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## *The Unknown Unknowns*

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Two-time defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously remarked that there are known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns.<sup>2</sup> Scholars and researchers aim at the known unknowns but should remain receptive to the unknown unknowns that may reveal themselves and upend the analysis. Be open to those who disagree; sometimes they are right. Reassessment is a virtue not a fault. My study of Russia, China, and Japan began with false knowns, turned toward elusive unknowns, and has required continual reassessment.

*Formative Years:* I grew up amidst nuclear bomb tests, civil rights marches, the Vietnam War, three draft-age brothers, and grownups bitterly divided over U.S. Soviet policy. Pulitzer-prize winning photos showing a South Vietnamese general's point-blank execution of a Vietcong officer and the napalming of nine-year-old girl remain vivid memories. I wondered why the United States was in Vietnam and whether the Soviet Union was as evil as some said. In college, I began learning more about the world, starting with neighboring Latin America.

In 1978 two years before the Shining Path insurgency emerged, for my undergraduate thesis I interviewed Peruvian diplomats, journalists, scholars, businessmen, and religious leaders about freedom of expression for a special concentration in Latin American studies and human rights. One lawyer made me feel as if she wanted to flay me alive. I was not far off. Many of her future clients would be detained Shining Path insurgents. White privilege enable me to fenagle a press pass (based on my affiliation with my college newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*). The pass got me through the police cordon and into the national assembly, where legislators were screaming at each other rather than conducting any discernable business—freedom of expression on steroids. It turns out that meaningful expression depends on a complementary willingness to listen.

Travel to East Germany in 1979 taught me lessons concerning police states and consumer goods. The nighttime train ride to West Berlin, located deep in East Germany, took me past a succession of well-lit, well-patrolled, but empty train platforms with silhouetted, assault-weapon bearing soldiers with German shepherds. Day trips to East Berlin required minimum currency conversions into Eastern-bloc aluminum coins. After spending some of them on memorably inedible chocolate, I gave the rest to a subway kiosk attendant, attracting unwanted attention from a police officer. I concluded that a system so vocally dedicated to workers produced remarkably bad consumer products and that the promised socialist democracy was

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<sup>1</sup> The ideas presented are those of the author.

<sup>2</sup> <https://archive.ph/20180320091111/http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636>.

actually a suffocating dictatorship. This was my first contact with the Big Lie that attempts to mask the disconnect between the liberating theory versus the despotic practice of Communism.

*The Alienation of Labor:* After my graduation, recessions ruined the job market, so I spent summer school studying accounting (boring) and computer science (then as now, a subject with high employability). While writing an accounts payable program package in my day job, I studied Russian at night. Soon one boss locked out the other boss, who had walked off with the hard drive. The computer code and office politics consuming my days gave an unMarxist meaning to the term, “alienation of labor.” I felt as if I were slowly dying, one boring day at a time. To align my interests with the job market, I hoped that studying both Russia and China would lead to employment either at a small college as a jack of all minor trades or in the federal government as an analyst. I assumed Russia would remain an important country because it had been for centuries. Instead, Russia became unimportant for the two decades after the collapse of Communism that occurred mid-Ph.D. So much for life’s certainties.

Graduate school entailed interdisciplinary course work and hard skills acquired from language study, with the addition of German, Chinese (Classical and modern), Russian, and Japanese to my grade-school French and Spanish. Upon graduating from Columbia’s School for International and Public Affairs in 1984, I migrated to the History Department, where Russia would become my major field and China my minor one.

Sadly, the two primary historians of Russia despised each other but colluded to avoid hiring a specialist in Soviet history, a period they thought was best left to the political scientists. The relevant political scientist made headlines for propositioning horrified grad students.<sup>3</sup> He retired a decade later in good standing. After completing the course work for two Ph.D.s, along with certificates from the East Asian and Russian institutes, I inquired about receiving an MA in history for the completed coursework, but gave up when I was told that it would cost one year’s tuition. Once I had defended my dissertation, I never again set foot on Columbia’s campus as a matter of principle. My grandmother said one learns more from other people’s mistakes than anything else. By that measure Columbia provided a superb education. It was also an excellent dating service, where I met my husband, the kindred spirit also intent on studying Russia and China with the travel plans to match.

*Books in the Basement:* When searching for a dissertation topic by perusing the Russo-Chinese collection in the East Asian library basement, I noticed that Chinese authors, whether in the Qing, Republican, or Communist periods, and whether Nationalist or Communist sympathizers, titled their books, *A History of Russian Aggression in China*. The common title gave lie to the long-standing, erroneous known known of a Sino-Soviet monolith. I decided to study the evolution of the Russo-Chinese border, the two nations’ line of interaction. That resulted in my first book, *Imperial Rivals*.<sup>4</sup> It turns out that the land Russia took from the Chinese sphere of influence exceeded U.S. territory east of the Mississippi, which remains a cause for enduring resentment. Counterintuitively, Russia’s periods of greatest expansion corresponded with internal weakness, an unknown unknown, which is applicable to the recent Russian expansion into Ukraine.

Our research year in the Soviet archives beginning in the fall of 1988 occurred as demonstrations presaging the fall of Communism cascaded across Eastern Europe. Soviet newspaper coverage detailed newly discovered, Stalin-era, mass graves, answering in the affirmative the question concerning Soviet depravity, but begging the question of why. That June when Poland called elections, China called in tanks, with enduring consequences. We watched Tiananmen television coverage from Moscow. Former General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev earned his Nobel Peace prize by liberating Eastern Europe, while paramount leader Deng Xiaoping re-subjugated China. Tiananmen delayed our arrival in China by a half year until January 1990. We lived on Beijing University’s campus, surrounded at night by armored personnel carriers deployed to keep

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<sup>3</sup> Amy Bayer, “CU prof Bialer charged with sexual harassment, *Columbia Daily Spectator*, vol. 111, no. 51 (19 November 1986) <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19861119-01.2.2&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->.

<sup>4</sup> S.C.M. Paine, *Imperial Rivals: China, Russia, and Their Disputed Frontier* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1996).

students on campus rather than out of harm's way. I worked at the Qing archives in the Forbidden City and read untranslated Russian novels on the long commute.

The following year, Taiwan's Academia Sinica provided a congenial environment to write up our dissertations. The Taiwanese could finally visit their mainland relatives, which extinguished desires to reunify. Childhood memories of beloved relatives gave way to resentful family members blaming the well-off Taiwanese for the disasters of Communist rule and demanding compensation. In 1990 Taiwan had almost 40 % the GNP and 24 times the per capita GNP of China, but less than 2 % the population and 1 % the area.<sup>5</sup> China's economic wounds were self-inflicted. The Taiwanese had made different choices, producing different cumulative effects. By 2000, Taiwan would become a full-fledged democracy, undermining China's racist proposition that the Han and democracy were incompatible.

*Naptime Projects:* Upon graduation, I almost killed my career by having two children eighteen months apart and staying home with them for eight years. I made the right decision. Jobs are a means to pay the bills. Children are miracles. Family comes first. While my husband had two back-to-back post-docs at the Hoover Institution, I had a couple of short affiliations between babies, allowing me to send the revised dissertation to my publisher a week before the eldest arrived. Immediately after the youngest's birth, my husband took a job at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas, where every two hours, I either nursed or changed someone, and, in uninterrupted moments, completed page proofs and an index. My husband secured funding for multiple summers using Princeton University's archives, giving me a morning a week to roam its excellent nineteenth-century newspaper collection to explore international coverage of the First Sino-Japanese War. The research that became my second book revealed two more unknown unknowns: Japan's, not the West's, overwhelming military victory shattered the Confucian bedrock of Chinese civilization, and China lost the war from a failure of imagination not an inadequacy of resources.<sup>6</sup>

Eventually the children split their mornings at rival Baptist and Methodist play schools, while I wrote up the manuscript. On weekends, my husband took them to the zoo and a succession of playgrounds stops, delaying their return home until lunchtime. When they returned, I stopped writing, mid-sentence. Children taught me how to use time efficiently and that profound insights come from people of all ages; one should listen carefully to the young, particularly as one ages.

When it came time for the youngest to board the big yellow school bus for kindergarten, my husband encouraged me to test the job market. In 1999, I applied for every advertised job in Russian, Chinese, and Japanese history. In addition to interviews at the annual history convention, the Naval War College invited me directly for a campus interview. When trying to figure out which job it involved, I found two listings: the Japan ad I had answered on the teaching side, and a China job on the research side, which my husband then applied for and got.

He left a congenial job for a politically fraught job. I traded no job for the intellectual run of my life. The only other women at the college were secretaries. We suffered a common demeaning treatment by a subset of self-important white males. For any administrative help, I had to line up an 06 (the designation for a navy captain or army/air force/marine colonel) or nothing happened. The department chair let me know that no one with a brain had trouble spelling. So much for me. My lecture ratings were awful. Luckily his were worse.

*Teaching in My Discomfort Zone:* Over the years I have taught with army, navy, marine, air force, and Foreign Service officers and learned much from each co-moderator. My first year I was paired with a frank, unapologetically profane navy captain.

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce A. Elleman and Paine, *Modern China: Continuity and Change, 1644 to the Present*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 489-93, 529, 540-3; <https://knoema.com/atlas/Taiwan-Province-of-China/GDP-per-capita>; <https://knoema.com/atlas/China/GDP-per-capita>; <https://countryeconomy.com/demography/population/taiwan?year=1990>; <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/area/>.

<sup>6</sup> Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895: Perceptions, Power, and Primacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

In our shared office, he regularly described our lone and affable air force student with a navy obscenity to disparage air force officers. In addition to the existence of the U.S. Air Force, he had never gotten over umbrellas becoming part of the U.S. Navy uniform in 1987—to him they were unwarriorlike. His ripe comments about the French reflected poorly on him not them. Working for the military is all about team work—i.e., one makes the team work. As he drifted to sleep during all-hands meetings called by the President of the College, an active-duty, generally humorless admiral, I would poke him awake because his snores, like everything else about him, were loud. By the end of the year, I understood why, as a young redhead on his first sea tour, he had been duct-taped to the ship's deck and spray painted orange when crossing the International Date Line (this reflected an old navy tradition of masquerading bullying as a career milestone). Our students turned him in to the Equal Opportunity officer who interviewed me to ask whether all was well. I answered the question correctly: "Everything is fine."

I had arrived at the Strategy & Policy Department with expertise about Russia and China, two great continental empires, but gross ignorance about navies and marginal knowledge about the maritime powers, Britain and the United States, that dominated the curriculum. I learned more in my first year than in any other year since kindergarten, when I became literate. My Ph.D. thesis had lacked a thesis—a fact pointed out by a senior, visiting scholar, who recommended having one in the book. He might have gone further: without an overarching argument that the body of the dissertation proves to be accurate, the dissertation is nothing more than an undigested chronology, or a stream-of-consciousness, tour of the topic. One needs to take a stand and defend it. Thus, mine lacked the defining element of a thesis. The failure to address the obvious and often most important things is actually a common oversight. When writing, I continually ask: What is missing? The obvious often becomes so only by stating it.

The required structure for student papers helped me work on this skill. Each paper must answer an assigned question, deliberately worded so that intelligent, well-informed persons can answer in antithetical ways. After providing a single-sentence answer (the thesis), the paper must lay out the three to five large points proving the thesis, each one supported by dense, succinct evidence. A strong counter-argument follows, detailing the most persuasive counter to one's own argument. Typically, the paper concludes with the rebuttal, the point that made one choose the argument over the counterargument. The rebuttal cannot restate the main argument, which is called repetition, and is inexcusable in a ten-page paper.

For example, if the question were to ask whether abortion should be legal or illegal, the writer must choose a side and support the thesis with compelling evidence. Then the writer must carefully consider the strongest opposing argument supported by the best evidence—not a dismissive, perfunctory, or straw-man counterargument, but what the smartest critic would actually argue. The rebuttal is not a demonization of those who disagree, but provides an additional point of argument that is well-supported by new evidence that should help critics reevaluate their position. The process requires respect for both sides of the argument and lays out the best evidence for both sides of the question. The papers are pure analysis; they disaggregate the problem into its constituent pieces.

Before writing, students have a tutorial with their co-moderators, a civilian (me) and an active-duty officer (my co-moderator) to help them strengthen their argument. We raise counterarguments, point out gaps in the evidence, and suggest ways to organize it, but the students decide what the argument and the counterargument are, and whether they should be reversed.

Struggling paper writers often compose a succession of outlines. The first organizes the facts—the chronology laying out the "what." The next digestion organizes the themes—the topics that will ultimately explain the "how"—the chain of causation. The final outline provides the thesis and points proving it. It contains both an analysis and a judgment—to explain the "why." This mirrors the study of warfare: the tactical level focuses on the pieces that make up military operations (the what), the operational level lays out the battles and campaigns (the how), and the strategic level concerns the purpose of the war (the why). I have given high grades to well-argued papers with which I disagree and low grades to poorly supported theses with which I agree. Education should teach students how to think, not what to think, how to express ideas, not which ideas to express.

*Learning the Language of Strategy*: My now retired senior colleagues from the Strategy & Policy Department taught me the language of strategy. The one-trimester course, which takes up eighty percent of a student's time, is team-taught by all faculty members, who divide up the lectures and seminars. Team teaching leverages the expertise of all so that we can teach content that exceeds the expertise of any of us. I learned the methodology, became familiar with wide-ranging case studies, and eventually learned to lecture by attending my colleagues' lectures, which I did multiple times in my early years.

The name of the department, Strategy & Policy, embodies the core methodology. Humans set goals (policy objectives) and try to match strategies to attain them. Militaries differentiate among the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of warfare. In this framework, operational objectives are a means to achieve strategic objectives, not an ends in themselves. Winning is never defined at the tactical or operational levels, only at the strategic level. North Vietnam lost every conventional battle against the United States, but it won the Vietnam War. Wars break down into global, regional, and civil wars or sometimes nested variants. Political objectives can be unlimited (regime change) or limited (something less). An unlimited objective puts the enemy on death ground (either fight or die), predisposing a costly fight even in lopsided contests. Death ground can create powerful opposing coalitions united by a common lethal adversary. Thus, counterintuitively, coalitions may depend more on one's enemies than on one's friends.

In *The Wars for Asia 1911-1949* I applied the terminology of strategy to the discipline of history to disaggregate China's tortuous twentieth century into a long civil war nested within a regional war against Japan nested within an overarching global war.<sup>7</sup> Three unknown unknowns emerged: World War II began in Asia, not Europe. China made victory against Japan possible. The Communists navigated the layers of warfare better than their enemies did, accounting for their victory. The unknown unknown from *The Japanese Empire* concerned the ruinous consequences from Japan's misidentification of itself as a continental rather than a maritime power.<sup>8</sup>

*Scholars and Choices*: The Japanese use the term *rōnin* for a masterless samurai—a person without a patron, wandering in pursuit of a profession. My dissertation adviser knew nothing about my topic. Few scholars studied Russo-Chinese relations. Analysts still try to understand Asia without Russia. Diplomatic history was a marginalized field. Military history was beyond the margins. Sadly, the tribalism that facilitates racism also segregates intellectual pursuits.

The main influence on my topic choices is my husband, the well-published member of the family, who is forever full of book ideas.<sup>9</sup> He roped me into two major projects, a China text and a series of co-edited naval books. Writing a text forces a broadening far beyond one's expertise. *Modern China*<sup>10</sup> was my most intellectually excruciating project, starting with the nasty reviews from peers who had been chosen for their expertise in our weak suits; then the endless permissions for poems, tables, and photos; and ending with the index from hell. Too many reviewers forget that criticism should be constructive, explaining what to fix and how to do so, and that their profession concerns positioning others to succeed through the transfer of knowledge.

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<sup>7</sup> Paine, *The Wars for Asia 1911-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Paine, *The Japanese Empire: Grand Strategy from the Meiji Restoration to the Pacific War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Elleman, *A History of the Modern Chinese Navy, 1840-2020* (London: Routledge, 2021); Elleman, *International Competition in China, 1899-1991: The Rise, Fall, and Restoration of the Open Door Policy* (London: Routledge, 2015); Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989* (London: Routledge, 2001); Elleman, *Diplomacy and Deception: The Secret History of Sino-Soviet Relations, 1917-1927* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1997) plus 25 other books and counting.

<sup>10</sup> Elleman and Paine, *Modern China: Continuity and Change, 1644 to the Present*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

My husband's solution to our shared ignorance about navies was to coedit a series of books on naval operations (five with me), with chapters by naval experts. We learned much from editing the chapters down to length and writing each volume's analytical concluding chapter about the prerequisites and possibilities for naval blockades, commerce-raiding, expeditionary warfare, naval coalitions, and non-military uses of navies respectively.<sup>11</sup> This taught us about the invisible maritime world of negative objectives—an unknown unknown that took fifteen years to discern. Navies are most important for what they prevent (a negative objective) rather than for what they make happen (a positive objective). Internationally most information flows by submarine cable. Our credit cards make purchases the world over that arrive on schedule at our doorsteps because navies prevent piracy, which is not something that most online shoppers consider.

Working in the Strategy & Policy Department was career altering. My most important formerly unknown unknowns concern the invisible role played by maritime power, the ever more skewed costs favoring sea over land transport, and the security concerns, paradigms, and strategic possibilities arising from this asymmetry.

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<sup>11</sup> Elleman and Paine, *Naval Blockades and Seapower: Strategies and Counter-Strategies 1805-2005* (London: Routledge, 2006); *Naval Coalition Warfare: From the Napoleonic War to Operation Iraqi Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2008); *Naval Power and Expeditionary Wars: Peripheral Campaigns and New Theaters of Naval Warfare* (London: Routledge, 2011); *Commerce Raiding: Historical Case Studies, 1755-2009* (Newport: Naval War College Press, 2013); *Navies and Soft Power: Historical Case Studies of Naval Power and the Nonuse of Force* (Newport: Naval War College Press, 2015).