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Embracing Opportunities and Finding Balance: My Path to Becoming a Historian

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When I began my first year as an undergraduate at Brown University in the mid-1990s, I never imagined that I would pursue a career as a historian. Although I had always enjoyed my history classes, I entered college planning to study chemistry and math, subjects that I had loved and excelled in during high school. At the time, I envisioned continuing my studies in a graduate program in science and eventually teaching chemistry. During my first two years of college, I enrolled in numerous math, chemistry, and physics courses. But I also took advantage of Brown's open curriculum, which lacks general education requirements and encourages students to experiment and to broaden their worldview by taking classes in a range of subjects and departments. During my sophomore year, at the same time that I was struggling to understand Organic Chemistry and Advanced Physics, I enrolled in two history courses—Gordon Wood's course on the American Revolution and Charles Neu's class on the Vietnam War. Little did I know then that my experience in these two classes would change the trajectory of my life.

Those two history courses captured my attention in ways that my math and science classes at Brown never did. Both professors made past events seem relevant, and I especially appreciated the way they humanized the subject of history. For example, in addition to academic scholarship on the Vietnam War, Neu assigned personal accounts written by soldiers and anti-war activists, and he invited veterans to speak with our class. I devoured the assigned reading for these courses and could not wait for the next class meeting. I also began to seek out history courses on other topics, and by the end of the end of my sophomore year I officially changed my major to history. I was especially drawn to courses on twentieth century U.S. and world history. One of my favorite undergraduate classes was an advanced seminar with Neu that focused on George Kennan and Cold War-era diplomacy. In large part because of that seminar, I elected to write an honors thesis under Neu's supervision. My thesis examined George McGovern's failed 1972 presidential run and focused on his opposition to the Vietnam War. I enjoyed working closely with Neu, who served as my primary mentor during my final years at Brown, and I relished having an opportunity to spend a few days doing research for the thesis at Princeton University. This was my first exposure to working in the archives, and I was energized by reading obscure campaign paraphernalia, as well as newspaper accounts of McGovern's career and the 1972 election.

After graduating from Brown, I decided to take time off from school so that I could get some real-world work experience while I was applying to history Ph.D. programs. I spent a year living with my parents in my childhood home outside of Washington, D.C. During that time, I worked as an administrative assistant at the Institute for International Education (IIE), a job that fell into my lap as the result of a chance encounter with the director of the Egyptian exchange program at IIE. My daily tasks were tedious and often unpleasant—I answered a lot of phone calls and filed what felt like mountains of paperwork. But I enjoyed meeting some of the Egyptian students who were pursuing graduate degrees in the U.S., and I loved traveling around the country for university site visits. Perhaps more importantly, my experience at IIE encouraged me to think more deeply about the role of educational and cultural exchange in American foreign relations. Looking back now, I realize that my subsequent interest in development initiatives, foreign aid, and private citizens' efforts to promote international exchange grew at least in part out of my short time working at IIE.

As I researched and applied to graduate programs, I prioritized universities where I could study Vietnamese history and language. Despite loving the undergraduate courses I took on the Vietnam War and related topics, I had felt frustrated by a sense that I was only exposed to part of the story, and that we learned about this important history almost exclusively from the American perspective and within the context of U.S. history. To understand fully the conflict and its significance, I believed that I had to study Vietnamese society, culture, politics, and history. The University of California, Los Angeles particularly appealed to me because of its strong history faculty, who worked in a wide-range of sub-fields including Vietnam and Southeast Asia, as well as the robust world language offerings. I also liked the idea of living in a different part of the country and being closer to my college boyfriend (now my husband), who had moved back home to California after our graduation.

The six years I spent as a graduate student at UCLA broadened my horizons considerably. At that time, UCLA did not have a traditional diplomatic historian, but I was fortunate to be able to take classes from a diverse group of scholars. Officially an Americanist, I spent my first year in graduate school taking the required series of courses on U.S. historiography with excellent scholars including Joyce Appleby and Laura Edwards. From the moment I entered the program, Jessica Wang served as my primary advisor. Although her work to that point had focused primarily on the history of science, I quickly realized that Wang had wide-ranging intellectual interests including in the Cold War, U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the bureaucratic state, policy history, and the history of public health, to name just a few. During my first year in the program, Wang hired me as a research assistant for a project on liberalism and the courts, and she charged me with reading about the professionalization of legal studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This experience boosted my confidence and offered a window into how professional historians research and write. Wang's intense curiosity inspired me to pursue a range of topics for my own seminar papers, and her unwavering support provided a solid foundation for all of the work I did while at UCLA. Even now, I continue to rely on Wang's advice and friendship as I navigate a career in academia.

I was also deeply influenced by another Americanist in the department, Melissa Meyer. Meyer was a scholar of American Indian history whose work focused on issues of identity and belonging among native peoples. During my second year in the Ph.D. program, I took a graduate seminar on American Indian social history with Meyer. Her approach to examining societies from the bottom-up and her insistence on the importance of social interactions was a significant departure from the focus on political, institutional, and top-down narratives that I had grown accustomed to in many of my other history classes. The research paper I wrote for Meyer's seminar, which explored the history and meanings of native dance traditions as well as their connections with modern pan-Indian pow-wows, remains one of my favorite projects from graduate school. After taking that course with Meyer, I began to see my own interests as bridging the fields of diplomatic and social history. At that point in the program, I was beginning to develop my dissertation project, which I conceived as a study of U.S. foreign aid to South Vietnam from the ground up. Although my topic was outside of her field of expertise, Meyer agreed to serve on my dissertation committee because she supported my effort to introduce a social history approach to the study of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. I think she also had a personal interest in the topic, given the fact that she came of age during the war. Ironically, one of Meyer's most important contributions to my professional growth resulted from our conversations not about her scholarship or teaching but about her family. Meyer seemed to have struck a model work-life balance, and she always made me feel comfortable talking about my academic and professional goals as well as my strong desire to raise a family.

As I had hoped, in addition to U.S. history, I was able to study Vietnamese language and history at UCLA. After completing two years of Vietnamese language coursework at UCLA, I was accepted to the Vietnamese Advanced Summer Institute (VASI). I spent the summer between my second and third years of graduate school in Hanoi. Studying in Vietnam was a disorienting, humbling, and invigorating experience. In addition to working on my language skills, I also learned a lot about Vietnamese culture, history, and food that summer. And because my peers in the VASI program were graduate students in various fields, including linguistics, literature, and anthropology, I was exposed to the work of young scholars in other disciplines related to Vietnamese studies.

Although I entered UCLA's doctoral program with a specific focus on Vietnam and Vietnamese history, I increasingly became interested in the entire region of Southeast Asia. One of the most formative aspects of my time at UCLA was the opportunity to study Southeast Asian history and to participate in events hosted by the university's Center for Southeast

Asian Studies. Within the history department, I took classes on Southeast Asian history with Anthony Reid, on U.S.-Philippines relations with Michael Salman, and on political violence and nationalism in Southeast Asia with Geoffrey Robinson. John Whitmore, an eminent historian of Vietnam, had a one-year visiting appointment at UCLA during my second year in the program, and I was fortunate to participate in a small reading seminar with him. I also studied with faculty in the Asian Languages and Cultures department, including Thu-huong Nguyen-vo and George Dutton. I gained my first teaching experiences as a TA for Reid and Dutton's introductory courses on Southeast Asian history. By the end of my time in the program I had developed my own course on popular culture and nationalism in Southeast Asia, which I taught at UCLA as a senior seminar during the quarter after I completed my degree.

As a graduate student, I was influenced by my instructors as well as by the scholars whose work we read in seminars. I had read Kennan and other 'realist' scholars as an undergraduate, but I finally discovered the revisionist 'Wisconsin school' of diplomatic historians at UCLA. In addition to William Appleman Williams and Walter LaFeber's work, Thomas McCormick's *America's Half Century* forced me to grapple with the economic underpinnings of U.S. foreign policy and introduced me to world systems theory analysis.¹ Emily Rosenberg's classic *Spreading the American Dream* was particularly influential in encouraging me to consider the central role that non-state actors have played in shaping American foreign policy.² James Scott's work on everyday forms of resistance and the limits of state power informed how I thought about the relationship between communities and governments.³ Scott's engaging books also inspired me to try to write in a way that is accessible and clear. In addition to books on Vietnamese nationalism and revolution by historians including David Marr and William Duiker, I read with great interest newer scholarship that considered U.S. involvement in Vietnam within the context of broader global trends such as decolonization. Mark Bradley's *Imagining Vietnam and America*, Robert Brigham's *Guerilla Diplomacy*, and Philip Catton's *Diem's Final Failure* were all books that I read during graduate school and that shaped the ways I have written and taught about the Vietnam War and American intervention ever since.⁴

I began working on my dissertation during my third year at UCLA. My committee consisted of two Americanists, Jessica Wang and Melissa Meyer, and two Southeast Asianists, Geoffrey Robinson and George Dutton. This committee composition reflected my desire to produce a dissertation that bridged the fields of the U.S. in the world, modern Vietnamese history, and social history. It also cemented my position as a scholar with one foot in American history and the other in Southeast Asian studies. At that time, most existing scholarship focused on diplomatic and military aspects of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, especially during the 1960s and early 1970s, when American ground troops participated in the conflict. I chose to focus instead on the years from 1954 to 1965—the period between the Franco-Viet Minh war and the American war—and on non-military aspects of U.S. involvement. Very little had been written on low and mid-level

¹ Among the most influential books I read as a graduate student were William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: Dell, 1962); Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963) and Thomas McCormick, *America's Half Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War and After* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

² Emily Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

³ James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); and Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁴ David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) and *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); William Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981) and *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Hyperion, 2000); Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Robert Brigham, *Guerilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Vietnam War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); and Phillip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002).

American aid workers in Vietnam, but I viewed these men and women as instrumental in advancing larger U.S. efforts to support the South Vietnamese government and to develop the economy, society, and political institutions of the country.

My dissertation research took me to East Lansing, MI, Washington, DC, and Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). In East Lansing, I explored the Vietnam Project and Wesley Fishel collections at Michigan State University to learn about the university's program of technical assistance to the Government of Vietnam. At the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, I located materials related to the U.S. Agency for International Development (and its predecessor agencies) and American assistance to Saigon. I also was able to access some South Vietnamese journals that were published in the mid-twentieth century. Articles from these journals offered a window into Vietnamese perspectives on economic development and foreign aid. Although I had originally planned to research the Catholic Relief Services' (CRS) efforts in Vietnam, I quickly learned that the organization closely guarded its records and that it would be difficult to access the types of materials that would be helpful to my study.

As luck would have it, at the moment that I realized studying the CRS might not be feasible, I stumbled upon another set of sources that ultimately proved invaluable to my dissertation and first book. As part of my research, I interviewed American aid workers, diplomats, and others who were posted in Vietnam during the 1950s or 1960s. One of the people I spoke with was Rufus Phillips, a former employee of the Central Intelligence Agency and a military advisor to the South Vietnamese government in the 1950s. In addition to providing a colorful account of what life was like in Saigon during those years between the French and American wars, Phillips introduced me to Anne Shirk, the most recent Executive Director of the International Voluntary Services (IVS), a non-governmental organization that served as a model for the Peace Corps.

I had intended to include IVS in my study of aid workers and development programs, but until Phillips put me in touch with Shirk, I had only limited success finding materials related to the organization and its efforts in South Vietnam. However, Shirk proved to be a treasure trove of information and resources. She invited me to visit her in her Northern Virginia home, and during our meeting she explained how IVS had operated. She also told me stories about some of the former volunteers, who referred to themselves as IVSers. Then, to my complete surprise, Shirk informed me that she had boxes of materials related to IVS in Vietnam and that I was welcome to look at them. Those boxes included letters written by IVS volunteers while they were living in Vietnam, minutes from IVS board meetings, and other organizational documents including publicity materials, reports and newsletters, and end-of-mission narratives produced by the IVSers. When the organization had dissolved the previous year, in 2002, Shirk and other IVS employees had not had enough time to properly catalogue all of the organization's papers before their lease was up. At the time of our meeting, Shirk was organizing and preparing the materials for donation to an archive at Goshen College, where the papers now reside. She offered to let me photocopy documents that would be useful for my study and also supplied me with the names and contact information for former Vietnam IVSers who might be willing to talk with me. As a result of Shirk's generosity, I was able to conduct interviews with a number of volunteers around the country and, more importantly, to have access to their written historical records.

My dissertation research also took me back to Vietnam in the fall of 2004. This time, I lived in Ho Chi Minh City and conducted research at the Vietnamese National Archives II. Returning to Vietnam several years after that first stint in Hanoi, I was struck by how much the country had changed in that short time, as well as how different Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City felt, at least to a foreigner. Although bicycles and motorbikes still dominated the city streets, there were now many more cars and trucks clogging the roads and polluting the air. Foreign businesses and stores, including American ones, increasingly shared space with traditional markets and shops. Ho Chi Minh City seemed much more cosmopolitan and politically-open compared with Hanoi, and foreigners from all over the world came to travel, work, and study there.

In the archives in Vietnam, I looked at numerous materials in the collection of South Vietnam's presidential papers from 1955-1963, during Ngo Dinh Diem's tenure. Researching in Vietnam posed a number of challenges that I had not experienced previously. American and other Western researchers had only started gaining access to Vietnam's archives a few years prior, and we still had to navigate a pretty restrictive system to gain permission to read certain documents. Researchers were required to provide detailed information about their research project as well as a justification for how each document they requested related to that project. On several occasions, the archivists refused to grant me access to a particular

document or report because they deemed it inappropriate or not relevant to my study. I sometimes felt frustrated by the lack of control I had over what I could look at—not to mention the challenge of reading sources in Vietnamese, which was always slow-going for me—but ultimately I appreciated having the opportunity to conduct research in a dramatically different environment and to incorporate some of the materials I found there in my project. And it helped that there were a few other Americans working in the archives at the time, including my friends Asia Nguyen and Jessica Chapman, as we could support and commiserate with each other.

In 2005, I completed my dissertation and went on the job market. Although I did not immediately get a tenure-track position, I was fortunate to be able to stay on at UCLA as an adjunct lecturer for several quarters. I taught a large course on U.S. foreign relations in the twentieth century as well as smaller seminars on Southeast Asia and U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In 2007, I was hired on the tenure-track at San Francisco State University. The position had been advertised as a U.S. foreign relations job and replacement for Jerry Combs, who had recently retired after a long and successful career. However, I was thrilled to learn that my new colleagues were excited for me to teach Southeast Asian history alongside courses on American foreign relations. Teaching has been one of the most rewarding parts of my career and has both expanded and sharpened my perspective on the role and position of the United States in the world. My students at SFSU are almost universally engaged and curious, and their questions, research, and contributions to my classes have compelled me to continue learning and thinking in more sophisticated ways about international relations. Even after spending over a decade at SFSU, I continue to feel lucky every day that I teach at a university that values undergraduate education and in a department with colleagues who are dedicated, talented, and genuinely supportive.

During my first several years at SFSU, I focused on developing new courses and revising my dissertation for publication. My son and twin daughters were also born during that period. Between the heavy demands of teaching and family responsibilities, it took longer than I had imagined to finish that first book. Eventually, I completed the book, *Aid Under Fire*, which built on the research I began in graduate school and examines American nation-building programs in South Vietnam between 1955 and 1965.⁵ The book focuses on civilian aid workers, who implemented economic aid and technical assistance projects in public and police administration, agricultural development, education, and public health in Vietnam. *Aid Under Fire* explores the relationships between American aid workers and local people (in both Vietnamese and ethnic minority communities), and it explains how and why nation-building endeavors failed on the ground. I attempt to demonstrate how Vietnamese people—government officials as well as ordinary citizens—were active participants in their own development. They accepted American aid and advice, even as they opposed some projects and struggled to maintain their own practices, traditions, and beliefs. Although it proved challenging to find sources that gave voice to regular Vietnamese people, I read American sources, including aid workers' writings, against the grain in an attempt to illuminate ways that Vietnamese acted on their own interests and prioritized what was important for themselves and their families. Ultimately, I argue that the shortcomings of American nation building resulted directly in U.S. military intervention and the escalation of the war in Vietnam.

Aid Under Fire reflects and represents several recent historiographical trends. In the broadest sense, the book mirrors the internationalization of the field of U.S. history, especially diplomatic history. My work dovetails with that of a new generation of historians who have relied on multi-archival sources, including Vietnamese language materials, and whose work considers the Vietnam Wars within the global process of decolonization as well as in a Cold War context.⁶ The book is

⁵ Jessica Elkind, *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky: 2016).

⁶ See for example Mark Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

part of a growing body of scholarship that considers early U.S. involvement in Vietnam, during the years before the ground war, and emphasizes non-military intervention. My research also intersects with scholarship on the history of international development and foreign aid. Like historians Daniel Immerwahr, Amanda McVety, and David Engerman, I treat development assistance as a critical aspect of U.S. foreign relations.⁷

Since completing *Aid Under Fire*, I have worked on a couple of smaller side projects as well as a second book project. I contributed a chapter on the origins of the Cold War to Matt Masur's edited volume, *Understanding and Teaching the Cold War*.⁸ I also returned to a study of IVS, specifically women volunteers in Indochina during the mid-20th century. Kitty Sklar invited me to serve as an editor for the online *Women and Social Movements in Modern Empires Since 1820* collection. This project involved creating a cluster of primary source documents and writing an introductory essay about women aid workers in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam during the 1950s and 1960s.⁹ Recently, however, I have devoted most attention to my next book project, which explores U.S. non-military intervention in Cambodia during the 1970s. This study focuses on the intersections between human rights and foreign policy, the changing dynamics of American involvement in the developing world during the latter part of the Cold War, and the triangular relationship among China, the United States, and Cambodia.

At this point in my career, I feel very lucky to be in a position where my research and teaching can straddle the fields of U.S. diplomatic and Southeast Asian history. Perhaps as importantly, I feel like I have (mostly) figured out a way to have the kind of work-life balance that I craved as a graduate student. While reading other essays in this series on "Learning the Scholar's Craft," I was struck by something on which Anne Foster reflected in her contribution. In her piece, Foster observed, "I am content to have more children than books."¹⁰ I share Foster's sentiment completely, even as I imagine with excitement a number of future research projects and books I might write. I'm not yet sure what my final tally will be—so far, my kids are winning—but, whatever the outcome, I know that taking those history courses at Brown so many years ago set me on the right trajectory. And I hope that some of the students who take my history courses will also find themselves on an intellectually stimulating and personally rewarding career path.

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⁷ For good examples of this scholarship, see Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Amanda McVety, *Enlightened Aid: U.S. Development as Foreign Policy in Ethiopia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and David Engerman, *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁸ Jessica Elkind, "Origins of the Cold War" in Matthew Masur, ed., *Understanding & Teaching the Cold War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017).

⁹ Jessica Elkind, "U.S. Women Aid Workers in Indochina, 1955-1970," in *Women and Social Movements in Modern Empires Since 1820*, <https://search.alexanderstreet.com/wasg>.

¹⁰ Anne L. Foster, "Connections Across Boundaries" in H-Diplo *Learning the Scholar's Craft* series, <https://hdiplo.org/to/E248>.