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Learning the Scholar's Craft: Twists and Turns in the Life of a Very Lucky Man

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Columbia College did not require a major when I was an undergraduate. I didn't take my first history course until my junior year, although I had worked earlier with Peter Gay, the great scholar of modern Europe intellectual history, when he was an assistant professor in the Government Department teaching Contemporary Civilization in Columbia's core curriculum—lots of Freud. I enjoyed the survey of American history and enrolled in a wonderful colloquium in American history my senior year—8 students, 3 professors, weekly essays.

As I approached graduation, I was unsure of what to do. I had started pre-med, planning to become a psychiatrist, but my freshman chemistry class met Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday at 8 in the morning and my lab was scheduled for 9-1 Saturday. These times proved inconsistent with my social life to which I gave priority. I considered going to law school and in my senior year applied to Yale. My friends at Harvard and Columbia law schools were suffering and Yale seemed more humane. I also applied to the graduate history program at Columbia and to the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, which I did on a dare, having been told I had no chance of being admitted. Yale put me on the waiting list. I was outraged and withdrew. They had admitted my cousin two years earlier and the Columbia faculty we shared thought I was the sharper of the two. I was accepted by both Columbia and the Fletcher School. Harry Carman, then the much beloved Dean Emeritus of Columbia College, said: "Cohen, you've lived all your life in New York, go to Boston." So I did.

Having applied to the Fletcher School, in the second semester of my senior year I enrolled in a beginning class in international relations taught by a young assistant professor, Ken Waltz. Neither of us was particularly impressed by the other. Forty or so years later, when he was generally acknowledged to be the leader in the field, we spent a few days together at a conference in Kuala Lumpur and delighted in memories of the course and of his first and my last year at Columbia.

At the Fletcher School, where I studied American diplomatic history, I developed close friendships with two Japanese students: Shijuro Ogata, who later became #2 in the Bank of Japan, and Chusei Yamada, who served as Japan's ambassador to India and Egypt. I became very interested in Japan—the food and the history. After graduation, I enlisted in the navy and chose to serve as a line officer in the Pacific Fleet, hoping in vain to be deployed to Japan. I enjoyed shipboard life (I was qualified to run a destroyer escort before I had a driver's license) and toyed with staying in the navy, but I'd married along the way and we had a son. Unable to perceive of how I could be a father when I was always somewhere in the Pacific, I decided to study for a Ph.D. in Japanese history.

At the time the leading scholar in Japanese history was Marius Jansen, who taught at the University of Washington. My wife was eager to stay in the northwest and so I applied and was accepted in the UW Ph.D. program in history. Unfortunately, when I arrived in Seattle, Marius had left for Princeton and there was no one there to replace him.

Unable to study Japanese history. I decided to start with American diplomatic history under the direction of W. Stull Holt—about whom I'd heard good things from a friend who'd taken a summer school class with him at Harvard. Stull, who had been a fighter pilot in World War One, was outraged when he was not allowed to fly when he reenlisted in December 1941 (he served out the war as a colonel in intelligence with dozens of other historians). His hostility towards the Japanese was at least equal to his hostility towards the Nazis. He insisted that I study the Chinese language instead, claiming mistakenly that Japanese would then be easy. And that was how I ended up focusing on Chinese-American relations.

Initially, the subject of my dissertation was going to be American perceptions of the Chinese Communists during World War II. I wanted to address the question of when the US Government realized the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was likely to take control of China after the war. Unable to get a fellowship to allow me to work in the State and Defense Department archives in Washington, I wrote instead about a group of historians and journalists known as “revisionists,” who, in the interwar period, had argued it was a mistake for the U.S. to have intervened in the First World War. I had become interested in them because Ruhl Bartlett, a leading diplomatic historian with whom I did not get along at Fletcher, despised them. I could do the research for this subject without ever leaving the UW library. It was a little tricky because Stull had no use for them either. The dissertation became my first book: *The American Revisionists and the Lessons of Intervention in World War I*.¹

My Chinese language proficiency (never great) declined in the year in which I wrote my dissertation and the year I taught at UC Riverside, but I had a stroke of luck shortly after I joined the faculty at Michigan State in 1963. MSU had played a major role in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) program on Taiwan that ended in 1964. The presidents of MSU and National Taiwan University (NTU) wanted to maintain a relationship and decided on a faculty exchange. NTU wanted someone in American history and no one else on campus had any interest in spending a year on Taiwan, so off we went—for what proved to be two wonderful years in which my wife and two young children learned to speak Chinese and my language skills improved. I gained access to the archives of the Bureau of Investigation, where all the documents that Kuomintang intelligence had collected from the Chinese Communists were filed. MSU asked me to stay a second year, and paid for me to spend the summer between academic years in Hong Kong at the Chinese Research Center, which had the finest collection of post 1949 Chinese Communist documents and publications. There I became friends with Dick Solomon and Mike Oksenberg, who later served as China policy advisers to national security advisors Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski respectively. I subsequently wrote the first two articles on the development of CCP policy toward the United States since the creation of the Party.² Unbeknownst to me at the time, publication of my articles was funded by the CIA.

Two years after I returned from Taiwan, an American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) grant allowed me to spend the summer in Washington, D.C., where I read in the State Department archives, gaining much of the information that helped round out what I had found in Taiwan and became the basis of my second book, *America's Response to China* (now in its 6th ed.)³ The book was published originally by John Wiley & Sons in a series edited by Bob Divine. The Wiley agent at UCR

¹ Warren I. Cohen, *The American Revisionists and the Lessons of Intervention in World War I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

² Cohen, “Development of Chinese Communist Policy Toward the United States, 1922-1933,” *Orbis* 11 (1967): 219-237; Cohen, “Development of Chinese Communist Policy Toward the United States, 1934-1945,” *Orbis* 11 (1967): 551-569.

³ Cohen, *America's Response to China*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1971).

urged me to write it and offered an advance that was irresistible to me and my hungry family. In the archives, I also came across material that contributed to my third, fourth, and fifth books.⁴

It was in 1967 that I met Dorothy Borg, then at Columbia, who was probably the single most influential person in my career. Dorothy was determined to create a new field, American-East Asian Relations, equivalent to American or Asian history. Bob Scalapino, the leading Asianist at UC-Berkeley, had once explained to me that I had not been awarded a Ford Foundation research fellowship because I was neither an Americanist nor an Asianist. Dorothy was determined to change that. Scholars working in the field would be expected to master the language and culture of at least one Asian country as well as of the United States. John Fairbank, then the country's leading China scholar, and Ernest May of Harvard both supported her in this effort. Indeed, John spoke of the need for such scholars in his American Historical Association (AHA) Presidential Address in 1967. Dorothy oversaw the creation of an AHA Committee on American East Asian Relations—a committee that moved to the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) when AHA politics interfered with selections of its membership. May was the initial chair of the committee, but it was Akira Iriye, who became a close friend, who was the driving force. He chaired it after Ernest—and I chaired it after Iriye. In 1971 I ran an AHA program on American-East Asian relations at Columbia. In 1984, I entitled my SHAFR Presidential address “American-East Asian Relations: Cutting Edge of the Historical Profession.”

In 1969, Borg organized the first Japanese-American conference on Japanese-American relations 1931-1941, the papers for which became the prize-winning book, *Pearl Harbor as History*.⁵ She asked me to present an essay on the influence of private groups such as the National Council for the Prevention of War, the American Committee for Non-Participation in Japanese Aggression, and the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, on American policy. The counterpart Japanese essay was written by Sadako Ogata, wife of my Fletcher School friend (and later Japan's ambassador to the UN and UN High Commissioner for Refugees). Eager to impress Borg, I probably did more research for that article than any other I've written.⁶ Out of that research came the ideas for two subsequent books, the poorly named *Chinese Connection*—a title forced on me by my publisher despite the fact that much of the book was about relations with Japan (my original title was “China, Japan and the Three Wise Men”—May thought it would end up shelved with books on religion. My research indicated the importance of the peace movement and led in part to my *Empire Without Tears*.

I had come across Dean Rusk's name in my research on U.S.-China relations and was puzzled by how a man who was so obviously able could have performed so poorly as secretary of state. When the Sam Bemis-Bob Ferrell series on American Secretaries of State was ready for Rusk, I volunteered to write it. I had long been interested (perhaps as a remnant of my early interest in psychiatry) in how exceptionally able men went wrong: Harry Elmer Barnes in *American Revisionists* and George Sokolsky in *The Chinese Connection*, as well as Rusk. In the course of writing the book, I had several meetings with Rusk. We had agreed that I would send him sections of the book as I wrote them and he would call my attention to any errors or omissions. He would not question my judgments. The process worked well until we got to the chapters on Vietnam when he decided that he would rather watch the Georgia v. Georgia Tech football game on TV than talk about what I had written. He wrote to me after the book was published taking exception to my conclusions—which, in retrospect, may have been a bit harsh.

⁴ Cohen, *Chinese Connection: Roger S. Greene, Thomas W. Lamont and American-East Asian Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Cohen, *Dean Rusk* (Totowa: Cooper Square Publishers, 1980); Cohen, *Empire Without Tears: America's Foreign Relations 1921-1933* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).

⁵ Dorothy Borg and Shumpei Okamoto, eds., with Dale K. Finlayson, *Pearl Harbor as History: Japanese-American Relations 1931-1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

⁶ Cohen, “The Role of Private Groups in the United States,” in Borg and Okamoto, ed., *Pearl Harbor as History*, 421-458.

Of all the books I've written and all the money the Luce Foundation committed to my work and conferences Iriye and I chaired, the Foundation's leadership was most pleased by *East Asian Art and American Culture*, published in 1992⁷. Akira was always pushing me to focus more on culture in my writings. But the major force behind the decision to write the book was an unsuccessful effort to save my marriage, which had been strained by my research travels and time spent writing. My wife was a studio artist with a deep interest in Asian art history. We had written a joint article for one of Iriye's University of Chicago symposia and Luce gave us a large grant to write the book. The domestic problem was not solved, but Asian art historians and curators loved the book (more than diplomatic historians, few of whom other than Akira and Frank Ninkovich, understood what I was doing). At a conference at which I spoke at the Frick in 2012, I was astonished to learn from the keynote address by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Asian art curator that I had created a new subfield of art history.

I'm not sure how the idea for the *Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations* emerged. Akira, Walter LaFeber, and I were thinking about celebrating our 50th birthdays by each writing one of the volumes. Walt would obviously write the second volume, from the Civil War to World War One. Akira would prepare the third, from the First World War through the Second. I thought I might try the first after a conversation with Ernest about using contemporary IR theory to write about the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Then I asked John Lewis Gaddis to write the Cold War volume, but he demurred. I decided to write it instead, and to ask Bradford Perkins from the University of Michigan to write the first one. Perkins was older than we were, but he was in a class by himself as a scholar of late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century American diplomacy. Initially, Brad was too busy, but a few years later he asked if we were still interested and we went ahead with it. My Cold War book⁸ was intended to give more stress to Asia, less to Europe. I obviously succeeded: May reviewed the series favorably for *Foreign Affairs*, but expressed wonder how anyone could write about the Cold War without mentioning West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer.

John Gaddis and I had become friends at one of Borg's conferences and when he obtained funding from the MacArthur Foundation for the Cold War History Project, he asked me to join him with primary responsibility for the Asian side and he made the project an extraordinary success. We were joined by Sam Wells, then deputy director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, when we decided to base the operation at the Center (where I at later became director of the Asia Program). I always teased John about being what passed for a liberal in Texas. He found my later writings on American foreign relations too critical, especially when I wrote about the presidency of George W. Bush.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, I decided to write a book for which I had few qualifications: *East Asia at the Center: Four Thousand Years of Engagement with the World*.⁹ I had been struck by the discovery of Chinese pot shards in a thirteenth-century village I visited after a safari in Kenya. I enjoyed the reading, and found all sorts of things that astonished me. The book was well received, with few references to the arrogance displayed. I am currently preparing a second edition.

One of my great interests has long been human rights. I've been involved for many years with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, Human Rights Watch, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense Fund, Planned Parenthood, and others. When I went back to the Rockefeller Center at Bellagio in 2000, I began work on series of essays on twentieth-century people whose efforts I admired: Margret Sanger, Jack Greenberg (NAACP Legal Defense Fund), Muslim feminists, Chinese dissidents, Aung Sang Suu Kyi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Vaclav Havel, Pope John XXIII (my personal favorite) and others. Of course, I included Gandhi and Martin Luther King. In the course of my research I discovered that some of them were less saintly than I had

⁷ Cohen, *East Asian Art and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

⁸ Cohen, *America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945-1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁹ Cohen, *East Asia at the Center: Four Thousand Years of Engagement with the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

imagined. Sanger's interest in eugenics and Gandhi's relationships with women were appalling. Once again, the publisher insisted on a title I didn't like: *Profiles in Humanity: The Battle for Peace, Freedom, Equality, and Human Rights*.¹⁰ Along those lines, I was outraged when the Board at Cambridge University Press refused to use the title I had chosen for a collection of essays I edited on the Chinese takeover of Hong Kong. I called it "Red Star over Hong Kong."¹¹ The Board apparently feared it would offend the British authorities responsible for the deal.

Along the way, I edited eight volumes, some with Akira, usually derived from conferences on American-East Relations that one or the other of us chaired. I also co-edited one with Nancy Bernkopf Tucker (my second wife—thanks to Dorothy who introduced us and to Bellagio where it all began many years later) on Lyndon Johnson's foreign policy. In that book she wrote the essay on China and I was left with the Middle East.¹²

Other than *Profiles* and the 5th and 6th editions of *America's Response*, and my 2000 Reischauer Lectures for Harvard,¹³ most of my writing in the last 20 years has been focused on American policy. I wrote *America's Failing Empire*¹⁴ at the request of Ron Edsforth, a former student who was editing a series for Blackwell. I wanted to explain the weakness of the U.S. approach to foreign affairs after the Cold War and to reveal the foolishness of policies pursued by President Bill Clinton and by George W. Bush in his first administration—the book was published in 2005.

My most recent book, *A Nation Like All Others*,¹⁵ was written as a result of pressure from friends and my editors at Columbia University Press—all of whom were eager to shake me out of the paralysis I suffered after Nancy's death. Back in the 1960s, the University of Chicago Press had a series on American Civilization and the editor, Daniel Boorstin, asked Stull Holt to write the volume on American foreign policy. Stull wanted to wait until the war in Vietnam was over and it took too long. He never was able to write it. I thought that as his former student, it was my responsibility to write the short one-volume history of America in world affairs, beginning to end (c.2018)—although I wrote it for Columbia rather than the University of Chicago Press. I intended it to be my last book, filled with my idiosyncratic reflections on American policy from the eighteenth century to the present. The title tells the story; how I came to realize how my youthful vision of American exceptionalism eroded.

I had one additional experience over the years of possible interest to young historians. I've written hundreds of book reviews and somewhere along the line I became frustrated by the word limitations imposed by the journals. I think the *American Historical Review* was giving me 600 words. I discovered to my delight that I could write them for the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (back when it was the best in the country) and others and be allowed 1500-2000 words. And, unlike academic journals, book reviewers for these publications actually got paid for them.

Finally, I want to note that much of what happened in my career was fortuitous and I benefitted at least as much from good luck as from ability. I won a taxi-cab company scholarship that allowed me to go to Columbia and the Fletcher School. I got

¹⁰ Cohen, *Profiles in Humanity: The Battle for Peace, Freedom, Equality, and Human Rights* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

¹¹ Cohen and Li Zhao, eds., *Hong Kong Under Chinese Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹² Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, eds., *Lyndon Johnson Confronts The World: American Foreign Policy 1963-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹³ Cohen, *The Asian American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Cohen, *America's Failing Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

¹⁵ Cohen, *A Nation Like All Others* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

my Ph.D. in 1962 when there were jobs aplenty—and when publishers often begged one to take advances and write a book for them. My first book, *American Revisionists*, probably would not have been publishable in an era like this one. And I was fortunate to encounter Stull Holt, Dorothy Borg, Akira Iriye, Nancy Bernkopf Tucker—and others named in my acknowledgments.

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