

H-Diplo ESSAY 325

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

16 March 2021

The Path from Iowa Farm Girl to Iowa Professor

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E325>

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My interests in global politics were sparked at a young age while growing up in north central Iowa. Farming communities are keenly aware of events in world politics that can affect the price of crops, land, and equipment. My parents were informed and engaged in politics and got me interested in participating in and studying politics at a young age. My mom helped organize local caucuses, usually at neighbors' farmhouses, and she volunteered at a voting site at the fertilizer plant where my dad worked. We bumped into political candidates in nearby cities and we experienced incredible access to political candidates as the first caucus state for presidential elections. We moved to the "big city" when I was 16 and I lived across the street from a retired schoolteacher (Vivian, also my daughter's name), who invited to me her house for coffee to discuss politics. I didn't fully appreciate those early access points to the study of politics and international relations (IR), but my background profoundly shaped the questions and theories that I found compelling in my academic journey. It is perhaps fitting that I am now the F. Wendell Miller Professor of Political Science at the University of Iowa, a named chair that was funded by an Iowan farmer.

In middle school and high school, I loved math and history classes. I took an economics class my senior year and became fascinated by the topic. I wrote a paper in favor of President Ronald Reagan's economic and tax policies and started having interesting debates with my grandfather as I sought to defend my arguments. I applied to only one college (Iowa State University) because of financial constraints but also because I had little guidance about where I could apply or how competitive I would be in other institutions. As a first-generation college student, I faced a higher learning curve for pursuing an academic degree, although one of my (five) sisters, Denise, attended a four-year college in Iowa and gave me invaluable advice. I entered college and declared myself as an economics major. Little did I know that an elective course I took my first semester, Introduction to World Politics, would change the trajectory of my life.

Ellen Pirro, the professor for my first political science class, was an incredible teacher who brought passion and energy to the classroom. I remember taking an intimidating quiz the first day of class progressing from questions I could answer (e.g. who was the U.S. president, the British prime minister), to questions that I could not (e.g. who are the Tamil Tigers, who is the leader of China). I wrote a paper for her class defending multinational corporations as a net good for economic development and received the most comments (red ink) I had ever seen on a paper, challenging most assertions I made. This inspired me to take more political science classes where I learned from several other amazing professors (Richard Mansbach, James McCormick, Jorgen Rasmussen) and where my love of international relations flourished. The department nominated me to attend the Student Conference on U.S. Affairs (SCUSA) at West Point and it was the first time I had ever flown on a plane. I was a double major in economics and political science by my third year and was considering going to law school like many political science majors. But a bad experience with a constitutional law class made me question that decision.

My advisor in economics was a female Ph.D. student. One day in office hours, I asked her what a Ph.D. was for and she told me she was studying to become a college professor. Such a career path had never even occurred to me and I immediately started talking with professors in political science about pursuing such a degree. Jim McCormick attended Michigan State

University for his Ph.D. and he encouraged me to apply there. I applied to several schools, but MSU gave me the best offer, in part because my background in economics (and math and statistics training) made me a good fit for their quantitative program. In 1991, I graduated from ISU and moved to East Lansing.

I was the youngest person in my cohort (22 years old) and was intimidated by my peers' much more extensive real-world experience. More than one had served in the Peace Corps. My first semester, I took a class on war with Gretchen Hower that was the most exciting class of my life. We read several books, including *The War Trap* and *The War Ledger*, and I was fascinated by the scientific study of warfare. The Peace Science Society conference was held in Ann Arbor that year and I attended my first conference with a group of faculty and students from the department. I saw Kenneth Boulding presenting a paper in which he argued that having a military is like having a football team; you can't just practice. I saw Bruce Bueno de Mesquita (author of *The War Trap*) present research and I met several other scholars whose work we had read in my seminar. My exposure to the intellectual community was intoxicating.

In my second year, MSU hosted the International Studies Association (ISA) Midwest conference and I presented my first conference paper on military alliances. I was so nervous my face and neck became bright red during the presentation. A guy in the audience proceeded to tell me my work was wrong, my first exposure to the "real" academia. One of my grad student colleagues hosted a party at her house for conference participants. I went to the basement and was pouring myself a beer from a keg while talking to an older gentleman. After chatting for 15+ minutes, he introduced himself as Hayward Alker! The combination of intellectual and social events was one of the things I really enjoyed about academics.

I signed up for Scott Gates's international relations seminar in the spring semester of my first year and became exposed to the "isms" in the field. Most of my classes had students from multiple cohorts and some described the environment as a "battle of the egos," something that I enjoyed very much (I am very competitive). Our IR group (including Renee Agress, Chris Butler, Cooper Drury, Erick Duchesne, Seonjou Kang, Dave Lektzian, Sherry Quinones, Brandon Prins, and Mark Souva) was very cohesive. We had workshop sessions every Friday where we presented and received feedback on our work. We socialized at restaurants and bars, played poker together at professors' houses, and engaged in epic Magic the Gathering battles.

I spent my fourth year in graduate school at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 1994-1995. Gretchen Hower was a student of Dina Zinnes and suggested that I go to UIUC to learn more about dynamic modeling from Zinnes and Robert Muncaster. I spent time in the Merriam Lab where I met several other talented graduate students (including Paul Hensel and Mark Crescenzi) and was exposed to incredible academic discussions (and card games at Murphy's Pub) every Friday. Dina also hosted many social events at her house with excellent wine and company. I took social choice theory with Brian Sala and interacted frequently with Paul Diehl and both professors welcomed me warmly to the department.

When I returned to East Lansing, I had to commit to a dissertation project, which I thought would be a game theory model of alliances and war. When this project fell apart for various reasons, it morphed into an empirical project where the plan was to take treaties coded by other alliance scholars in the 1970s and update them. When the box of materials arrived in the mail, and I soon realized there was nothing workable in that box, I cried and then figured out my next moves. Scott Gates wrote an MA thesis on the monadic democratic peace theory (the idea that democracies fight fewer wars than non-democracies), something I had read earlier in grad school. We were working on a paper together on the dyadic democratic peace at a time when this field was just taking off. I made the decision to switch dissertation topics to the democratic peace, with Scott and Gretchen as co-chairs and Jim Granato and Paul Abramson as committee members.

My theory and analyses on the democratic peace focused on the systemic level of analysis which allowed me to take full advantage of my time series training at MSU (I took 11 modeling and statistics classes in grad school and served as a TA and later instructor in the ICPSR summer program). At my first ISA conference in 1996, I met Nils Petter Gleditsch and he

invited me to apply for a research position in Trondheim, Norway to oversee the Polity 3d coding project.¹ I jumped at this amazing experience and lived in Norway for several months. While there, I honed my dissertation theory, which built upon Kant's arguments about how the experience of warfare encourages the creation of better, more democratic institutions. I found that large wars in history were the drivers of more democratic countries and that as the percentage of democracies increased, war became less likely.² Thus, there was an evolutionary trend towards less war and more democracy. I also showed that the effect varied over time; democracy has a stronger pacifying effect after 1945 than in earlier periods. Later research also showed that the effect of international organizations on peace, another leg of the Kantian tripod, had time varying effects as well.³

The job market in 1996 produced two possibilities: the University of Buffalo or Florida State University. FSU was attractive not only for weather reasons, but also because Paul Hensel was in the department along with two other colleagues I met at a 1994 Stanford (Hoover Institute) summer camp in rational choice modeling, Ashley Leeds and Will Moore. Moving to Tallahassee was a good move because I met my husband Steve Mitchell early in 1998, married him a year later, and had a daughter while on the tenure track. Those early days at FSU were some of the happiest times of my academic and personal life. My intellectual and social lives intertwined seamlessly, and I received fabulous mentoring from Will Moore and many others (for example, Charles Barrilleaux, Bill Berry, Tom Carsey, Evan Ringquist, and Dale Smith). I began two projects early on that stemmed from my interests in alliances and the democratic peace. One involved collaboration with Ashley Leeds to return to my interests in coding the content of military alliance treaties. I helped to compile and code data for the Alliance Treaty Obligation and Precision (ATOP) dataset for the 1816-1944 period.⁴ We challenged an argument in the literature about allies being unreliable partners, finding instead that in war, allies do as promised 75% of the time.⁵ My friendship with Ashley was also critical for the later development of the Women in Conflict Studies (WICS) group, and encouraged me to form the Journeys in World Politics mentoring program for women in international relations with Kelly Kadera at the University of Iowa.

The second project I worked on during the initial states of the tenure track was coauthored with Brandon Prins and coded the issues at stake in militarized interstate disputes (MIDS) between democracies. We found interestingly that 40%+ of jointly democratic MIDs involved competition over marine resources such as fish and oil.⁶ Paul Hensel started the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) project focused on diplomatic conflicts between countries over territory (contiguous land borders or islands). We discussed the possibility of adding water issues and successfully competed for several NSF grants to code river and maritime claims. Our issue approach was distinct from other work on conflict because we sought to

¹ Sara McLaughlin, Scott Gates, Håvard Hegre, Ranveig Gissinger, and Nils Petter Gleditsch, "Timing the Changes in Political Structures: A New Polity Database," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42:2 (1998): 231-242.

² Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, Gates, and Hegre, "Evolution in Democracy-War Dynamics," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 43:6 (1999): 771-792.

³ Christopher C. Anderson, Mitchell, and Emily Schilling, "Kantian Dynamics Revisited: Time Varying Analyses of Dyadic IGO-Conflict Relationships," *International Interactions* 42:4 (2016): 644-676.

⁴ Brett Ashley Leeds, Jeffrey M. Ritter, Mitchell, and Andrew G. Long, "Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions, 1815-1944," *International Interactions* 28:3 (2002): 237-260.

⁵ Leeds, Long, and Mitchell, "Reevaluating Alliance Reliability: Specific Threats, Specific Promises," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44:5 (2000): 686-699.

⁶ Mitchell, and Brandon C. Prins. 1999. "Beyond Territorial Contiguity: Issues at Stake in Democratic Militarized Interstate Disputes." *International Studies Quarterly* 43:1 (1999): 169-183.

understand how conflicts evolved from diplomatic points of disagreement to the threat/use of force or war.⁷ Most conflict research by the late 1990s was still focused on data compilations of wars, militarized disputes, or crises, but we didn't know as much about which types of diplomatic issues escalated into these severe clashes. For example, while territorial issues were shown by John Vasquez and others to be the leading cause of war in history, ICOW data collection of 843 territorial claims from 1816-2001 showed that half of these conflicts were resolved purely through peaceful negotiations.⁸ Issues that involved more tangible stakes such as cross-border river or maritime conflicts experienced militarization less often than issues characterized by intangible stakes (e.g. historic homelands, sacred sites).⁹ In addition to showing that issue salience and conflict history were important predictors of war¹⁰, we also focused attention on the role of institutions for maintaining peace.¹¹ My interests in diversionary conflict (and background in economics) showed that domestic economic conditions¹² (e.g. inflation, foreign direct investment¹³) also helped us understand the timing¹⁴ of conflict initiation between pairs of countries with diplomatic conflicts.

I taught a class on conflict management and assigned an article by Richard Bilder, a law professor, who argued that countries that accept the jurisdiction of international courts like the International Court of Justice (ICJ) should be better able to reach agreements out of court. This idea really intrigued me, and I recruited some students (John Brady, Effie Charalampaki, Jackie DeMerritt) to help me collect data on states' optional clause declarations recognizing the ICJ's jurisdiction. My first look at the topic showed that there were more frequent peaceful negotiations over territorial disputes for pairs of countries that jointly recognized the court's jurisdiction, consistent with Bilder's conjecture. But Peace Science audience members wanted to know more about the factors that produced such commitments in the first place. Emilia Justyna Powell, a Ph.D. student in FSU's program, took my graduate class the following semester and was looking for a paper topic idea. I suggested she look at why countries make ICJ declarations, a topic which was a good fit given her background in law. She developed a very interesting theory that civil law countries are more accepting of ICJ jurisdiction because the court follows rules and norms similar to Roman law and she expanded upon this idea in her dissertation. We coauthored a book that looks more generally at how domestic legal traditions (civil, common, Islamic) influence states' willingness to join international courts (ICJ, ICC), how they design their commitments (e.g. the number and types of reservations), and what

⁷ Paul R. Hensel and Mitchell, "From Territorial Claims to Identity Claims: The Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) Project," *Conflict Management & Peace Science* 34:2 (2017): 126-140.

⁸ Bryan A. Frederick, Hensel, and Christopher Macaulay. 2017. "The Issue Correlates of War Territorial Claims Data, 1816–2001." *Journal of Peace Research* 54:1 (2017): 99-108.

⁹ Hensel and Mitchell. 2005. "Issue Indivisibility and Territorial Claims," *GeoJournal* 64:4 (2005): 275-285.

¹⁰ Mitchell Hensel, Thomas E. Sowers II, and Clayton L. Thyne, "Bones of Contention: Comparing Territorial, Maritime, and River Issues," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52:1 (2008): 117-143.

¹¹ Mitchell and Hensel, "International Institutions and Compliance with Agreements," *American Journal of Political Science* 51:4 (2007): 721-737.

¹² Mitchell and Prins, "Rivalry and Diversionary Uses of Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48:6 (2004): 937-961.

¹³ Hoon Lee and Mitchell, "Foreign Direct Investment and Territorial Disputes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56:4 (2012): 675-703.

¹⁴ Mitchell and Thyne, "Contentious Issues as Opportunities for Diversionary Behavior," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 27:5 (2010): 461-485.

effect these commitments have on interstate cooperation (returning to my original question).¹⁵ I grew more interested in international institutions and courts as conflict managers, which led to additional research on how countries bargain in the shadow of international courts and the development of several new classes on institutions and courts.

A job opportunity at the University of Iowa became a possibility and the idea of living close to my family was exciting. I arrived in 2004 and learned very shortly thereafter that my friend and colleague, Kelly Kadera, had an outside offer. We discussed some possible requests in her counteroffer, including funding for a workshop to mentor women in IR. Kelly was a student of Dina Zinnes and an Illinois Ph.D. and we had met when I first spent time at UIUC. We agreed that creating something like the Juniors Masters workshops that Dina organized would be productive. We had both observed several talented women leave academia since we had joined the field, including my female advisor (Gretchen), and we sought along with other WICS members to remedy the situation through the creation of better mentoring programs for women in IR. We began the first of twelve Journeys in World Politics workshops in the fall of 2004 and received multiple grants to continue the program.

We read many pieces about gender biases in academia, which sparked my interests in collecting systematic data on citations, service burdens, tenure/promotion, and salaries. This led to a series of articles showing that women's research was cited less often than men's work,¹⁶ that publications did not influence promotion for women like it did for men,¹⁷ that women took on much more academic service than their male peers,¹⁸ and that women's salaries in political science were \$4000 below those of their male peers.¹⁹ I experienced gender biases on the job market firsthand, interviewing for a dozen positions and getting zero offers. My involvement in several disciplinary committees (e.g. ISA Status of Women Committee) helped push forward some changes, such as ISA journals agreeing to collect gender data for submissions, reviewers, and publications. I was also personally transformed by reading this research. The gendered patterns of recommendation letters, such as shorter length and more qualifiers (or doubt raisers), were found in my own letters, much to my horror. I became more aware of my implicit biases and sought to address them when I was department chair (2013-2016) and served on other committees in the department and university. I encouraged the dean to change the process for selection of department chairs to create more diversity. My own life taught me valuable lessons about work-life balance issues, as my productivity increased significantly when my husband Steve stayed at home and took over household responsibilities when we moved to Iowa. Like many working women, I also wondered whether this reversal of roles was a net positive or negative for my daughter.

My time at Iowa has expanded my research and teaching in many productive directions. The undergraduate students on our campus are highly engaging and I have worked with dozens as research assistants and coauthored projects with several students.²⁰ I have been fortunate to work with many amazing Ph.D. students (Emilia Powell, Clayton Thyne, Hoon Lee,

¹⁵ Mitchell and Emilia Justyna Powell, *Domestic Law Goes Global: Legal Traditions and International Courts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁶ Michelle L. Dion, Jane L. Sumner, and Mitchell, "Gendered Citation Patterns Across Political Science and Social Science Methodology Fields," *Political Analysis* 26:3 (2018): 312-327.

¹⁷ Vicki L. Hesli, Jae Mook Lee, and Mitchell. 2012. "Predicting Rank Attainment in Political Science: What Else Besides Publications Affects Promotion?" *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45:3 (2012): 475-492.

¹⁸ Mitchell and Hesli, "Women Don't Ask? Women Don't Say No? Bargaining and Service in the Political Science Profession," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 46:2 (2013): 355-369.

¹⁹ Claypool, Vicki Hesli, Brian David Janssen, Dongkyu Kim, and Mitchell. 2017. "Determinants of Salary Dispersion among Political Science Faculty." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50:1 (2017): 146-156.

²⁰ For example, Kelly Daniels and Mitchell, "Bones of Democratic Contention: Maritime Disputes," *International Area Studies Review* 20:4 (2017): 293-310.

Stephen Nemeth, Youngwan Kim, Zahid Choudhury, Mark Nieman, Olga Chyzh, Sojeong Lee, JongHwan Han, Yooneui Kim, Bomi Lee, Cody Schmidt) and their interests have pulled me in new directions. Clayton Thyne, my first student at Iowa, was my RA for two years and we coauthored several papers together. His dissertation focused on the onset, duration, and consequences of civil wars and I developed a new class on the topic to learn more about the literature. This led eventually to an edited book with Dave Mason on what we know about the causes and consequences of civil wars.²¹ Sojeong Lee's first year paper in my water and conflict class considered how countries in the Aral Sea basin traded oil and water resources, something we expanded into an article.²² A recent publication with Bomi Lee and Cody Schmidt pushes my research in the direction of climate change and interstate conflict²³, intersecting well with a new project with my colleague Elise Pizzi on natural disasters, governments' policy responses, and conflict.²⁴ Having an amazing group of IR scholars around me (Kelly Kadera, Brian Lai, Elizabeth Menninga, Alyssa Prorok, Thania Sanchez) helped me move research in many directions while being grounded in my conflict and institutional roots.

I published a study in 2020 that describes the ICOW maritime claims data (270 claims from 1900-2010), the culmination of 20+ years of data collection.²⁵ My research shows how contention over maritime issues differ from territorial (and other) diplomatic issues. An earlier version of the paper was presented at a Naval War College "Bridging the Straits" conference in 2018 where I had the opportunity to present my research findings to naval officers and IR scholars. I have tried to expand the outreach of my work in the past decade, with frequent appearances on Iowa Public Radio, blog posts describing my findings, and interviews about my research.²⁶ I am currently working on a book project that will bring together my work on water issues to hone my theoretical and empirical contributions for a more general audience.

I have been asked why a person from a landlocked place like Iowa would study maritime conflicts and you can see from my story that I got there through a long and winding process. Perhaps given the importance of water for farmers, it is not surprising that I saw the connections between water, fishing resources, and conflict. Being raised by a family of strong women created the foundation for my own mentoring efforts for women in my field. My interests in democratic and international institutions were fostered by many influential professors and mentors in my career. Working with many of those mentors as coauthors (Chris Achen, Paul Diehl, Scott Gates, Nils Petter Gleditsch, Vicki Hesli, Will Moore, and John Vasquez) was an incredible opportunity for an Iowa farm girl like me.

Sara McLaughlin Mitchell is the F. Wendell Miller Professor of Political Science at the University of Iowa. She is the author of six books and more than fifty journal articles and chapters. She has received over 1.1 million dollars in grants. Her areas of expertise include international conflict, political methodology, and gender issues in academia. Professor Mitchell is

²¹ T. David Mason and Mitchell, *What Do We Know About Civil Wars?* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2016).

²² Sojeong Lee and Mitchell, "Energy Resources and the Risk of Conflict in Shared River Basins," *Journal of Peace Research* 56:3 (2019): 336-351.

²³ Cody J. Schmidt, Bomi K. Lee, and Mitchell, "Climate Bones of Contention: How Climate Change Influences Territorial, Maritime, and River Interstate Conflicts," *Journal of Peace Research* 58:1 (2001): 132-150.

²⁴ Mitchell and Elise Pizzi, "Natural Disasters, Forced Migration, and Conflict: The Importance of Government Policy Responses." Forthcoming, *International Studies Review*. Published online. <https://academic.oup.com/isr/advance-article/doi/10.1093/isr/viaa058/5893729>.

²⁵ Mitchell, "Clashes at Sea: Explaining the Onset, Militarization, and Resolution of Diplomatic Maritime Claims," *Security Studies* 29:4 (2020): 637-670.

²⁶ For more information, see <http://saramitchell.org/research.html>.

co-founder of the Journeys in World Politics workshop, a mentoring workshop for junior IR women. She received the ISA Quincy Wright Distinguished Scholar Award, a distinguished alumni award from Iowa State University, and she served as President of the Peace Science Society.