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The Life of a Historian

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Growing up on a farm in west-central Illinois, near the town of Augusta where I attended high school, I never imagined that I would become a professor of history at a major university. My father taught history at a different high school, but I took only the required course in this subject as it was less interesting than math and science. After graduation in 1959, having won a four-year state scholarship that would pay my tuition and fees, I enrolled at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, as a pre-med student in its new Edmund J. James Honors Program.

A biology professor, who directed the honors program, became my academic advisor. He encouraged me when my mid-term grades were lower than I was accustomed to earning. He very wisely told me that many other pre-med students came from high schools in the suburbs of Chicago where they had already learned what was new to me. He said they would begin to encounter new information during the last half of the semester and would be struggling because they had not developed the good study habits that I had already acquired. He was right. By the end of that semester, I was doing as well as other students. I earned an A in all of my math and science courses.

I continued as a pre-med student for three semesters, succeeding academically but becoming less interested in my career choice. The next semester I enrolled in two history courses, which I thoroughly enjoyed. Because I started in pre-med, I had fulfilled all of the college's math and science requirements and could concentrate on humanities and social sciences. In my junior year I declared history as my major but still did not know where this would lead me. I took a survey course on American history after 1865, which was taught by Cedric Cummins, a guest professor from the University of South Dakota. His class was at 8:00 a.m. in a large lecture hall. I was also in his recitation section. At 10:00 a.m. I had a sociology course in the same hall. Because there was no lecture there at 9:00 a.m. and I did not have another class at that time, I remained in my seat during the hour. Professor Cummins often stopped and talked with me as he was leaving. Sometime during that semester, he told me that jobs were available in history at colleges and universities and that I should consider becoming a historian. That idea began to shape my decisions. By taking courses during the summer of 1962, I was able to graduate a semester early. With a major in history and a minor in philosophy I earned my B.A. in January 1963.

I became a graduate student in the Department of History during the second semester of my fourth year at the University of Illinois. Staying there was not only cheaper, it also had the advantage that I could remain close to Margery Marzahn, who would become my wife on August 24, 1963, and who still needed one more year to complete her degree. I earned my M.A. in history in August 1964 and continued as a Ph.D. student. I chose American history after 1789 as my major field and European history after 1815 as my secondary field. American history before 1789 and European history from 1648 to 1815 were my minor fields. Because I had taken several courses in ancient and medieval as well as modern European history and only a few in American history as an undergraduate, there were plenty of graduate lecture courses as well as seminars that I could take without duplication. Another reason for staying at the University of Illinois was the opportunity to study with Professor Norman A. Graebner. I wanted to become an American diplomatic historian, and I knew he was one of the leading scholars in the field.

As a Ph.D. student, I was a teaching assistant in 1964-1965 and then Professor Graebner's research assistant the next two years. After finishing her undergraduate degree, Marge earned a M.A. in history and also worked in the university library. We were both eager to finish our education and move to wherever I could find a job.

For my doctoral dissertation I decided to examine U.S.-German relations after the First World War.¹ Having never studied a foreign language before college, I had taken four semesters of German to fulfill this requirement. I had selected German, thinking it would be the best choice for a pre-med student. I had also learned enough French to pass the exam and fulfill the department's requirement that Ph.D. students in history had to know two foreign languages. I wanted to use relevant historical records not only of the United States but also of a foreign country for my dissertation. The archives of the German Foreign Office for the Weimar era had been seized by the United States and the Allies at the end of the Second World War. Many of these documents were available on microfilm, which enabled me to use them without traveling to Germany—a great advantage for a graduate student on a very limited budget. The university library, one of the best in the country, purchased the microfilm that I needed at Professor Graebner's request.

While working on my dissertation, I entered the job market in the fall of 1966. I told Marge that I would like to get a position someplace like the University of Nebraska. As a child I had been in Lincoln when my family visited close friends in the state. To my great surprise, I received a phone call from the chair of the Department of History at the University of Nebraska, Professor James A. Rawley, who invited me for an interview. That interview in December 1966 resulted in a job offer, which I promptly accepted. After returning home, I met Professor Robert W. Johannsen, the chair of the Illinois History Department, on campus and told him about my new job. I then learned that he had played a key role. He and Professor Rawley, two Civil War historians, had been together at the Southern History Association conference a few weeks earlier. During their conversation, Professor Rawley stated that his department was seeking to recruit an American diplomatic historian. Professor Johannsen replied that one of Professor Graebner's students was well qualified for the position. That soon led to the invitation for my interview. The job market did not operate at that time like it does now!

One senior professor at the interview told me that he worried I might not complete my dissertation and earn the Ph.D. before I moved to Nebraska. I was determined to prove him wrong. I defended my dissertation in August 1967. Marge and I had just purchased a house in Lincoln and would soon move there. Norman and Laura Graebner stopped in Urbana-Champaign long enough for my defense. They were returning from Nebraska, where they had visited her relatives, en route to Charlottesville, Virginia, where he would join the history faculty at the university as a distinguished professor. I was his last Ph.D. student at the University of Illinois.

In Nebraska I soon learned that football was the preeminent sport. I knew little about the game because my high school did not have football and, essentially, neither did the University of Illinois. Because football was the common topic during the fall in conversations with friends and colleagues, I could not help but learn despite my general lack of interest. My game was baseball. During my senior year in high school, our team made it to the sectional championship game—one victory away from the state tournament with the top sixteen teams in Illinois. In addition to three walks, I got seven hits out of twelve times at bat during tournament play. My seasonal batting average was 0.435, which seemed more important at the time than it does now.

Horse riding was also common in Nebraska. On the farm I had learned to ride a young horse, Mackie, for pleasure and work. We used him to move cattle from one field to another. During the summer of 1968, a friend from Illinois, who had just gone to Iowa State University after he earned a Ph.D. in chemistry, visited us in Lincoln. He wanted to ride a horse, so we went to a stable where we could rent horses by the hour near a large city park with a bridle trail. Having ridden some of their horses that would barely walk, except on the way back to the barn, I asked for one with some life. I was given a big stallion. The moment I landed in the saddle, he reared up as high as he could and then launched on a gallop as fast as he

¹ Lloyd E. Ambrosius, "The United States and the Weimar Republic, 1918-1923: From the Armistice to the Ruhr Occupation," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1967.

could run. I enjoyed a great ride. After returning to the stable, however, I learned that Marge, who was pregnant with our first child, had feared that she would be raising our baby by herself.

My academic career coincided with the emergence of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR), which would become a central part of my professional life. At the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians in Chicago during the spring of 1967, Professor Graebner met with several other distinguished historians of American diplomacy to organize the new society. He invited me to join him, so I attended the founding of SHAFR. I remained silent, making no contribution. I welcomed the opportunity to meet several historians in my chosen field whose books I had read. For the first SHAFR conference in 1975, I organized a panel and delivered a paper. After this session I met Klaus Schwabe, whose recent book I had just criticized. He did not hold that against me. He would later become a professor at the R-W Technical University in Aachen, Germany. He and I, along with our families, would become close friends. He too attended most SHAFR annual meetings, which gave us the opportunity to see each other almost every year for decades. We stayed in the same university dormitory during the early years and then shared a hotel room after SHAFR migrated to better accommodations. I attended almost all of SHAFR's annual meetings, except when I was in Europe, and published an article in the first volume of *Diplomatic History*, SHAFR's new journal in 1977.² Later I served on SHAFR's program and nominating committees and the committee for the Norman and Laura Graebner Award for Lifetime Achievement (and as chair of each for a year), and on the *Diplomatic History* editorial board. My connections and friendships with SHAFR members became an important and enriching part of my professional career.

Opportunities to spend extended time in Europe benefitted my scholarship and my life. Fortunately, Marge also welcomed these ventures abroad. Research in government archives and manuscript collections took me to many locations in Europe as well as the United States. She and I, along with our two young sons, went to Germany in 1972-1973, when I received a Fulbright Faculty Research Fellowship. My host for the year was Erich Angermann at the University of Cologne, where he had been appointed as the first professor specializing in American history at a German university after the Second World War. That year not only facilitated my research, it also helped improve my German, especially the spoken language.

Just a few years later, in 1977-1978, we went to Ireland, where I had been invited to become the second Mary Ball Washington Professor of American History at University College, Dublin (UCD). I taught a lecture course on American diplomatic history during the twentieth century and a seminar for honors students on the same subject. The U.S. State Department reviewed the professorship that year, including an interview with me, to decide whether to include it as one of the Fulbright Distinguished Professorships. Incorporating it into the Fulbright program provided funding for a Mary Ball Washington Professor at UCD each year, not every other year as the original private endowment allowed. The U.S. ambassador to Ireland, William V. Shannon, who had helped establish the endowment, played a key role in this transition.

My last guest professorship in Europe came in 1996, when I received a Fulbright Faculty Research and Teaching Fellowship at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. Professor Detlef Junker had invited me to replace him while he was serving as director of the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C. By then he and his wife had also become our good friends. He wanted me to teach the lecture course on American foreign relations in the twentieth century that he had offered each year and a reading seminar for advanced students in this field. He asked me to come for a full year, but I could only get away from the University of Nebraska for a semester as I was serving as chair of the department. Marge joined me in Heidelberg after she finished the spring semester at Kansas State University, where she was a professor of political science. In 1986 she had completed a Ph.D. in political science at the University of Nebraska.³

² Ambrosius, "The Orthodoxy of Revisionism: Woodrow Wilson and the New Left," *Diplomatic History* 1 (Summer 1977): 199-214.

³ Margery M. Ambrosius, "Economic Development, Occupational Interests, and the American States: Policy Adoption and Effectiveness," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1986.

My experience in Heidelberg culminated in a strange twist. When I attended the SHAFR annual meeting in Washington, D.C. in 1997, Detlef and I had dinner together. When he picked me up to drive to the restaurant, he said he had an item of business to discuss with me. I told him that I too had something to discuss. Over dinner he shared with me that his history colleagues at Heidelberg had told him they greatly respected my work as guest professor in 1996 but they were disappointed with the historian whom he invited to come the next year. He asked me to suggest someone who would be a good choice. I replied that the previous evening I had dined with Norman Graebner, who told me he would welcome a new experience, given his wife's recent death. He thought teaching at a major European university might be an ideal change. I promised him that I would share this news with Detlef the next evening. Detlef and I were delighted that I had the best possible answer to his question. Early the next week, after he contacted his colleague who was chair of the history faculty, Norman received an official invitation from Heidelberg for the following year. He applied for a Fulbright Faculty Research and Teaching Fellowship, for which I wrote a letter of recommendation, and spent a semester in 1998-99 as a guest professor in Heidelberg. It was a unique reversal for me to write the recommendation for my Ph.D. mentor, but an easy task as he was so eminently qualified.

As a student during the 1960s, the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam greatly influenced my perspective on American and world history. I favored racial equality and opposed the war. More than anyone besides my parents, Professor Graebner shaped my thinking.⁴ As a realist in his interpretation of international relations, he criticized American presidents during the twentieth century for failing to match ends and means in their foreign policies when they promised more than they could deliver. He saw Woodrow Wilson as a prime example of this failure. He believed the Cold War presidents often exaggerated foreign threats, viewing their application of the "domino theory" to Vietnam as the consequence of this misdirected thinking. In his judgment, North Vietnam could never pose the same danger to U.S. national interests that Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan had during the Second World War. In 1965 he held one of the first teach-ins at universities to protest against the Vietnam War.

Professor Graebner understood, long before most American historians, that the United States was an empire. His first book, *Empire on the Pacific* (1955), rejected Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis about the westward expansion of democracy across the American continent.⁵ Decades later the New Western History finally embraced this interpretation of the nation's imperial past and questioned the Turner thesis. The widespread denial of American imperialism, except for the so-called aberration in 1898, had prevented other historians from recognizing that the United States, as an empire, was repeating the same mistakes as France in Southeast Asia. As Professor Graebner's student, I gained confidence in my own realist critique of America's international relations. I also benefitted from the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's historical writings and his advocacy of Christian realism.⁶

During the second semester of my first year at the University of Nebraska, I taught the history of U.S. foreign relations after 1900 while we all experienced the trauma of 1968. From the Tet offensive to President Lyndon B. Johnson's decision not to run for reelection, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, it looked like the United States was losing its war abroad and unraveling at home. I devoted my last three lectures to the origins of U.S. involvement in Vietnam during the early Cold War and the military escalation during the 1960s. I criticized American presidents from Harry Truman to Johnson for exaggerating the threats and ignoring the costs. Although I knew that the chair of the Department of History, who had just come here from the U.S. State Department to teach American military history, supported the war, I decided to exercise my academic freedom to offer my critique. To his credit, he never held it against me. Years later, after the United States had lost the war and withdrawn from Vietnam, I looked back on my lectures in 1968,

⁴ Norman A. Graebner, *A Twentieth-Century Odyssey: Memoir of a Life in Academe* (Claremont: Regina Books, 2001).

⁵ Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* (New York: Ronald Press, 1955)

⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952); Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

priding myself for having been more discerning on America's involvement in Vietnam than the officials in Washington. I gained more self-confidence about my understanding of history.

In my first book, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition* (1987), I examined the president's role in creating the League of Nations at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and the fight in the United States in 1919-20 over the Versailles Treaty with Germany.⁷ My research in the United Kingdom and Germany, as well as at American libraries and archives, informed my critical interpretation of Wilson's peacemaking. I included a detailed account of the German government's position on the League, but the reviewers of my book overlooked this feature. I was placing the peacemaking in the framework of international history, but they assessed my interpretation from the perspective of domestic U.S. politics. They also typically held more favorable views of Wilson's liberal internationalism and did not welcome my realist critique. I argued that Henry Cabot Lodge and most other Republican senators advocated alternative concepts of American internationalism, not isolationism like Wilson alleged. By insisting that only his vision of a new world order was acceptable, and that any compromise on the peace treaty would sacrifice God's will, he prevented the United States from entering the League of Nations and potentially playing a more constructive role in European international relations after the First World War.

Although my interpretation differed substantially from that of the Princeton historian Arthur S. Link, who was widely respected as the foremost authority on Woodrow Wilson, we enjoyed a good relationship. Behind the scenes he encouraged the Cambridge University Press editor to publish my book. He had asked me to share my manuscript with him while he was editing the last volumes of *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (1966-1994) because he did not want to miss anything that I had discovered. At several history conferences, when we met in the book exhibit hall, he invariably asked me to sit down for a long conversation. He would tell me about the latest documents he was editing in the hope of convincing me to accept his favorable view of Wilson. I took that as an expression of respect for my scholarship. Less rigidly ideological than some of his students and disciples, he never allowed the differences between our perspectives to harm our friendly relationship. I complimented him on his monumental achievement in editing Wilson's papers after the publication of the last volume.

During the 1990s I served as chair of the Department of History for five years. I replaced a colleague one year when he was on leave, and then two years later was appointed to a regular term. During the time between my acting and regular appointments, I served on the university's Academic Planning Committee when the university faced a serious budget cut. The chancellor and senior vice chancellor for academic affairs, both interim appointees, proposed drastic cuts in academic programs that would have resulted in the firing of tenured faculty and, particularly, of women. In the committee behind closed doors, the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences resisted the dismissal of tenured faculty and I argued for gender equity. At one meeting I attempted to persuade the senior vice chancellor that firing so many women who were tenured faculty would cost the university more in legal fees and settlements than it would save, but he vehemently opposed me. The committee, however, voted to support what my dean and I had advocated. A new chancellor quickly solved the budget crisis without firing any tenured faculty. The dean began to recruit me, first to serve as an associate dean and then as chair of the department. I declined the first but accepted the latter.

I experienced more unexpected conflict after a new dean came to the university. On several occasions he told the chairs and directors of departments and other units in the college what I knew to be false. Whenever I had heard the new senior vice chancellor state the opposite in the Academic Planning Committee, I could not remain silent while the dean misled my colleagues. I shared with them what I knew. He never attempted to correct me or deny the accuracy of what I said, but I'm certain he did not appreciate my words.

This dean also sought to control departments by dividing and conquering the faculty. He circulated false rumors in an attempt to turn my colleagues against me. They soon learned and supported me instead. I'm certain he did not like this

⁷ Ambrosius, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition: The Treaty Fight in Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

either. Soon after I had returned from Heidelberg, he invited me to his office with a disingenuous offer to help me deal with my supposedly unhappy colleagues. He claimed there were serious problems, although I had seen the data from the annual survey of my leadership that showed that all but a couple of my colleagues ranked me at or near the top in all categories. I surprised him by submitting my resignation as chair with a ninety-day notice, making it effective in November. That panicked him because the senior vice chancellor would want to know why I was resigning in the middle of the semester. He begged me to take back my letter of resignation and continue as chair for the remainder of the academic year. I did not take back my letter, but after he put his request in writing, I agreed to serve as chair until the next summer. For the remainder of that academic year the dean completely changed his behavior and treated me with the utmost respect. He soon left for another university after his own review by the vice chancellor.

I continued to focus my scholarship on Wilson, although, unlike most historians who have written extensively about him, I remained critical. Because he was so articulate and his speeches, letters and other writings are so extensive, I saw him as an excellent way for me to address a much broader range of questions about the history of U.S. foreign relations. In articles and books, *Wilsonian Statecraft* (1991) and *Wilsonianism* (2002), I assessed his presidential leadership and his legacy of liberal internationalism.⁸ Later presidents, from John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush, drew upon his worldview to justify wars in Vietnam and Iraq, while historians and political scientists who affirmed Wilsonianism were intellectually disarmed, unable to offer critiques of one failed venture after another.

I also edited two books, *A Crisis of Republicanism* (1990) and *Writing Biography* (2004), which resulted from conferences I organized for the Department of History.⁹ The first honored Jim Rawley on the occasion of his retirement. The second was the outcome of the first of a recurring series of symposia that the department hosted, thanks to a generous donor who had endowed them with a gift to the university foundation while I was chair.

My latest book, *Woodrow Wilson and American Internationalism* (2017), investigated the importance of religion and race in the president's worldview and statecraft.¹⁰ I had explored the religious and racial factors in his diplomacy in my earlier scholarship, but focused even more on them in my recent writings. His endorsement of *The Birth of a Nation*, the racist silent film in 1915 that glorified the role of the Ku Klux Klan in denying racial equality to African Americans after the Civil War, was not just significant for domestic American history. It also provided a key to understanding Wilson's vision for a new world order after the First World War. Likewise, his liberal Christianity profoundly shaped his diplomacy at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and especially his refusal to compromise with Republican senators during the subsequent treaty fight. In common with other Protestant advocates of the Social Gospel, he affirmed that the United States could even help create the kingdom of God on earth,

After forty-eight years on the history faculty at the University of Nebraska, I retired in 2015. For the past decade I had been the Samuel Clark Waugh Distinguished Professor of International Relations. I received the university's Louise Pound-George Howard Distinguished Career Award. I had been elected in 2012 to a two-year term as vice president of the Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (SHGAPE) and then two more years as its president in 2015-16.

⁸ Ambrosius, *Wilsonian Statecraft: Theory and Practice of Liberal Internationalism during World War I* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1991); Ambrosius, *Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson and World War I," *Passport: The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Review*, 48 (April 2017): 31-39; Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson and Wilsonianism a Century Later," *Passport: The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Review* 51 (January 2021): 38-42.

⁹ Ambrosius, ed., *A Crisis of Republicanism: American Politics during the Civil War Era* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990); Ambrosius, ed., *Writing Biography: Historians & Their Craft* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Ambrosius, *Woodrow Wilson and American Internationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Retirement allowed me to fulfill my responsibilities to SHGAPE and also finish the work on *Woodrow Wilson and American Internationalism*. Along with SHAFR, SHGAPE has been an important part of my professional life.

Marge and I began my retirement by taking a trip to Turkey, where she had long wanted to travel, and to Germany to visit friends. She had already retired from Kansas State University. Both of us could look back on our academic careers with joy. Unfortunately, she suffered a stroke and died on January 30, 2018. I am still blessed with our two sons and their families. They also learned the scholar's craft. Even in retirement I am fairly active as a historian—still enjoying the career choice I made six decades ago.

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