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My Formative Years

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My career has been, I suppose, that of a changeling – an historian trapped in a political scientist's body, an occasional bureaucrat and diplomat, a Dean and a pundit. My field has been that of 'hard,' i.e., military national security, but also military history, and some topics much further afield, to include a current project on William Shakespeare. It has been an exceptionally fulfilling and generally (although not always) a happy one. Much of it owes to good fortune, but the greatest part to all those who helped me along the way. Of all these, I will say at the outset, the important have been family – grandparents, parents, my wife, children and even grandchildren. It would be an intrusion on their privacy to say much on that score, but unquestionably they played the most important role in forming me, to include my professional career.

My interest in things military stemmed from three boyhood experiences. The first, and the heaviest, was that of a Jew born barely a decade after World War II. I attended an orthodox day school, where most of my rabbis were survivors – one had been in Dachau, several had fled the German invasion of Poland and ended up in Shanghai, one had been a hidden child in Berlin throughout the war. Some of my parents' friends spoke with thick accents and had no immediate family beyond spouse and offspring; we walked to Sabbath services with a friend of my father's who had been one of Jews rescued by Oskar Schindler. I never learned about the disfiguring scar on his neck.

Subconsciously, I suppose, they taught me that the world is a place where the worst can happen. At the same time, I have vivid memories of the crisis leading up to the Six Day War and then the shock of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. In both cases, it seemed as though Israel, the only Jewish state, was in mortal peril, and saved itself only through battle. From this combination of influences I came to realize that military power has its uses. Or as I told a German audience when one imperious member of it informed me that as a German she knew that war never solved anything, "If it had not been for the war my country waged, the woman my uncle married would have ended up as smoke in a chimney, and my cousins would never have existed."

In a rather more benign vein, growing up in Boston was to be surrounded by monuments and echoes of a much earlier vein of military history, that of colonial conflicts and the War of Independence. I devoured Francis Parkman's histories and the novels of authors like Kenneth Roberts, and a fascination with the period of conflict from the beginning of the eighteenth century through the War of 1812 never left me – so much so that after the end of my term as Counselor of the Department of State in 2009 I returned to a book, *Conquered into Liberty*, focused squarely on it.¹

¹ While all of Parkman's histories made an impression, the most important was *Montcalm and Wolfe* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1884; still in print through Library of America). Among other things no one has excelled Parkman in depicting the landscape through which French, British, Canadian and American colonists and Native Americans traveled and fought. Of Kenneth Roberts's novels two, in particular, made an indelible impression: *Arundel* (New York: Doubleday, 1929) and *Rabble in Arms* (New York: Doubleday, 1933)

Finally, war in a more immediate way hung over me as a teenager. By the time I turned eighteen in 1974 America's Vietnam war had ended, but I still had to register for the draft (I was 1A and my number was 8). Before then, of course, I had watched my brothers and older friends wrestle with the issues Selective Service posed. I watched the nightly news, with the weekly grim statistics of American, South Vietnamese, and Viet Cong/North Vietnamese killed – hundreds in each category – posted on Friday night. When later on in my career I taught the children of Vietnam refugees who had made it to Harvard, I realized that the end of the American war had not been the end of their families' war.

I knew, therefore, even as an undergraduate at Harvard that this subject – national security and armed conflict – was the one I wished to study. I was fascinated by the phenomenon of Henry Kissinger, the ultimate engaged professor, serving as President Nixon's national security adviser and later as Secretary of State, and I had the immense good fortune of learning from wonderful teachers. My first, who taught a small seminar on national security issues in my sophomore year, was Joseph Kruzal, a former Air Force officer who was completing his Ph.D. at Harvard. Joe, who poured me my first drink of whiskey, died an untimely death on the slopes of Mount Igman in Bosnia in 1995, serving his country as a deputy assistant secretary of defense.

Kruzal in turn introduced me to Samuel P. Huntington, who advised my senior honors thesis, and then became my Ph.D. adviser and mentor throughout. He was unquestionably the most important intellectual influence on me, but I had, I now realize, a truly extraordinary range of teachers – James Q. Wilson, America's foremost student of bureaucracy; Stanley Hoffmann in international affairs; Ernest May, dean of American diplomatic historians, Judith Shklar and Harvey Mansfield in political philosophy, and many others. All of them indulged, in different ways, my fascination with things military. All of them were broad-gauged intellectuals rather than narrow specialists. And all of them had been marked, one way or another, by World War II, if only as children. "I remember the fall of Paris," Hoffmann once told us (for he had been there). When I asked what it felt like, "There was an enormous sense of relief, if you can believe it, that we would not have to live through *that* again," by which he meant, of course, World War I.

But Huntington was overwhelmingly my most important mentor. In some respects, this is odd, because I disagreed with the thrust of one his most famous books, *The Soldier and the State*, and indeed wrote a book, *Supreme Command*, that in part refutes it. What Sam taught, however, were things much deeper than a theory of civil-military relations. He was, first and foremost, boundlessly curious and intellectually omnivorous. He had no orthodoxies. He would consume any type of history or social science: what mattered to him was the central question. He believed passionately in what he called "policy-relevant basic research," that is, scholarship that was rigorous but oriented on real world problems. He was humble. I often heard him say, "Hmf. I never thought of that," or even – really rare for a Harvard professor – "I've changed my mind on that one." And he taught one other thing by example: never to write the same book twice, a besetting sin of academe. He would tackle new topics in each book, an act of intellectual courage that inspires me to this day.

At Harvard I was also exposed to a diverse swarm of august figures. In retrospect I realize how much I learned from wide-ranging public intellectuals like Raymond Aron or V. S. Naipaul, historians like Michael Howard, or practitioners like Aharon Yariv (former head of Israeli military intelligence) who passed through for a few days. The leisurely faculty dinners at which graduate students could sit and listen and learn was one of the highlights of my time at Harvard. That structured eavesdropping at the equivalent of high table was a growth experience, which I have attempted to replicate for my own students.

about the northern campaigns of 1775-1777. His portrayal of Benedict Arnold as hero (which he was at that period) probably influenced my treatment of him in Eliot A. Cohen, *Conquered into Liberty: Two Centuries of Battles Along the Great Warpath That Made the American Way of War* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

I had written my senior thesis on the relationship between democratic politicians and elite military units, which subsequently appeared as a short book.² That experience (which included a summer of work in archives in the UK and Israel) convinced me of the merits of comparative studies and of the historical qualitative approach to political issues. Having written about elite units (I admit, I had been fascinated by the history of the Commandos during World War II and Churchill's patronage of them) it was time to turn to the mass. My Ph.D. dissertation, which became my first substantial book, *Citizens and Soldiers*, explored the ways in which democratic states choose systems of service, from universal conscription to long-service volunteer enlistment to fill their armies' ranks.³ I learned that the abstract demands of justice (equity above all) often came into tension with peacetime military effectiveness, and both could be radically affected by the impact of war. In exploring that three way pull I learned how important it was to think broadly about military affairs, from the point of view of the political philosopher as well as the general, the legislator as well as the conscript soldier.

As an assistant professor I also served as an assistant dean (or, as Harvard termed it, a Senior Tutor) of one of the undergraduate houses. I stumbled into that (as into most things in my professional career) when the Government Department decided to split an assistant professorship in two. It was great good fortune, because unlike most assistant professors, I came early on to have serious responsibilities for student welfare and supervising resident graduate fellows. When I reflect on that time, I realize that David Aloian, the master of Quincy House and head of the Harvard Alumni, and John Fox, the Dean of Harvard College were also my teachers, possessed not only of practical wisdom but deep human understanding that they communicated to a rather green academic administrator. They helped enrich my understanding of organizations and leadership, and that in turn shaped not only my scholarship but my onward career.

I similarly benefited from a fortuitous baiting by an older friend, Michael Handel, about military service, which led me to join the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) as a rather anomalous graduate student and receive a commission in the U.S. Army Reserve the day after I received my Ph.D. Samuel Eliot Morison in a speech to World War II veterans then studying for the Ph.D. told them that they had no idea how much their scholarship would be enriched, rather than delayed, by their wartime experiences. I have found that any kind of experience of leadership, or administration, or military or public service is broadening in ways that are hard to fathom in one's early twenties, and often insufficiently appreciated by academics who shy away from the bruising realities of the world of practice. In that world, one learns that brilliant ideas are important – but that they are meaningless without the ability to turn them into reality. One learns too that most achievements are collective, not individual, which runs counter to the incentives that life in a political science or history department creates for young faculty.

Broadening too was regular writing in a popular as well as, simultaneously, a scholarly vein. At various undergraduate publications, then more obscure magazines willing to publish someone starting out, and eventually *Commentary* and *Foreign Affairs* I benefited from demanding editors like Neal Kozodoy and James Chace, who rammed home lessons about clarity and forceful expression that, as I think about it, I first learned from my junior high English teacher. Too many academics decline to exert themselves to write compellingly for non-expert audiences. They miss thereby both the opportunity to share what they have learned with a broader community, and to develop skills that make their scholarship at once accessible and precise.

I turned down a promotion to associate professor at Harvard in order to join the faculty of the Strategy Department at the Naval War College, a move that baffled my long-suffering academic mentors. In retrospect this too was an invaluable formative experience. At Newport, my colleagues included some of the country's top military historians (and several from overseas as well), who pushed me to become better read, and helped develop my sense of contingency and personality in the making of military affairs. My students were officers from the United States and abroad who were, on average, fifteen years

² Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians: Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Center for International Affairs, 1978).

³ Cohen, *Citizens and Soldiers: The Dilemmas of Military Service* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

or more my senior. They were a demanding yet receptive group – and the challenge of teaching them grew me as an educator, while I found myself learning again from those engaged in the world of practice. And intellectual projects emerged as well, including a project co-authored with John Gooch entitled *Military Misfortunes*⁴ about how competent military organizations may nonetheless fail. It had begun as a heated argument in the cafeteria about Gallipoli, turned into a lively seminar, and eventually became a book.

The more important intellectual product of teaching at the Naval War College, however, was a book called *Supreme Command*, which grew out of my increasing discomfort with the civil-military relations dogma we were teaching students (and which many of them believed in any case) that the spheres of political and military authority needed to be sharply divided.⁵ My immersion in military history and conversation with my colleagues, however, made me realize that the reality of best practice – think of the wartime leadership of Abraham Lincoln, Georges Clemenceau, Winston Churchill and David Ben Gurion – was radically different. Having come to believe that if practice contradicts theory one had better concoct a different theory, I was prompted to write a book that has, I am glad to say, lasted in print and on military as well as civilian reading lists for the last two decades.

After Newport I became a professor at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), the only job that I have ever actively pursued – all the other opportunities I have had simply popped up, although I had to seize them. My students have wanted to engage in the work of the world; they range from pin-sharp BA/MA students to Navy one stars, and everything in between; they are adventurous. My thinking on many subjects evolved as I taught them, but I learned as well from everything we did together outside the classroom. Of the latter, the most important were our staff rides to battlefields in the United States and abroad, where we studied campaigns for days at a time, on the ground, using directed role play to get at the essence of difficult strategic and operational decisions. Now that those students are themselves senior officials at home and abroad, they now teach me, because one of the great rewards of giving as a teacher is that one's students can become one's friends, and even mentors in their turn.

SAIS gave me the freedom to build a program of my own devising, and allowed me to bring in wonderful colleagues, including retired distinguished practitioners – Andy Bacevich, Tom Keaney, John McLaughlin and Eric Edelman - who have been invaluable friends and colleagues over the years. It also provided a wonderful opportunity to spend interludes in the Defense Department and much later on, as Counselor of the Department of State, as well as serving on advisory panels such as the National Security Advisory Panel to the National Intelligence Council (where Professor Dick Betts and I were two academics amid a clutch of retired general and flag officers) and the Defense Policy Board. All of these further enriched my practical sense of the realities of national security, as did running the U.S. Air Force's study of the 1991 Gulf War. In all of these cases I found the historian in me growing stronger at the expense of the political scientist: my beliefs in the particularity of things, the hazards of chance, individual psychology and circumstance that Isaiah Berlin describes so well in his essay on political judgment, have become stronger and stronger over time.⁶

And these experiences in turn shaped my understanding of history itself. As Counselor during the last two years of the George W. Bush administration I was in the thick of a crisis arising from the construction of a North Korean nuclear reactor in Syria. For several months I was certain (or as certain as one can be) that a Middle East war impended. It did not occur, but the thought that it would palpably shaped American behavior. When I later returned to nineteenth century American military history I found myself reflecting on another war: a third conflict with Great Britain, which for decades was a live

⁴ Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

⁵ Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

⁶ Isaiah Berlin, "Political Judgment," in Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 40-53. See also his essay "The Sense of Reality" in the same volume, 1-39.

possibility until several years after the Civil War. It never happened, but I was more sensitive to the consequences on both sides of the Atlantic of the reasonable belief that it probably would.

I do not think I can draw a chronological line under my formative experiences. Running a study for the U.S. Air Force on the first Gulf War was an exercise in management and public scholarship at a tricky time.⁷ Spending two years as a Dean drafted into service to pull my home institution out of financial and academic crisis was yet another education – this time in executive leadership under very difficult circumstances. And here too, a non-academic teacher came my way. I had heard of executive coaching before and asked the provost of Johns Hopkins if the university could provide one to help me through what was bound to be an extraordinarily difficult assignment. Andraea Douglass helped me understand the practical problems of leadership and organizational change, and became one of my teachers as well.

All of these experiences in the world of affairs – in government and academe alike – taught me not only skills and insights into organizational dynamics, but also exposed me, sometimes in a disconcerting way, to the varieties of selflessness, commitment, competence, venality, cowardice, and cluelessness to be found in any complex organization, and not just universities. And those experiences will, in turn, refract themselves through my next book, about Shakespeare on the art of politics. As I plan on saying in the introduction: it is all very well to watch Richard II, Goneril or Iago on the stage. I have had to work with those people.

Churchill once said that the course of one's career is like walking down a dark corridor, when suddenly an unseen hand throws open a window that illuminates the way ahead, which, in turn, leads to walking through a door into another dark corridor. That makes sense to me: there was nothing in my career that was planned other than the choice to become a professor (and even then, I had backup plans). If there are lessons for anyone starting out, they are first and foremost, to heed the wisdom of Fred Rogers: look for the helpers. There are so many people, most of them not professors, who can help you grow. Accept that accident and fortune will shape which corridor you walk down, and simply ready yourself for the unforeseen opportunities that come your way.

And finally, do not think of yourself as ever fully formed. “The secret of George Washington,” the great Revolutionary War historian Don Higginbotham once said to me, “is that he never stopped working on George Washington.” None of us are George Washington nor, for that matter, Sam Huntington. But I like to think that the most important professional lesson that I learned during my career was never to stop working on me.

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⁷ Cohen, ed., *Gulf War Air Power Survey*, five volumes and summary report (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1993).