

H-Diplo ESSAY 307

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

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This is Not a How-To Guide

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Reader: this H-Diplo series is full of great examples. Outstanding scholars with inspiring and even heartwarming stories that might inform your own journey. This one is the counter-example. I must confess: I did everything wrong.

For starters, history was not my favorite subject in high school. Instead, I avoided it. The only history I knew was from museums. It was encased in glass, with dioramas and stuffed dead animals. Instead, I read books I stumbled upon. I became obsessed with William Faulkner and J.D. Salinger and E.M. Forster. (It was a while until I found Doris Lessing and Vladimir Nabokov – his other books – and Zora Neale Hurston.) I wrote stories, a one-act play, and a regular column of political satire in my high school paper. My family ignored all of this. My father passed me news clippings about the expected growth in demand for computer scientists.¹

My next mistake was that I went to a university with a great History Department – U.C. Berkeley – and I avoided it. I wanted to be a writer, so of course I would major in English. I'm not sure how I decided that was the rule, but an unhappy encounter with Edmund Spenser's poetry made clear that this was also a mistake. I apologize, but I found it hard to get excited about memorizing passages from *The Faerie Queene*. I dropped the major after I had nearly completed it in two years. Having taken one brilliant Sociology intro class, a theory class, I concluded that then-qualitative social science would help me understand the world, making me a better writer. This was actually correct, but I continued a meandering path.

A summer internship made me want to change the world, not just write about it, and I found myself in the middle of the disability rights movement, as the aide to an important leader, Judy Heumann. It was after the movement had taken over a federal building, but was still during the direct action phase. This is why I know how to plan a barrier-free demonstration, and that those photographers at the sit-in are probably from the police department.

Law school was a concept I had also rejected, but my movement work led me to reconsider. Law was not as boring as I had thought. It could be a tool for social change. I also learned from the movement that law wasn't enough. Movements can be

¹ In his defense, my father was the child of Polish immigrants who became factory workers, and he shared glimpses of depression-era poverty in flashes of anger at his middle-class children. He was being practical, within the context of the world he knew. Drafted into the World War II infantry, he was pulled out of basic training, sent to Oakridge, Tennessee—to the Manhattan Project, and then used the G.I. Bill to become a nuclear physicist. As a small child, I noticed photographs on the wall of his employer, in pretty pastel colors. I didn't know, at first, that they were of nuclear clouds. Later, when he created his own small business, I was required to mop the floors of that little corner of the military industrial complex.

crisis-driven. There is little time or opportunity to think about the end state. Maybe graduate school could help me with that.

As you might guess, I was not through making colossal mistakes. I did not seek out advice about graduate school. This is probably a good thing, since I could have ended up a social scientist. But financially, it was insane, as this essay will reveal. I did one thing right: I went to Yale Law School. You can do it like graduate school: lots of seminars, lots of research and writing, brilliant teachers and classmates. YLS had serious issues in the early 80s. Still, I liked law school so much that I was thought to be too suspect to join the underground feminist organization that disrupted the overwhelmingly white male milieu with periodic posters left in the night displaying the sexist-quote-of-the-week offered by a professor in class.

It was law school that finally helped me to see that I really needed history. I took Constitutional Law from a Very Famous Professor. He was also a very angry professor. One day he was angry at the New Deal era Supreme Court for upholding the National Labor Relations Act. It would have been futile to object out loud in class, so I just whispered the counter-arguments to a classmate. But I also knew that I was not fully equipped, because the most important arguments were not about the case law but about history.

Before long, I was a joint degree grad student in American Studies, so that I could pursue history without abandoning literature and the social sciences. Just an M.A., I thought at first, another mistake. I must have been the only graduate student who didn't know the proper way to go about applying, and didn't know about "packages." Perhaps at this point I should explain that I was a very shy person, though I could be ok at hiding it. I just never asked for help. And when I did ask, it was too late. This is how a student with no savings and no family support ended up funding a Ph.D. with law school loans. I told you, this is not a how-to guide. (Two decades later, everything was finally paid off.) The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation² awarded me a Charlotte W. Newcombe Fellowship, which was a godsend, giving me one year to work on my dissertation.

How all of this was going to turn into a career remained unclear until Robert Cover, a brilliant legal historian, told me I should publish the seminar paper I wrote for him. Pro-tip: shy people need encouragement. Cover became the chair of my Ph.D. committee, but he died unexpectedly at the age of 42, after forever influencing legal thought.³ David Brion Davis kindly stepped in as chair. Adolph Reed was the most active interlocutor on my committee. I could not avoid thinking critically about race because, annoyingly, he kept calling on me in his seminar. Burke Marshall, himself a historic figure, rounded out the group.

With Cover's encouragement, I went on the law teaching job market. I did this well before finishing my Ph.D. because of course I needed a job. I did not screw this up, however, leading another Yale Law Prof to describe me as "the pin-up girl" of the law hiring conference – thinking that that was a way to complement my success.

I began teaching at the University of Iowa College of Law, where Linda Kerber would become a life-long mentor and friend. Civil rights history had become my focus. (Disability history did not exist when I was in grad school, and when I raised the possibility of a paper on disability in a history seminar, I was met with a blank stare.) One summer in law school I had worked for the ACLU national legal staff, and they sent me to Topeka, Kansas to do historical research for continuing litigation related to the original *Brown v. Board of Education* case. The Topeka history was so interesting that I decided it

² Recently renamed the Institute for Citizens and Scholars, <https://woodrow.org/news/citizens-scholars/>.

³ Martha Minow, Michael Ryan, and Austin Sarat, eds., *Narrative, Violence, and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

would be the focus of my dissertation.⁴ But something in the archives sparked a broader set of questions. The Topeka Board of Education decided to end segregation in 1953, before *Brown* was decided. When a reporter asked why, a board member replied that racial segregation was “not an American practice.” Using the language of Americanism in the Cold War years left me puzzling over the way the historiography of *Brown* was, at the time, disconnected from the history of the Cold War. I thought about everything I had learned about culture from John Agnew at Yale, and I wondered whether Cold War culture mattered to civil rights reform.

Once I started thinking about this, the primary sources looked different. The Cold War was all over the place. The U.S. Justice Department brief in *Brown* specifically invoked the impact of segregation on the U.S. Cold War mission, and it relied on a letter from Secretary of State Dean Acheson. Of course I wanted to find the Justice Department correspondence file. Then I ran into the best brick wall of my life. I was informed that the records were “attorney work product” and I could not see them. This, of course, was ridiculous, but even later, when Drew Days, my law school professor and Solicitor General of the United States, tried to help me get access, it was unsuccessful.⁵

I couldn't get to the Justice Department files, so I turned to the State Department files. I was an intrepid researcher at this point, but I knew nothing about State Department records. Serendipity intervened when a National Archives staffer put me in touch with the legendary archivist Sally Marks. She was patient, kind, interested, and non-dismissive. The records I needed had only recently become available. She showed me how to do the research, and introduced me to the decimal file numbering system. One number was like a seam in a gold mine. It soon became clear that this wasn't just a Cold War culture problem. *Brown* mattered to U.S. foreign affairs. And this, reader, is the unlikely tale of how I became a diplomatic historian. It happened in the archives.

I quickly wrote what is still my most cited article: “Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative.”⁶ Because critical race theorist Derrick Bell had suggested that the Cold War mattered to *Brown*, I sent him my draft, apologizing for imposing on him. “Far from being presumptive,” he wrote back, “receiving your article is the best Christmas gift I received this year.” (Reader: this is the second most important shy-person-booster-event.) The international turn in my work did not endear me to some in legal history and civil rights history, however, even though I did my best to explain that the international impact was fueled by the work of the grassroots movement. But before long, an effort to “internationalize” United States history set my work in a broader literature. The Organization of American Historians (OAH) and the *Journal of American History* were a lifeline at this point, promoting global approaches, and publishing my article about Josephine Baker's run-ins with the U.S. national security regime.⁷

I had been terrified about sending my article to Bell, but I was even more terrified of diplomatic historians. I was obviously not a member of the club. I was still trying to figure out the acronyms. Then someone – either Brenda Gayle Plummer or Gerald Horne – invited me to join their panel at “Rethinking the Cold War: A Conference in Memory of William Appleman Williams,” at the University of Wisconsin in the fall of 1991. I drove to the conference with my five-month-old,

⁴ Although I changed my dissertation topic, much of my Topeka research is published in Mary L. Dudziak, “The Limits of Good Faith: Desegregation in Topeka, Kansas, 1950–1956,” *Law and History Review* 5:2 (Fall 1987): 351–391.

⁵ I was given access at some point only to the results of another researcher's FOIA request, which was missing the kinds of records I sought. I was advised to bring a FOIA suit, but by then it was clear that the State Department records were a more important source for my work.

⁶ Dudziak, “Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative,” *Stanford Law Review* 41:1 (November 1988): 61–120 (accessible open access here: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1137993).

⁷ Dudziak, “Josephine Baker, Racial Protest, and the Cold War,” *The Journal of American History* 81:2 (September 1994): 543–570.

and this kept me from much of the brilliant proceedings, but Plummer and Horne would be crucial colleagues and sources of encouragement. They were the masters who introduced me to the field.

Then people kept inviting me to be on panels at Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations conferences. I went to my first meeting with my baby in tow, further reinforcing my alien status. Somehow a relationship blossomed, however, because SHAFRites were persistent. Later, I was on a plenary panel with Marilyn Young, who spoke brilliantly about the Korean War. She would become my next crucial friend and mentor. She demanded that I stick up for my ideas.

In later years, serendipity and sheer stubbornness continued to be my keys to success. My career path might have been less random and more sensible if I had more often bothered (or found the courage) to ask for advice. But at the end of the day, I achieved my childhood dream. After all, you are reading my words.

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