Germany after my senior year of high school. I knew, though, that I wanted to leave Nashville behind, and, if possible, to spend a lot of time abroad. I had declared a history major at American University (AU) only because I applied too late to get into the School of International Service. Fortunately for me, during orientation I met Roger Brown, a wonderful man, caring advisor, and distinguished political historian. I had done well on the U.S. history AP exam so was able to skip the U.S. survey, and Roger asked me what upper level class I would like to take. Ironically, because Cornell (where I later did my Ph.D.) at that time taught the survey primarily to majors, I never TA'd for it either. I always like to say I first took the U.S. survey at the same time that I taught it.

I picked Robert Beisner's "Other Wars: Cold, Korean and Vietnam" for no other reason than that we had never reached that time period in my U.S. history class, and it looked interesting. My high school history class had been taught by the basketball coach (a much more important position in a Nashville TN school than that of a history teacher), who was also overtly evangelical in his Christianity. We spent six weeks learning about the Puritans, one day on the Civil War (War between the States) and I don't recall any time devoted to the Cold War or after. I was not intending to stay in my history major very long, too, and I thought Bob's class would transfer well when I was able to get into the School of International Service.

I did declare and finish an International Relations degree, but Bob began to entice me to history with that class. I remember reading and analyzing the Long Telegram and NSC-68. I still love to teach both of those; several of my students this semester picked NSC-68 as one of their favorite readings of the whole class. I still have my copy of Thomas H. Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis's, *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945-1950* that we read, complete with my marginal comments, about what you would expect from an 18 year old. In fact, I still have every book from that class: Dean Acheson's *Present at the Creation*; Walter LaFeber's *America, Russia and the Cold War*, Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, Philip Caputo's *Rumor of War*. Well, there's one I don't have. At the end of the semester I did immediately sell Henry Kissinger's *American Foreign Policy* back to the bookstore (the only time in all of college that I did so with a history book).<sup>1</sup>

Before Bob's class, I just wanted to travel and maybe live overseas, and was happy to think about doing that as part of the Foreign Service. Even though I was politically aware and on the left/liberal side of the spectrum, I hadn't thought in any systematic way about the U.S. exercise of power. I took every class I could with Bob while at AU, including a grad seminar on Idealism and Realism in my senior year. He was a profound influence on me, although we are very different kinds of historians. He was in many ways a writer first, historian second. His own work reveals how much he cared about writing, but he also believed in the power, including political power, of words. He taught us to read deeply and carefully, whether reading other historians or the words of historical figures. And he got me thinking about the role of the United States in the world, the choices made, the effects, the contingencies. It became more and more interesting to study, rather than prepare to do, foreign policy.

The whole history department at AU, though, was equally enticing. Valerie French's seminar on Alexander the Great helped me think more creatively about sources. I also observed carefully how she balanced all her roles: professor, scholar, wife, mother, nurturing advisor. (We were unaware then of how much we asked her to do that we never asked of our male professors.) She gave me my only (richly deserved) C on a paper. At a crucial moment, she also told me that one's health is always more important than turning in a paper on time. I was lucky enough to take classes with Michael Kazin, Peter Kuznick and Robert (Bob) Frost, and that Peter and Bob let me hang out in their office for many more hours than was probably good for any of us, though much more edifying for me than them. Alan Kraut helped me, perhaps unwittingly, think more broadly about foreign relations. In my senior thesis, which Alan directed, I connected foreign relations and immigration history, and began to think about the ways that low and mid-level foreign service officers carried out U.S. policies. I remain fascinated by how the 'doers' rather than the 'makers' of foreign policy influence so much of what happens. My senior year I spent as many hours in the Library of Congress and National Archives as on campus. It was exhilarating. I did not tire of it, ever.

I also worked all through college, about 20 hours a week, initially in a children's clothing store a few blocks from campus, but then in a small consulting firm, in a building on 17<sup>th</sup> and K Streets, near the power center. We decidedly were not a power firm. Miranda Associates did various kinds of educational projects. I started there as a temp, and was hired on permanently as a "research associate." In DC-speak that means I did everything from copy, proofread, and bind the proposals we submitted for contracts, to actual research, to writing parts of grant proposals and projects. My most significant work was writing the textbooks used by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) for the many people studying to become citizens in the aftermath of the Immigration Control and Reform Act of 1986. It was assuredly my most-read work by several orders of magnitude, but as a contractor, I could not claim authorship. In that job, I came to believe that anyone who is reasonably intelligent, willing to work hard, and flexible in what they will do can have a successful career. Soon after graduation, I got an opportunity to work for History Associates, based in Rockville, MD. I was contracted out by them to work for J. Samuel Walker, now retired but then historian of the Nuclear Regulatory

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas H. Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis, *Containment: Documents on American Police and Strategy, 1945-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969); Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945-1980*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, (New York: Wiley, 1980); Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Avon Books, 1977); Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977); Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977).

Commission, doing research for his book *Containing the Atom*. What a great job. I got to travel all over the D.C. area, conducting research in the Archives, the Richard Nixon presidential papers (then housed in a non-descript space), and the reading rooms of various agencies. And Sam Walker, who had trained as a historian of U.S. foreign relations and had written a great book on Henry Wallace to his credit, was a wonderful boss, mentor, and example. All the various jobs I had in DC convinced me: I could study what I loved, get a Ph.D., and then decide what kind of career to have.<sup>2</sup>

With the guidance and help of Bob Beisner and Alan Kraut, I hit the graduate school jackpot: Cornell, to work with Walter LaFeber. Alan, a Cornell grad, asked me solicitously if I was aware of how rural Ithaca was. I appreciate that to this day, even though I had been to that area dozens of times since I was born in Corning, NY, even if I lived there only briefly. Bob sat down with me early in the process, looking through the AHA Directory, talking about the programs and the people I would work with, carefully steering me to people who were not misogynists, were open minded methodologically, and supportive. Misogyny was of course an issue. One of my professors, during my senior year, introduced me to one of his grad school mentors. He asked me what I wanted to study in grad school. I said “diplomatic history” (as one did in those days), and he said “But women don’t understand the decisions men make when they go to war.” It was a short conversation, and I didn’t apply to the university where he still taught (although not in foreign relations history). Walt had only one male Ph.D. student the whole time I was there, James (Jim) Siekmeier. The rest of us were women: Susan Brewer, Sayuri Shimizu, Shannon Smith, Lorena Oropeza, Beth Murphy, and me. Bob and Alan helped me choose potential programs which were rigorous, and right for me.

I arrived at Cornell in the fall of 1988. I was not aware of it, but Cornell was one of the most theoretical history departments in the nation. I soon became well aware. I found most of what Dominick LaCapra’s students said to be marginally incomprehensible. Intimidating. Walt LaFeber’s second question to me, at our first in-person meeting, was “What do you want to write your dissertation about?” Intimidating. More students had accepted Cornell’s offer of admission than was intended, and our first semester seminar was filled with 18 extremely intelligent, well-read, and outspoken students. Intimidating. Also all of it exhilarating. I was not working at a job 20+ hours a week, as I had all through college. I could just read, which was good. There was a lot of reading to do.

An initial disappointment turned out to be probably the single most beneficial unexpected development of my career: I wanted to study U.S.-Eastern European relations, using my German as a base language to explore U.S. relations with the new nations formed out of the Austrian empire in the aftermath of World War I. I imagined I would learn Hungarian or Czech (ha!) in order to do that. Walt said, though, that there wasn’t really an Eastern European historian at Cornell, and I would have to pick a different part of the world. Gulp. He suggested I take the undergraduate survey of Southeast Asian history, given the strength of that field at Cornell. Never did he give better advice, and he always gives good advice.

The faculty at Cornell were stellar but my classmates provided my real education. They were so intelligent and creative, as one would expect, but also generous, supportive, interesting, and fun. I had my share of anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, worries about funding, and whether my project was good enough or going to pan out. I also remember hours of reading in Olin and later Kroch libraries, browsing the shelves of the best library in the world for someone who studies Southeast Asia, the potluck dinner at my apartment the first Thanksgiving and so many amazing potlucks after, especially with the Southeast Asianists. We students talked for hours over coffee and beers, went to talks like they were movies, and hung out, by choice and necessity, in the History Reading Room in Olin Library, which housed our reserve readings and journals.

I spent increasing amounts of time with the Southeast Asianists. I was an interloper, studying only the colonial languages (French and Dutch), and one who arrived late to my love of Southeast Asia, seeing it through prisms already established by my study of the United States. But they accepted me. Southeast Asianists often have mastered more languages and a more diverse history and historiography than almost any other set of scholars, yet they are incredibly welcoming. I think it’s

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<sup>2</sup> J. Samuel Walker, *Containing the Atom: Nuclear Regulation in a Changing Environment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Walker, *Henry A. Wallace and American Foreign Policy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976).

because no one who studies Southeast Asia is likely to be able to master even the languages needed to study their own specialty, let alone a substantial portion of the languages used in the region. They rely on each other's work in a more intimate way than scholars of other regions do. From them I learned to look at the United States from a different vantage point, to ask questions starting from the concerns of people in other countries, to see connections and continuities across lines that Americans perceived as breaks. Most significantly, I came to see how empire was a common theme, not a distinction, for the ways that Europeans and Americans interacted with Southeast Asia.

Beth Murphy was Walt's last student, but the set of us knew that we were the last group of students who would have Walt LaFeber as advisor. Walt, like Bob, in many ways is an intellectual historian who happens to study foreign relations. Yes, he's in the Wisconsin School, and yes, he believes that the economic power of both capitalists and the United States are determining factors in the construction and conduct of U.S. foreign policy. But he is really a historian of ideas, words, and increasingly by the time I arrived at Cornell, culture. The range of cultural activities he takes seriously in his scholarship reflects his own deep engagement with sports, theater, music, film, and literature. His seminars were an exercise in learning to read fast and well, with at least three monographs per week, and questions directed at a particular person, rather than the group. He may not have thought so at the time, but he succeeded. I still remember more details from David Pletcher's *Diplomacy of Annexation* and Reginald Horsman's *Race and Manifest Destiny* than a lot of books I have read more recently.<sup>3</sup>

One of Walt's constant refrains was that you are only in grad school to get out of grad school. He wanted us to pick projects early, keep them constantly in our minds, and research and write expeditiously. To that end, almost every time we met, he asked me for my thesis, in one sentence. In the beginning I made liberal use of spoken semi-colons to express my inchoate ideas in one sentence. But it's a practice I use with my own students now. They are as chagrined, and later as happy, as I was then. When I said I wanted to work on some aspect of U.S. relations with Southeast Asia in the 1920s and 1930s, he initially was skeptical. But he let me explore the topic in an early seminar paper, and allowed himself to be convinced. He did have some definite parameters, and disallowed some topics, but we found and crafted our own topics. I don't know if he was comfortable with the way an advisor must both encourage intellectual independence and shape a student's journey, but he was skilled at it. Although seminar was always fascinating and enlightening, and he hosted us for lovely meals both at his house and in the Statler, my favorite place to talk was in his library carrel, surrounded by piles of books, in front of the manual typewriter. The conversations were expansive, from Big 10 football to opera to history, but weighty, not frivolous.

I probably took on too large and unwieldy a topic for my dissertation, exploring U.S. and European reactions to three anti-colonial rebellions in Southeast Asia during the 1920s and 1930s. I set off for research in 1992, spending a few months each in The Hague, London, Aix-en-Provence, and Washington, D.C., and a couple of weeks each at the Missionary Research Library at Union Theological Seminary and the Hoover Institution at Stanford. All this travel was funded by the MacArthur Foundation's new program offering fellowships in "Peace and International Cooperation." Even the MacArthur Foundation had hopes that the end of the Cold War would usher in an era of peace, although the program lasted only a few years, as did our hopes. I had an extremely expensive laptop, without which this dissertation would have been impossible. Cornell supported dissertation writing at that time with a fellowship, and I had a straightforward organization. I finished writing in a little over a year.<sup>4</sup> I had a Ph.D., and would soon have a job, but no idea how to turn that dissertation into a book.

While I was on the job market in the mid-1990s, several people asked me if I was "really" an Americanist. There was no "America in the World" category yet. Other foreign relations historians who had a similar approach were on the market too, though, and universities began to respond. My first tenure track position was at Saint Anselm College, a small liberal arts

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<sup>3</sup> David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon and the Mexican War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973); Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Anne L. Foster, "Alienation and Cooperation: European, Southeast Asian, and American Perceptions of Anti-Colonial Rebellion, 1919-1937," PhD thesis, Cornell University, 1995.

college in the Benedictine tradition, located in Manchester NH. The location was perfect for my family situation, and I settled into the heavy teaching load of a small college. I was their twentieth-century U.S. historian *and* their Asian historian. During my six years there, I taught ten different history courses, including a Japanese history course for which I definitely should apologize. One of my students took seven courses with me, for about two-thirds of his major. I loved many things about Saint Anselm, especially the students. My father taught in Methodist seminaries, so I also appreciated again being around people for whom their religion and their intellect were intertwined. It was also difficult in some ways. My years at Saint Anselm's coincided with the public revelations about sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. The inadequacy and hypocrisy of the church's and college's response was difficult to take. Still, I had no plans to leave. In the year I was up for tenure, though, my family situation changed and we needed to make a move.

All my career choices have been structured by the needs of family rather than what would have allowed me to have the highest degree of professional success. I am content to have more children than books, so many decades after earning my Ph.D., but sometimes I have to remind myself that I am contented. I interviewed for my current job at Indiana State only three weeks before my second daughter was born. I do like to joke that they gave me the job out of gratitude that I didn't go into labor during my job talk. Indiana State University is a wonderful, incredibly demanding place to teach. About half my students are the first generation in their families to go to college, and about half are on Pell Grants. They tend to be very career focused, and not sure of their intellectual abilities. It takes a lot of energy to help them realize their potential.

Family and teaching, and a 60-mile commute each way, have slowed my research productivity. I also am too attracted to the kind of large and unwieldy project that I chose for my dissertation. I remain interested in what happens across lines that people usually think of as dividers. The path from dissertation to book for my first monograph took years, so many years I don't like to count them. I don't think anyone today could write a dissertation like mine if they wanted to have an academic career. I had organized the dissertation chapters around rebellions in colonial Southeast Asia in the 1920s and 1930s. I knew there was an interesting historical question in this material, but the historical narrative was more elusive. Nearly no one had written about the United States and Southeast Asia (with the exception of the Philippines, and even that literature was comparatively sparse then). We all dream of the project no one has done, but it's actually incredibly difficult to have to work from such a fragmented historiography. There is voluminous scholarship in Southeast Asian studies on each rebellion, but almost no U.S. historian would have heard of any of them. Southeast Asianists saw no intrinsic reason to be interested in what the United States was doing there. How could I make a book interesting to Americanists or Southeast Asianists or, ideally, both? I had to do more research, reconceptualize the argument and organization, and rewrite the whole thing. *Projections of Power* finally appeared in 2010, just in time to help me get tenure a second time.<sup>5</sup>

I haven't been able to resist trying to keep a foot in both U.S. history and Southeast Asian history. I have more company now, especially from scholars taking transnational and more recently transimperial approaches. It's a challenge to read as widely as necessary, and even more of one to conduct research in all the relevant locations. I continue, though, to slowly work on my too-large project exploring policies and practices related to opium in Southeast Asia from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, with a focus on transimperial aspects of those. The topic provides rich fodder for articles, but I struggle to find a compelling narrative that encompasses all that was significant, while remaining readable. What I love about the complexities and nuance of history inhibit my ability to bring this project to a satisfactory end. Perhaps that won't happen, which is also all right.

Co-editing *Diplomatic History*, first with Nick Cullather from 2014-2019, and now with Petra Goedde, provides intellectual and professional satisfaction beyond what I might have imagined at the start of my career. Our field is so vibrant, with innovative work done by scholars at every level, and from around the world. The editorial meetings, every Thursday morning, are as intellectually engaging and a bit more fun than the seminars in graduate school. Seeing the newly submitted articles each week feels a little like getting new presents on my doorstep. The process of shepherding a manuscript through

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<sup>5</sup> Anne L. Foster, *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

the review and then editing process can be difficult and contentious. Even when so, most of the time we are helping authors produce the best article they can.

I am finishing this essay just as the stay-at-home orders in Indiana to deal with the COVID-19 virus are beginning to be lifted. I can't help but think of how some of the most important aspects of my intellectual journey, from frequent talks with mentors to the influence of fellow students from all around the world to my own international travel for research, are currently impossible and perhaps fundamentally changed for some time to come.

**Anne L. Foster** is Associate Professor of History at Indiana State University, and serves as co-editor of *Diplomatic History*. Her first book was *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941* (2010). She also co-edited, and published an essay in *The American Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives* (2003). Her current research explores the history of opium regulation and control in Southeast Asia. She has published numerous articles and chapters on this topic, including "Medicine to Drug: Opium's Transimperial Journey," in Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton, editors, *Crossing Empires: Taking U.S. History into Transimperial Terrain* (2020).