

H-Diplo ESSAY 253

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

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From 60 Feet Six Inches to the 38th parallel Without Regrets

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ESSAY BY WILLIAM STUECK, UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

I entered Springfield College in the fall of 1963 intending to become a professional baseball player and, secondarily, a high school history teacher. Two things happened in my junior year that drastically altered my plans. First, Frank Carpenter, a former China specialist in the State Department, came to Springfield to teach Chinese and Modern European history. After taking my first test with him, our paths crossed in the student union and he said to me, “Bill, your exam is as good as I would expect of a graduate student at Stanford [where he had attended graduate school]. You should be taking a language and thinking about attending graduate school.” Second, I met and fell in love with a classmate, Pat O’Connell, a fiery redhead with a quick wit and a sharp tongue. It didn’t hurt that, despite possessing what I was told was a major league arm, my fastballs frequently hit the backstop on the fly and my curves hit the dirt before reaching home plate. I didn’t take Frank’s advice on the language, but by the end of my junior year I had decided that a life in baseball was not really what I wanted. My fondest memory of my baseball career is that, in my last at bat in my last game at Springfield, I hit a two-run triple against UMass. (Did I mention that I was REALLY slow afoot?)

“This is an excellent historical analysis, but it’s not theoretically based.” These were the words written on my paper by Professor Tom O’Connor in a senior class in international relations. Tom was new to the faculty and, along with the fact that I had received straight Cs in a philosophy class two years before, his comment pretty much sealed it for me: political science was not my bag, history was. Theoretically challenged or not, I owe it to Tom for inspiring me to study the history of politics and diplomacy. Even so, I was to learn in graduate school that, while a historian does not have to have a superior aptitude for high-level abstraction, he/she does need to be able to organize information in a manner that is clear, meaningful, and persuasive.

“The strength of this essay is descriptive, the weakness conceptual.” So began the two-page critique of my first seminar paper in graduate school at Brown University. The critique’s author was John L. Thomas, who specialized in nineteenth-century American reformers. Thomas possessed limited knowledge of U.S. foreign policy and thought the field of diplomatic history rather tepid, but I eventually asked him to serve on my dissertation committee because I knew he would provide valuable criticism of my work. Sure enough, at my dissertation defense he asked, “Bill, how are you going to make this so it’s not so goddamn dull to read?” Days later he invited me to lunch at his home and treated me to his rewrite of the beginning of my dissertation. “For the first forty-five years of the twentieth century,” his first sentence declared, “American concerns about China and Korea followed a neatly reversed pattern.” My study was about U.S. policy toward China and Korea from 1947 to 1950. An important element was to explain why American policymakers did not intervene on a larger scale to protect China from Communism while they did make a major military commitment to protect South Korea in June 1950. I confess: I used the sentence to begin my first book, which appeared four years later. But I did dedicate the book to him and my other mentor at Brown, James T. Patterson, who introduced me to the concept of credibility. Over twenty years later I

sent Thomas a copy of my book *Rethinking the Korean War*.¹ When he told me that chapter 4 was “brilliant,” I thought, as they say in the South, I’d about died and went to heaven.

Naturally, in preparing this essay I went back to chapter 4 to try and figure out what Thomas thought was brilliant about it. What I discovered was that, for the most part, the descriptive in the chapter grew out of the conceptual rather than vice versa. In general the book took a topical rather than narrative approach to the subject. Although each chapter began with a description of events, the introductions ended with a paragraph defining clearly and concisely the question(s) to be addressed therein. The chapter titles also identified the question: in the case of chapter 4, “Why the War Did Not Expand Beyond Korea.” Then, the first sentence after the introduction in that chapter was, “The main reason the war did not expand is that the top leaders of the two nations with the greatest capacity to do so, the United States and the Soviet Union, preferred to contain the fighting.”² BAM! The reader has the argument and is primed to be persuaded by the information and analysis that follows. That recalled to me another comment that Thomas had made at my dissertation defense. He said that in his own writing he self-consciously manipulated the reader and didn’t feel the least bit guilty about it. He could have used the words guided or engaged rather than manipulated, but that was not his style. Sometimes the more risky or provocative word was necessary to nail down the point. In my case the lead sentence recited above got its force not so much for its profundity as an argument as from its bold and concise expression.

But I suspect that Thomas liked the chapter for more than its boldly stated argument. It was also because there was a nuanced argument about why, ultimately, the United States chose to contain the fighting. The simple answer is that it was the Europe-first strategy that the United States had adopted on the eve of World War II and continued in its aftermath. Yet emotions ran high among Americans in the aftermath of China’s intervention in the Korean War in the fall of 1950. So it is not difficult for a historian looking back to envision a scenario in which leaders departed from their chosen (and patient) strategy and lashed out at the immediate enemy in a way that expanded the conflict. In a nutshell my explanation of why that did not happen included, first, the improvement in the US military position in Korea between December 1950 and June 1951 and, second, the processes necessitated by the U.S. commitment to the United Nations and the European alliance that helped to avert any rush to escalate the fighting in weapons or geography. The funny thing is that, in my mind, I had made that argument in my much longer *The Korean War: An International History* published seven years before, but it was so buried in a dense narrative that it did not stand out to readers.³

Dense narrative, of course, has a long and distinguished past among diplomatic historians. The best practitioners were (are) able to blend the story of diplomatic interaction with broader themes. Still, for many of us the temptation to show off our massive documentary research—or, more high mindedly, to ensure our mastery of detail—leads us to mask and/or qualify our arguments to such an extent that readers not only miss them but are bored to tears in the process. In my own case I can see in retrospect that in my first book on the Korean War I was so intent on writing a narrative based on my years of multi-archival research that my voice did not always emerge clearly from the narrative. The chapters were organized strictly chronologically rather than focused on a clearly defined question. In my second book, in contrast, I was able to step back from my research and feature my voice. I’m glad I wrote both books, but I’m also happy to say that, finally with the second, Jack Thomas seemed satisfied!

I’m also pleased that, after eight years of retirement from the University of Georgia, I’m still thinking and writing about history. The process has slowed down, in part because I’m now 75 years old, in part because since November 2016 I’ve become a political activist. I was drawn to the field of U.S.-East Asian relations in the late 1960s by the desire to understand

¹ William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

² Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 124.

³ William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

how and why the United States went to war in Vietnam. That impetus grew out of my personal situation at the time but also my belief, which has never changed, that the past can be helpful in understanding the present. As Ernest May and Richard Neustadt wrote in their classic *Thinking in Time*, “the future has nowhere to come from but the past, thus the past has predictive value.”⁴

“You’ve got to stop shouting at the television and get out and use your skills to make a difference.” So said that fiery redhead I’d fallen in love with at Springfield, now my wife of fifty-three years, within days of Donald Trump’s victory in November 2016. Going on four years later, I’m chair of the Democrats in Rabun County, Georgia, and vice chair of the Democrats in Congressional District 9 (Doug Collins is the incumbent), areas that went nearly eighty percent Republican in 2018. It has been a rewarding experience in which my knowledge of American politics has come in mighty handy, and hopefully it will culminate in Georgia turning blue this November. Yet part of the reward has been to interact with some very good and talented people from outside academe and from places far removed from the Connecticut in which I grew up. The interaction has reinforced my belief that many academics err in priding themselves about being above the fray; when they do become engaged they often turn people off with an attitude of superiority. In my case, being based in the mountains of northeast Georgia—where the suspicion of outsiders and newcomers is strong despite the tourist-based economy—my Ivy League Ph.D. and long stint at the University of Georgia are not exactly pluses. Fortunately, I have a housemate who is far more of a “people person” than I am and is not shy about pointing out my limitations and missteps.

One virtue of my recent political work is that it has contributed to my evolution as a historian. I have lived through two great waves in the field of diplomatic history and, frankly, I at first resisted both of them. First came the rise of “left revisionism” in the 1960s and 1970s; then in the 1990s arose the “cultural turn.” I initially resisted them to a considerable extent because I saw them as grounded in extreme political agendas and often methodologically unsound. I don’t believe I was totally wrong in either case, but in my books and articles since 1995 I have integrated a good deal of information and insight from their proponents, albeit without the political or ideological message. Still, my recent political work has dramatized to me the importance of economic and cultural factors in politics. Politics at the grass roots level *is* more often than not dominated by economic elites at least as much concerned with their own interests as with those of the broader public. Yet cultural forces penetrate deeply into those politics and, in this day and age at least, can be surprisingly overt. While the present and the past are never identical, cultural and economic forces have always been and will always be with us. The challenge for diplomatic historians is to integrate them into our descriptions and analyses of the past along with the strategic calculations of nation states that frequently transcend both.

It is with that challenge in mind that I am working on what will surely be my last book, a topical history of US-Korean relations, which I am co-authoring with James Person. The first chapter, the United States and Japanese control of Korea, illustrates how cultural, economic, and strategic factors often interact. On the one hand, the shift in U.S. policy toward Korea from 1905 to 1910, when Washington uttered not a peep as Japan took over the country, and 1945, when the United States sent troops to the peninsula to prevent its occupation solely by the Soviet Union, had virtually nothing to do with economics or culture and much to do with evolving American strategy. On the other hand, cultural and economic perceptions were very much in play during World War II, as trusteeship emerged as the preferred approach to a Korea liberated from Japan. Koreans were considered incapable in the immediate aftermath of the war of establishing a stable government on their own. In part this was because of memories of Korean disarray at the turn of the century, in part because of the economic dislocation the end the war and Japanese colonialism would bring. The problem with the revisionist and cultural waves is not that they are without merit; rather it is that they sometimes go too far in making claims for their approach. My career has been much enriched (not to mention enlivened) by the passage through these challenges to conventional wisdom.

Finally, I should comment on the obvious danger of “presentism”—that is, of reading the past through the lens of the present—in the process of using the past to understand the present. May and Neustadt’s recommendations on how

⁴ Ernest R. May and Richard E. Neustadt, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decisionmakers* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 251.

decisionmakers can improve their use of the past strikes me as providing useful guardrails against this “fallacy.”⁵ Their key method is a rigorous examination of historical analogy, with carefully constructed charts of likenesses and differences as the primary instrument. Perhaps the biggest challenge for the historian is to avoid the expectation that decisionmakers in a bygone era had, or could be expected to have had, the precise perspective and/or information that we have today. As anyone familiar with my work knows, I have not hesitated to criticize decisionmakers, but my hope is that I have done so as an objective secondary to that of explaining why they did what they did—and that requires understanding that they did not have knowledge of the future as I do, nor are their values identical to mine. One of the advantages that I see in my current work is that, by starting with the late nineteenth century and moving forward to the present, it is easier to grasp change over time than when I focused on a period of just a few years, especially when those few years were not far removed from the present. It is easier with the broader approach to grasp continuity and the limits of linearity as well. The Trump predisposition to go it alone in foreign policy, for instance, represents a classic reminder of how old, apparently discredited ideas such as “America first” never really disappear and can even reassert themselves with a vengeance in particular historical circumstances. There is nothing wrong with using the present to identify questions we should ask about the past so long as in our desire to explain current events we do not lose sight of the distinctiveness (I avoid the word uniqueness intentionally) of bygone eras.

In concluding I return to Jack Thomas and his none-too-subtle reservations about the field of diplomatic history. Were he alive today, I think he would concede that the field has come a long way since the 1970s. Work on the Korean War alone illustrates the point. When I published my international history in 1995, I remarked that “much remains to be done by those who will follow me.”⁶ Time has proven me correct. A quick perusal of the bookshelf next to my computer reveals 15 books published over the last 25 years that have significantly expanded our understanding of that event.⁷ Some of them employed strictly traditional methods, but always with a new vantage point and/or new research. Others have been more innovative in methodology. While I’d like to think Norman Rich, another of my Brown professors, was right when he said to me that good works of history are never obsolete, I must concede that new research and analyses have contributed significantly to my understanding of the war and its consequences. They have also helped to identify areas where future

⁵ May and Neustadt, *Thinking in Time*, chapters 3-6.

⁶ Stueck, *International History*, 9.

⁷ I make no claim that the 15 books are all inclusive since 1995. They are merely the ones readily available on my shelves. However, I would like to cite those among them that have made the largest contributions to my own thinking. Allan R. Millett’s *The War for Korea, 1945-1950: A House Burning* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), along with my own post-1995 research, persuaded me that the Korean Right needs to be taken a good deal more seriously in creating a viable regime below the 38th parallel during 1949 and early 1950. This is not to deny that the Republic of Korea was a police state. It is to say that, by June 1950, the Syngman Rhee regime was capable of governing the country if secured from outside attack. Bryan R. Gibby’s *The Will to Win: American Military Advisors in Korea, 1946-1953* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), again along with my own research, has helped me understand the importance of both the U.S. military advisors in Korea and the Koreans themselves in building the South Korean army, which played a central role in the UN Command in the war. Sahr Conway-Lanz’s *Collateral Damage: Americans, Noncombatant Immunity, and Atrocity after World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2006), although not exclusively about the Korean War, persuaded me that U.S. bombing campaigns on the peninsula deserved more attention than I had given it in my own work. Gregory Mitrovich’s *Undermining the Kremlin: America’s Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947-1956* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) provided me with a coherent analysis of thoughts on U.S. strategy from the beginnings of containment, through NSC 68 and its critics, and into the Eisenhower period that has helped me make sense of evolving attitudes in Washington toward the Korean peninsula. Most recently, the books of Masuda Hajimu (*Cold War Crucible: The Korean Conflict and the Postwar World* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015]), Monica Kim (*The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War: The Untold History* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019]), and David Cheng Chang (*The Hijacked War: The Story of Chinese POWs in the Korean War* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020]), all by a new generation of scholars with multilingual skills and enormous energy and imagination, provide assurances that the field is advancing in areas of study and understanding largely ignored by their predecessors.

work is needed. Yet with all due humility, seeing how my work has been built upon by others makes me happy that I pursued a career in history instead of baseball—and married that fiery redhead.

William Stueck was born in 1945 in New London, CT and grew up 18 miles away in Old Saybrook, a small town at the mouth of the Connecticut River. He received his BS from Springfield College in 1967, his MA from Queens College (New York City) in 1971, and his Ph.D. from Brown University in 1977. He spent most of his career teaching at the University of Georgia, from which he retired in 2012 as Distinguished Research Professor of History. He is now lives with his wife of 53 years on “Paradise Ridge” in Dillard, GA.