

H-Diplo ESSAY 378

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

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From Normandy to Berlin to Buenos Aires to Helsinki

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I start with a cliché. I was destined to be a historian of international affairs. An early memory I have is sitting on my father's lap, while he read the evening newspaper and smoked. This would be about 1953. I was five years old. My father had spent the day in hard physical work as a cable splicer, perched high on a telephone poll. Rene Emil Rabe (1923-1982) had numerous tiny holes in his face. He would rub his face and display to me the flecks of shrapnel that had worked their way to the surface of his skin.

The flecks of metal were remnants of German mortar shell that had hit his position on 28 March 1945. Four days previously, Staff Sergeant (S/Sgt.) Rabe and his buddies in the 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment had jumped over the Rhine River into Germany. This was S/Sgt. Rabe's second combat jump. His regiment had been part of the legendary 82nd Airborne Division that had led the assault on Fortress Europe on D-Day. He and his company hit French soil at 2:38 a.m., near the village of Graignes, Normandy. Between the combat jumps were several weeks of vicious fighting during the winter of 1944-1945 in frigid Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge. Rabe also pulled occupation duty in Berlin and participated in September 1945 in the Allied Victory Parade through the Brandenburg Gates and down the once magnificent boulevard, *Unter den Linden*. S/Sgt. Rabe had made one of the most epic journeys in human history—from Normandy to Berlin. Along the way he collected four promotions, two Purple Hearts, and left part of an amputated, frost-bitten toe in Belgium.

My father's wartime experiences were obvious incentives to think historically. My father accommodated my endless questions. His responsiveness was unusual. My research on the members of his Headquarters Company revealed that the paratroopers declined to discuss their experiences with family. They opened up only a bit, when they passed retirement age. My father watched multi-episode documentaries like *Victory at Sea* (1952-1953) with me. He permitted me to listen in when he told stories to my three uncles who had served during World War II but had not seen combat. I also accompanied him to reunions of paratroopers in the late 1950s and early 1960s. As my father aged, Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD) afflicted him, and he became less responsive about his paratrooper days. During the Normandy landings, paratroopers had become entangled in their parachutes and drowned in the fields that the occupying Germans had flooded. Whenever my father saw a body of water, he saw in his mind's eye a drowning paratrooper from his company. PTSD, as well as alcoholism, was common among the paratroopers. A Silver Star winner from Headquarters Company ended his days in an assisted living facility racing up and down the halls, warning staff that "the Germans are coming."

My interest in history was cultivated by my extended family. Vacations included visits to the Smithsonian to see Charles Lindbergh's the "Spirit of St. Louis," to Mt. Vernon to explore George Washington's home, and to Gettysburg to tour the battlefields. I recall that in fourth grade I sent my savings to a foundation dedicated to saving Gettysburg from commercial development. As a youth, I spent summers in New York City with my grandparents. Beyond taking me to the usual places—the Empire State Building, the Planetarium, the Museum of Natural History—my grandmother brought me to the New York Historical Society Museum and Grant's Tomb. Neither of my parents had a high-school diploma and the education of my grandparents ended in grade school. Nonetheless, in the working-class culture that I grew up in, there was

intense faith in education and respect for teachers. My family focused on my education and success. My younger sister and brother somewhat ruefully remember my mother's constant admonition: "Be Quiet! Stevie is studying."

History remained my companion at Rockville High School in Connecticut. The Kuder Preference Test that students took in the mid-1960s decided that I should be a history teacher. The Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War awarded me "The Grand Army of the Republic" scholarship for excellence in American History. I was also fortunate to win a four-year scholarship "for all necessary expenses" established by a local man, Lebbeus F. Bissell, who owned an insurance agency. The scholarship provided me with the opportunity to attend the prestigious (and expensive) Hamilton College (1966-1970). Organizations and individuals who support young people never receive the credit they deserve and perhaps never realize the good that they do.

In order to be accepted as a history major, a Hamilton student had to make it through the basic introductory course taught by the five-person History Department. Most of the instructors had been at Hamilton for decades and sported colorful nicknames such as Edgar Baldwin "Digger" Graves. Our text was R.R. Palmer's, *A History of the Modern World*, which was originally published in 1950 and is now in its thirteenth edition.¹ To succeed in the course, one had to essentially memorize Palmer's weighty tome. The Hamilton history faculty took the position that they did not teach historical interpretation. As an undergraduate, you learned the facts. Debating historical philosophies and "schools of thought" was the business of graduate school. You were, for example, expected to be able to recite the terms of the various treaties that comprised the Peace of Utrecht (1713-1714). I suspect that Hamilton's training implicitly imparted in me a tendency to elevate historical facts over methodological approaches.

After the introductory course, I took a wide variety of courses in Asian, European, and U.S. history at Hamilton. I have never favored studying one area of the world over another. I found all fields fascinating and vital and still do. At Hamilton, I began to develop an interest in the field of slavery and race relations. I had the good fortune to take courses with Alex Haley, the author of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) and *Roots* (1976), who was a visiting instructor at Hamilton.² Haley was not a careful scholar, but he was an inspirational figure to me. My education at Hamilton also enhanced my public speaking. Hamilton's curriculum mandated a minimum of four semester-long courses on public speaking. This was a tradition that went back to the nineteenth century. The training involved getting up on your feet and delivering speeches in front of faculty and students. This could be unnerving for an eighteen-year-old from a working-class background who was finding it challenging to adjust to life in a college filled with students who had graduated from "prep" schools like Phillips Exeter Academy and Hotchkiss. But the experience proved invaluable. During my forty-five years of university teaching, I taught more than 10,000 students, many in lecture courses. Robert "Mumbles" Carson was my mentor in public speaking.

The war in Vietnam loomed over my years at Hamilton. I participated in a variety of anti-war activities in the upstate New York region. My senior thesis explored contemporary strategies to extricate the United States from the war. This included Major General James M. Gavin's "enclave" strategy of withdrawing U.S. troops to Vietnamese cities. As the leader of the 82nd Airborne during World War II, General Gavin had been my father's commander. I suspect that the agonies of the Vietnam conflict taught me the lesson to be skeptical of present and past official explanations of events. My thesis advisor was David Millar, an American colonialist by training but a historian who had been influenced by Walter LaFeber at Cornell University. Millar offered a year-long course on American diplomatic history offered three times a week at the ungodly hour of 8:00 a.m.

By the spring semester of 1970, the war in Vietnam was no longer just an intellectual issue for me. President Richard M. Nixon had instituted a lottery in 1969 to determine draft status, and I had pulled a low number. I would be drafted into the

¹ R.R. Palmer and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1992).

² Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, as told to Alex Haley (New York: Grove Press, 1965); Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976).

U.S. military soon after graduation in May. The decision I made, with the advice of my father, was to join the U.S. Marine Corps reserves, the only reserve or National Guard unit that had openings. This meant six months of infantry training and five years and six months of weekend and summer duties. Being a reservist meant, however, that you would not be sent to Vietnam, for both President Lyndon B. Johnson and Nixon proved reluctant to activate the reserves and provoke further anti-war dissent.

I believe that coming from a modest economic background and training to be a Marine (“once a Marine, always a Marine”) affected my subsequent teaching but not my scholarship. I taught almost exclusively at public universities, both at home and abroad, and most of my students were first-generation university students. I hope that those students perceived that I understood their struggles in their new intellectual environment. Marine Corps training imparts confidence in its recruits, and I think students noticed that I presented myself in a unique way. One accomplishment I am proud of is that, in the aftermath of the onset of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, I encouraged veterans to form a Veterans Association on the campus of the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD). By the time I retired from UTD in 2017, there were 700 veterans on campus.

Learning the scholar’s craft took place at the University of Connecticut (UConn) from 1971 to 1977. The key for my intellectual development was that I encountered great role models. My first graduate seminar, on the American Revolution, was led by Mary Beth Norton, who would go on to become president of the American Historical Association. She was succeeded by Richard D. Brown. Other models included: Richard O. Curry (Civil War); Hugh M. Hamill (Latin America); A William Høglund (Immigration); R. Kent Newmyer (Early Republic) and Bruce M. Stave (Urban). What they had in common was that they took their jobs seriously, worked hard, and published. Professor Brown gave me my big break when he asked me, a graduate student, to prepare the second edition of *Slavery in American Society*.³ Thereafter, I regularly taught courses on slavery and race relations both at home and abroad.

The role model *par excellence* was Professor Thomas G. Paterson, my dissertation director. I have never met a historian who worked so effectively. For several decades, he was the most widely read historian in universities and colleges. He authored the leading textbook in our field, *American Foreign Relations*, edited the most prominent reader, *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, and served as a lead author with Mary Beth Norton of the popular and influential textbook on American history, *A People and a Nation*.⁴ Tom was labeled as one who wrote critically of U.S. foreign policy. He allegedly was a “Cold War Revisionist,” or “New Left,” or a card-carrying member of the “Wisconsin School of Diplomacy.” Tom graduated from University of California, Berkeley and studied under Armin Rappaport, the first editor of *Diplomatic History*. Never once did Tom suggest any philosophical approach to me. Instead, his constant directive was that the best history was scholarship that raised questions about prevailing interpretations. Training graduate students was about teaching them how to ask hard questions. Tom was also tacitly a devotee of *The Elements of Style* and William Strunk’s injunction to “omit needless words.”⁵ He spent copious time correcting my prose and insisting that my next draft be filled with simple, declarative sentences composed in the active voice.

Once my publications began to attract notice, I received offers to teach internationally. During my career, I had the privilege of teaching in twenty countries. I served as the Mary Ball Washington Professor of American History at University College,

³ Richard D. Brown and Stephen G. Rabe, *Slavery in American Society*, 2nd ed. (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1976); Lawrence B. Goodheart, Richard D. Brown, and Stephen G. Rabe, *Slavery in American Society*, 3rd ed. (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1993).

⁴ Thomas G. Paterson, *et al.*, *American Foreign Relations*, 2 vols., 6th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005); Thomas G. Paterson and Dennis Merrill, eds., *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, 2 vols., 7th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2010); Mary Beth Norton, *et al.*, *A People and a Nation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

⁵ William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 23.

Dublin (1991-92) and as the Fulbright Bicentennial Chair in American Studies at the University of Helsinki (2005-06). I also led twelve summer seminars in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador. These teaching experiences enhanced my scholarship by educating me to be sensitive to international perceptions of U.S. policies. I can still see the shocked look on the faces of Argentine students, as they reviewed the memorandums of conversation that Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger had in 1976 with Admiral César Guzzetti, the Argentine Foreign Minister. Kissinger gave his tacit approval to the state-sponsored terrorism known as *la guerra sucia* (“the dirty war”) that resulted in the slaughter of 30,000 Argentines.⁶

I have written or edited thirteen books, with my scholarship focusing on U.S. relations with Latin America. I trust that my UConn professors appreciate that I tried to emulate their productivity. Whereas other scholars have criticized my interpretations, I have never had anyone question the factual basis of my work. My Hamilton College training has served me well. I have done both bilateral studies and regional analyses on U.S. relations with the nations of the Western Hemisphere. My first book on U.S. relations with Venezuela, *The Road to OPEC*, focused on oil diplomacy and was based on archival research in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Venezuela. It won the Harvey O. Johnson Prize from the Southwest Council on Latin American Studies. My second book on inter-American relations, *Eisenhower and Latin America*, won the Stuart L. Bernath Prize from the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations.⁷

Subsequent books have not won book prizes, but I tell (delude) myself that I am improving with age. My favorite is *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story*, which recounts the misguided and largely unknown attempt by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to shape the British colony’s independence movement. The study served as a basis for a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) radio documentary on the U.S. campaign to deprive Prime Minister Cheddi Jagan and Indo-Guyanese of their electoral victories.⁸ I am pleased that *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* is required reading in courses on modern Latin American history throughout the United States.⁹ Teaching and living in Latin America gave me insight into Latin American thought, culture, and society, and I hope that Latin Americanists see that in my presentations of inter-American relations.

A persistent criticism of my work revolves around the concept of “agency.” This issue was raised by five scholars in a recent H-Diplo Roundtable on my latest publication, *Kissinger and Latin America*.¹⁰ The charge is that I exaggerate the role of U.S. power in the region and that I fail to see that Latin Americans pursue their own agendas and make their own mistakes. The notion of “agency” is usually associated with an influential article by Max Paul Friedman.¹¹ Throughout my career, I have written a series of historiographic articles in which I have celebrated the various interpretative approaches colleagues

⁶ Stephen G. Rabe, *Kissinger and Latin America: Intervention, Human Rights, and Diplomacy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), 134-140.

⁷ Rabe, *The Road to OPEC: United States Relations with Venezuela, 1919-1976* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); Rabe, *Eisenhower and Latin America: The Foreign Policy of Anticommunism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

⁸ Rabe, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Mike Thomson, Presenter, “British Guiana,” *BBC Radio 4*, 30 August 2010, [BBC Radio 4 - Document, 30/08/2010](https://www.bbc.com/radio4/programmes/2010/08/100830_bbc4_british_guiana)

⁹ Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Diane Labrosse, ed., H-Diplo Roundtable XXII-46, 21 June 2021, <https://hdiplo.org/toRT22-46>

¹¹ Max Paul Friedman, “Retiring the Puppets, Bringing Latin America In: Recent Scholarship on United States-Latin American Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 27 (November 2003): 621-636.

have taken.¹² My point has been that we should all learn from one another and not insist on interpretative strait jackets. In any case, devotees of “agency,” often forget that Friedman cautioned in his article that “agency and independence are not the same thing.”¹³ Perhaps the most controversial application of the agency theme revolves around the issue of the collapse of civil order and life in Chile between 1973 and 1989. Nixon and Kissinger boasted about overthrowing Salvador Allende (1970-73) in a private telephone conversation in mid-September 1973. I agree with scholars who emphasize that President Salvador Allende and his left-wing supporters placed Chile on the brink of disaster with their unsustainable economic policies. It is, however, to engage in counterfactual analysis to absolve the United States of responsibility for the tragedy that befell Chile, for the United States had intervened massively in the Chilean political milieu from 1962 to 1973. It is better to use Jonathan Haslam’s astute term of “assisted suicide” to assess what happened in Chile.¹⁴ Moreover, between 1973 and 1976, the Nixon administration bolstered the murderous regime of Augusto Pinochet (1973-89) with military and economic assistance.¹⁵

To return to my opening theme, my adult life has reinforced my destiny with historical studies. In 1972, I met my wife, Genice Ann Gladow, in graduate school. She had written her thesis at the Honors College at the University of Oregon under the direction of Robert M. Berdahl, a historian of Germany and future president of the Universities of Oregon and Texas and chancellor of the University of California. At UConn, Genice concentrated her M.A. studies in history on the intersection of art and politics in German Expressionism. Genice subsequently became a successful lawyer, who focused on labor law, civil rights, and disability law. We like to travel and never miss a chance to visit a historical site. In the past few years, we have been to Ypres and Normandy, Hue and Khe Sanh, and the fortified mountains in Salta Province, Argentina and the Sacred Valley in Peru, where indigenous people held off Spanish colonialists.

My career as a historian has now come full circle. My latest effort is “The Lost Paratroopers of Graignes, Normandy: A Story of Resistance, Courage, and the Franco-American Alliance.” This is a terrific story about how the 900 villagers of Graignes came to the rescue of the approximately 160 paratroopers from the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions who had landed hopelessly off target on D-Day. The villagers asked the paratroopers to stay in Graignes to defend them from German occupiers. In turn, the men and women of Graignes served the paratroopers, finding their equipment in the swamps, conducting reconnaissance missions, and organizing a cooking campaign that provided the paratroopers with two hot meals a day. On 11-12 June 1944, superior forces of the 17th SS Division attacked the village. The Nazis were moving towards the strategic town of Carentan, situated between Utah and Omaha Beaches. When they ran out of ammunition, the paratroopers had to withdraw from Graignes. The villagers stayed strong, escorting paratroopers to safety and hiding other paratroopers in their homes and barns. Along with twenty other men, my father survived when a farm family named Rigault hid paratroopers for three days. A German patrol entered the family barn but did not venture into the loft where the Americans were hiding. The family subsequently arranged on 15 June 1944 for the paratroopers to be transported at night in a canal boat to the safety of U.S. forces. S/Sgt. Rabe would be free to fulfill his Normandy to Berlin destiny. The courage of the Rigault family also meant that Rabe’s son could fulfill his destiny to study international relations.

¹² Stephen G. Rabe, “Marching Ahead (Slowly): The Historiography of Inter-American Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 13 (July 1989): 297-316; Rabe, “Marching Ahead (Forthrightly): The Historiography of Inter-American Relations,” *Passport* 45 (September 2014): 25-31.

¹³ Friedman, “Retiring the Puppets,” 631.

¹⁴ Jonathan Haslam, *The Nixon Administration and the Death of Allende’s Chile: A Case of Assisted Suicide* (London: Verso, 2005).

¹⁵ Rabe, *Kissinger and Latin America*, 78-83, 141-151

Stephen G. Rabe taught from 1977 to 2017 at the University of Texas at Dallas, where he served as the Ashbel Smith Chair in History. He received three awards for distinguished teaching. From 2018 to 2020, he was an affiliated faculty member of the Clark Honors College at the University of Oregon. Rabe has taught or lectured in twenty countries, including serving as the Mary Ball Washington Professor at University College, Dublin and the Fulbright Bicentennial Chair at the University of Helsinki. He has also led seminars in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador. Rabe has lectured at fifteen U.S. universities and served as the Marjorie Allen Skotheim Lecturer at Whitman College. He has written or edited thirteen scholarly books. His articles, book chapters, essays, book reviews, and encyclopedia entries total about 250 pieces. The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAHR) presented him the Bernath Book Prize for his *Eisenhower and Latin America* (1988). SHAHR also bestowed on him the Bernath Lectureship Prize (1989) for being the outstanding young scholar in the field. His first book, *The Road to OPEC* (1982) won the Harvey O. Johnson Award from the Southwest Council on Latin American Studies. *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana* (2005) served as the basis for a BBC radio documentary. *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (2012, 2016) is assigned in university and college classrooms. His latest book is *Kissinger and Latin America: Intervention, Human Rights, and Diplomacy* (2020). His next project is “The Lost Paratroopers of Graignes, Normandy: A Story of Resistance, Courage, and the Franco-American Alliance” and will be published by Cambridge University Press.