

# H-Diplo ESSAY 299

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

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*"With a Little Help from My Friends": Collaboration and the Scholar's Craft*

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When I was about eight years old, I asked my ten-year-old brother what he was doing. "Writing a book," he replied. So, I sat down and started to write my own. I have no idea what it was about, and I'm sure I abandoned it quickly, but at that moment I began to think of myself as a writer. Believing I was destined to be a novelist, I devoured fiction and kept searching for that great story that was mine to tell. During my high school years, dominated by sports and marked by a studious avoidance of homework, I scratched my authorial itch by editing the sports page for the school newspaper.

My path to college was determined by an athletic scholarship. Volleyball was my life's passion at the time; academically I had little direction aside from the vague sense that I should buckle down and get good grades in preparation for some type of post-collegiate success. History, as I had experienced it in high school, was by far my least favorite subject. Memorizing factoids about dead guys was not for me. I loved to get lost in a great story—and still dreamed of writing one—so maybe I should study literature? I was fascinated by how people think, so psychology or neurology, perhaps? My father, an attorney and a product of a liberal arts education from Reed College, encouraged me to dabble before making any disciplinary commitments.

During my first semester of college, to dispense with an annoying requirement and make way for dabbling, I took a course in early American history. That which was meant to be a chore ended up shaping my life, a fact that would reveal itself in time. Expecting to be inundated with trivia, I was thrust instead into the messy and complicated world of the past, where the most interesting things could not be memorized, but were up for debate and often remained shrouded in mystery. The great stories might not be in history textbooks, but they were surely to be found in history. It turned out that the discipline, which was very much concerned with how people think, revived the dead guys (and girls) in the most interesting ways. And, apparently, I had an aptitude for my formerly-least favorite subject. I found this out—in a maelstrom of exhilaration and mortification—a few weeks into my freshman fall, when my professor unexpectedly called on me to read my first paper aloud in front of the 100+-student lecture hall. My social anxiety was not thrilled, but my inner writer was gratified to have something I wrote deemed worth sharing.

By the fall of my junior year at Valparaiso University, I had dispensed with all of the pesky general education requirements, and my schedule was an even split between history and literature courses. Fatefully, I enrolled in a history course on the Vietnam War in literature and film, in part because it combined two of my abiding interests, but more importantly because the three-hour Wednesday evening slot worked with my restrictive in-season volleyball schedule. I would be on the road many Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, and most Fridays, but Wednesday evenings were safe. The course focused overwhelmingly on the experiences of U.S. veterans, through books like Tim O'Brien's *The Things they Carried*, Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, and Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, alongside documentaries including "Hearts and Minds" and "The Bloods of Vietnam." The soldiers' stories were gripping in their own right, but I was, at the moment, uniquely primed to empathize. The glaring abuses of power that led to American involvement in Vietnam—and fueled the problematic ways the

war was conducted—resonated with me personally as I was navigating my own path through a highly abusive coaching situation. I knew my experiences were not comparable to those endured by veterans of a misbegotten war, but the coincidence made their stories feel relatable. Learning more about how and why American officials embarked on a war with such disastrous affects for so many became a bit of an obsession. I was imbued with righteous anger; a righteous anger that, even years later, probably crept into *Cauldron of Resistance* in counterproductive ways that I can only see now with a bit more scholarly maturity.<sup>1</sup>

While I would love to say I had a plan all along, my path to graduate school was haphazard. As my junior year drew to a close, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. Given the aforementioned context of abuse, my energy was focused overwhelmingly on survival and escape. I did know that I loved being a student, and I was good enough at it, so a Ph.D. program seemed a logical next step. I studied for the GRE, but arrived at the testing site over an hour late after a forest fire shut down my primary route. Somewhat surprisingly, my scores came back good enough to justify the limited batch of four grad applications I had in mind. The great serendipity in that process was an offhand email I sent to Fredrik Logevall, the young scholar of American foreign relations and the Vietnam War that I had identified as my preferred advisor at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). These days, of course, Logevall is a big deal for his Pulitzer Prize winning scholarship.<sup>2</sup> In 1998, before his first book *Choosing War* was even published, he was a big deal to me for the first of what would become many instances of wise counsel.<sup>3</sup> His offer to chat about the program turned into an hour-plus phone conversation. Before we talked, he read my (surely cringeworthy) 60-page writing sample about the origins of American intervention in Vietnam. He inquired sincerely about my interests and gave me specific advice about how to craft a successful application to join the history Ph.D. program at UCSB, where he and his colleague, Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, had recently started a Center for Cold War Studies (CCWS). A few months later, when I received competing offers from UCSB and Rutgers, the choice was a no-brainer. I wanted to work with Fred. And I'm not going to lie, I also wanted to live at the beach, just a three-hour drive from my family in San Diego.

The decision to head to UCSB was among the best of my life, and the stellar beach volleyball scene was but a bonus. Logevall and Hasegawa created a more intellectually vibrant community than I could have ever dared to imagine. They organized conferences, lectures, seminar guests, and social gatherings so regularly that it seemed odd for a week to go by without something on the CCWS calendar. It was one thing to devour and discuss books by Odd Arne Westad, Melvyn Leffler, David Holloway, David Schmitz, Tim Naftali, and countless others, and quite another to pick their brains in person. Our three-hour seminar discussions would prove to be just the opening acts of languid conversations that would stretch into the night over dinner, drinks, and in many cases multiple visits over the years. Thanks to my cohort—especially Jen See, Jennifer Baker, Toshi Aono, John Coleman, John Sbardellati, and Maeve Devoy—the line between work and fun was obliterated. And the collegiality generated within CCWS bound my cohort to our predecessors, leading to meaningful and lasting relationships with Kathryn Statler, Andy Johns, Ken Osgood, Kimber Quinney, and Jacob Hamblin.

The intellectual dynamism and camaraderie of my fellow grad students at UCSB extended beyond CCWS, introducing me to ways of thinking that have shaped me immeasurably as a scholar. Discussing race with Elizabeth Pryor and Sarah Griffith, gender with April Haynes, Carolyn Lewis, Leandra Zarnow, and Sandra Dawson, urban renewal with Andrea Thabet and David Torres-Rouff, and communal violence with Tom Sizgorich opened my eyes to the complex dynamics of power that both inform and transcend the exercise of foreign relations that I was devoted to studying. Despite my lack of access to a historian of Vietnam, the opportunity to study Chinese history and theories of ethnicity and nationalism with Mark Elliott

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

provided me with the perspective I needed to imagine South Vietnam's oft-dismissed politico-religious groups as nationalist actors, and to consider the concept of Vietnamese political legitimacy in Vietnamese rather than American terms. Less formal, but no less significant, conversations with Paul Spickard about Asian racial formations spurred me to interrogate how U.S. officials understood their Vietnamese counterparts. Sometimes I begrudge all of the above for making history so complicated, but in fact I am grateful to them for helping me learn to ask questions that are worth answering, however difficult it may prove to do so satisfactorily.

For CCWS, the capstone of every academic year was the annual graduate student conference, which now rotates between UCSB, George Washington University, and the London School of Economics, but in the early 2000s was an institution of UCSB. The two-day event brought together graduate students from around the country working on Cold War related topics, and individual faculty commentators for each. It was a tremendous opportunity to learn about the most exciting work coming down the pipe. That grad student conference was emblematic of the value Fred Logevall placed on getting to know the right people, and on breaking down any boundaries associated with academic rank and career stage.

As my dissertation crystalized around questions about South Vietnamese politics in the 1950s, Logevall went out of his way to bring visitors to campus that it would be good for me to know, and to invite me to conferences to meet others. Perhaps the most important connection he facilitated was with Mark Bradley, whose *Imagining Vietnam and America* was the single most influential book I read in grad school, shaping some of the key questions underpinning my dissertation and providing a roadmap for how to do research using Vietnamese sources.<sup>4</sup> Bradley would later serve as the editor of the U.S and the World series at Cornell University Press, which published my first book, *Cauldron of Resistance*. He provided invaluable feedback that made the book—despite its flaws—far better than it would have been without his help. Logevall also connected me with Robert Brigham, author of the pathbreaking book *Guerrilla Diplomacy* whose scholarly guidance and friendship has been incomparable.<sup>5</sup> Our brunch in the Saigon Sofitel during a much-needed break from the archives was a small but significant act of mentorship from someone I have come to trust on all matters of life, not just the professional. While Logevall introduced me to plenty of big names like Bradly, Brigham, Mark Lawrence, Marilyn Young, and others, he also had the good sense and humility to realize that some of the most important people for me to know—the field's future big names—were just a year or two ahead of me in graduate school. Introductions to Edward Miller and Lien-Hang Nguyen in particular were instrumental in facilitating my research. Without their detailed—and remarkably generous—advice about how to navigate the Vietnamese national archives, I would have been lost.

Equally important in preparing me to work in Vietnam was the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute (SEASSI) in Madison, Wisconsin, which I attended for three consecutive years prior to embarking on my dissertation research in Ho Chi Minh City. The ten-week program, led by the brilliant and kind Bac Hoai Tran and his fantastic teaching team, taught me more than just how to speak Vietnamese. My fellow language learners, including Scott Laderman, Ivan Small, Charles Keith, Mitch Aso, and others who would go on to produce important scholarship on Vietnam, joined me in imbibing Vietnamese culture, food, poetry, and song on the shores of lake Mendota. The people I met at SEASSI helped connect me with Vietnamese academics who would sponsor my research, introduced me to awesome young scholars like Jessica Elkind, Asia Nguyen, and Chi Ha who would be doing research in Vietnam contemporaneously, and became some of my favorite people.

Shortly after passing my comprehensive exams, thanks to a Fulbright fellowship and a few other generous funding sources, I headed to Ho Chi Minh City for fifteen months of research in the Vietnamese National Archives II and the General Sciences Library. It was that experience more than any other that transformed me from a student into a scholar. The training wheels were off. I had to figure out how to navigate a foreign archival—and political—system, and make sense of

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (New York: NCROL, 1999).

the source material I encountered in ways that departed significantly from the assumptions that underpinned my dissertation proposal. Every request I made of the archives—from basic access to finding aids, to requests for folders and photocopies of documents—had to be filtered through the local archivist to the government in Hanoi for deliberation. With limits on the number of files I could request, and on the number of pages the archives would reproduce, I spent some days pouring over boxes full of documents that turned out to be irrelevant, and others waiting for approval to view anything at all. But every once-in-a-while I opened a folder to find a treasure trove of insight, sometimes answering questions I didn't even know I had. During my time in Vietnam, the shape of my project shifted significantly. In some ways this reflected a frustrating inability to find what I needed to illuminate important historical questions. In other, more important, ways it resulted from attention to aspects of the past that I never would have known to look for if it were not for the months spent knee-deep in archival muck. On a more limited scale, the same went for my research in French and U.S. archives.

Just as valuable as my archival adventures was the opportunity to make Vietnamese friends, and to venture beyond the narrow comfort zone I had cultivated growing up as a white, middle class, Southern California mall rat. I reject the notion that my experience as a white person—I was often the only white person in view on my trips to Vietnam, Kenya, or elsewhere in the Global South—provides me any insight into the lives of Black and Brown people; after all, I carry my white privilege with me wherever I go, and my presence as a Western scholar abroad has uncomfortable imperial resonances. But I find that going to the places I want to write about, and surrounding myself with people from those places, is humbling in the best possible way. My Vietnamese friends understand their nation's history differently than I do, and they are authorities on their culture, heritage, and politics in ways that I can never become. I worried—and sometimes still worry—that this should disqualify me from writing about histories that I don't 'own.' Ultimately, though, it seems more fruitful to write about what I see, recognizing a broad range of authorities, and with the understanding that history is written to be revised.

I earned my Ph.D. in 2006 and spent the next two years as a Faculty Fellow in the history department at my alma mater, UCSB. Then, in early 2008, I accepted a job at Williams College. Overjoyed to be heading to the nation's top liberal arts college, I had no idea how much I would be tested professionally over the next several years. It turns out, Williams is top-ranked not just because of its large endowment, but because of its sincere commitment to quality undergraduate teaching. I was unprepared for what would be expected of me as a teacher—an aspect of the craft I had never really cultivated—and I stumbled a fair bit in my first semesters on the job. Confidence has never been my strong suit, and frankly I was intimidated by my brilliant, often demanding, students. My colleagues in the history department carried me through. A tenure-track job at Williams comes with ample privileges, but one I will never take for granted is a department that feels like family. Thirteen years into the job, thanks in no small part to my colleagues' support and encouragement, I have become the type of teacher that attracts great students to Williams. For me, that has taken a great deal of time and effort, at the expense of a bit more publishing. But I am no less proud of it than I would be of a new book launch.

Another wonderful thing about Williams is the encouragement I have received from colleagues and the administration to pursue new avenues of scholarship. I am finishing up a book about the Cold War and decolonization for the University Press of Kentucky—a book that would have been done by now were it not for the disruptions of pandemic parenthood—and have also been working on an international history of Kenyan runners. While deeply rooted in my academic interest in the imbricated histories of the Cold War and decolonization, and in the important political and diplomatic roles played by non-state actors, this topic also resonates with me personally. As a former NCAA Division I athlete, I have experience with the system that was so critical to the development of the Kenyan running industry, and to the experiences of that nation's athletic labor migrants. In 2016, just before my daughter was born, Williams College nominated me for a Mellon New Directions Grant, which enabled me to study Swahili and go back to school for a year of graduate work in anthropology. Professors Jennifer Burrell and Louise Burkhart, and my fellow students at the University at Albany, provided an invaluable education in anthropological methods as well as colonial and transnational anthropology. Without this I would have been ill equipped to conduct the field work that is so vital to uncovering aspects of the history of running in Kenya that cannot be found in traditional archives. Returning to the classroom as a student was also a good reminder that the scholar's craft is always a work in progress.

My current mid-career stage, amidst a pandemic that has upended just about every aspect of life and work, seems a great time to reflect on what I have learned about the scholar's craft. As my musings here suggest, people are incredibly important.

Historical scholarship is deeply collaborative at all stages, and that collaboration depends on the intellectual generosity of others, as well as our own willingness to share ideas before they are polished, and to take criticism as constructive (even if it isn't always packaged that way). Another important take away, for me, is that academic life comes with waves of disorientation. Moving to Vietnam was disorienting, relocating to Williams was disorienting, switching to a new geographic focus was disorienting, and having a baby that would become a factor in every professional decision I would make thereafter was disorienting. If you're anything like me, you'll take big steps before you feel ready, and spend some time fretting about your choices, wondering if you're in over your head. The uncomfortable truth may be that the scholar's craft requires a series of blind—or at least astigmatic—leaps, for if our paths are already on the map, someone else must have beat us to charting them.

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