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An Unplanned Journey

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I have never been one for introspection. I tend to look forward, not backward. I suppose, however, that a career in international politics is a natural choice for me, given my own family history. If not for World War II, my parents would not have met. Then, global politics became a family affair, with relatives spread across the globe—in Russia, the Middle East, and Asia. But I cannot say today how much that background made me what I am today. For that matter, I am not sure whether there is much to learn positively from my haphazard intellectual path through academia.

I grew up in the fifties and sixties, never more than a few miles from the Southern California beach. I remember the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Kennedy assassination, the music scene before the Beatles, and then all that was still to come. I was drawn to the excitement and promise of the sixties—the music, changing social norms and cultural shifts, and more-and-more the highly charged politics of those years, at home and abroad. But, as much as I wanted to look to the future, I often felt mired in the past, as the child of immigrants—a past that I could not fully comprehend and that, in its key parts, was shrouded in silence.

My father would chat about his early life and his service, years later, in the Haganah during Israel's 1948 Independence War. Less so, the years in between. Only late in his life did he detail his time in a Hungarian labor camp (after Hungary seized the Czechoslovakian town in which he was raised); his harrowing escape from the camp to safety behind the advancing Russian front; his failed efforts to reacquire his family's seized property from local officials after the war, when he fled again under threat of arrest as Russia took control of the region; and his success in passing as a young teenager to join a famous airlift of orphans from Prague to London. Only then would he make more than vague reference to Auschwitz, where his mother, father, and three siblings were executed. Only then did I learn they had names.

My mother talked more freely about her impoverished upbringing in Burma where she was born soon after the end of WWI. Her family immigrated there from Baghdad to join the thousands of Iraqi Jews living in Rangoon (from the early nineteenth century). Their language was Arabic, but their culture and tastes bent more to their adopted surroundings. The community dissolved, however, with the Japanese occupation. My mother, like many others, fled to India, where she lived for the next six years. She talked about being introduced, there, to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (who visited the YWCA where my mother was staying); seeing Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of India's independence movement, on the street during a demonstration; and surviving a bombing of a theater during the pre-independence violence when a British soldier "jumped" (my guess, "fell") on top of her. So, from her life, there were always stories—many more from her large, warm circle of Los Angeles friends, Baghdadi Jews from communities in India, Burma, and China. Baghdad was the ancestral home, but Rangoon—from the talk of many of them—was a magic city. As a child, I had an exaggerated sense of the size of these communities, and their centrality to world history.

I say, with confidence, that my parents supported me—and wanted for me, and my siblings, the security and promising future they never had. My father, who came to the United States with limited English, worked six days a week as a mechanic

in his rented shop in South-Central Los Angeles. He always earned enough for us to live comfortably. The hours were long, and the neighborhood was dangerous—too dangerous, we decided, when my father was almost killed in a violent robbery in the late sixties. For their children, education was the way up: for me (their oldest son), that meant math problems on the weekend, summer school when offered, special science classes when it was not. Life centered on making each day count—no frills (restaurant meals or birthday gifts). I had yet to decide from among the “big three,” a promising future as a doctor, a lawyer, or an engineer. I was betting on “astronaut,” so engineer remained a contender. I was willing to withstand the fierce competition, from most of my class, for available slots in the space program.

Yet an intergalactic career was not to be. I graduated high school in 1969 at sixteen and started college within a week of my seventeenth birthday. Soon, Neil Armstrong had already done the moon and, besides, by now, I had rejected math. (I told a math department recruiter that math was too “impersonal”—he disagreed, though I’m not sure on what basis.) My year of premed classes was lost to anti-Vietnam protests, anti-study habits, and admittedly less-noble pursuits. Then, an epiphany, in the firm voice of my chemistry professor: “you know James, we can’t all be chemists.” Neither boastful nor regretful, the message rang true: I had to find a different path. So, zoology begat psychology which eventually begat political science. Although I still tout my early college GPA as proof that I was committed to ending the Vietnam War, *staying out of Vietnam*—when I received a low draft number—later became reason for me to raise my GPA. Yes, ironic.

Still, my life remained bifurcated between academic work and political activity and readings. I spent far more time in political protests and student politics than I did in the classroom. I have few regrets about the period, as I think back to interacting with the icons of leftwing protest and, of course, my (albeit small) contribution to changing the world—though I do regret my decision to boycott math. But, at the time, I thought it important to take a stand.

When I shifted my major to political science (one course shy of the requirements for a psychology major), I assumed that political science was the right ticket to law school. With my exit from premed, in fact, my grades improved—enough to gain entry to at least some law schools. More importantly, I was now reading material close to my interests—nuclear weapons strategy, US foreign policy, Soviet foreign policy, and the rest—and *getting academic credit for it*.

Then, another revelation. Late in my junior year, I attended a Vietnam teach-in (run by my undergraduate mentor, Barry Steiner); the speaker was a RAND researcher who had worked on the Pentagon Papers. It had never dawned on me that you could do *that* for a living. He did it, and so could I. Forget Clarence Darrow—I was going to graduate school. I spent much of the summer of 1972 hitchhiking around the country—from Southern California to Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C. then up to Toronto and Montreal, visiting graduate schools. I’m sure I presented well after weeks on the road, but no matter. As realism and a limited budget would have it, I needed to apply closer to home. I gained acceptance and enrolled at the School of International Relations at the University of Southern California.

I was fortunate to catch the IR School in a period of transition. Jim Rosenau had joined the faculty (and would become chair), and various talented young faculty members were soon added. For my first two years of graduate school, I tried to take every class that was offered. I achieved more focus, however, after Charles McClelland hired me as a research assistant on an event-data project. I was attracted to the notion of finding patterns in large data sets—*using math*—to explain and predict worldly events. The idea appealed to me at a visceral level, though I had allowed that side of my brain to languish.

I was surely a math savant, I thought, just without the talent. I simply needed to bulk up through training. With the tuition remission I acquired as a teaching assistant to Jim Rosenau, and then Rick Ashley, I took math, statistics, and econometrics courses, and sat in on graduate courses with strong quantitative components. I began writing a dissertation on the Middle East that relied on event data. Rick Ashley chaired the committee and Jim Rosenau (to whom I had also been a research assistant) served as a member.

After delivering a 5-page proposal, as requested from my chair—a painful cut from the how-can-I-cut-any-of-this, 100-page original—I came to recognize a hidden benefit. I now knew what the dissertation was about. Within six months, the dissertation moved toward completion.

But now what to do? I had worked for a consultant out of the University's computer center, helping PhD students in other departments manage their data and conduct simple statistical runs on a mainframe computer. In fact, I was one of the first students around to type their dissertation, and print successive drafts, using the mainframe computer. I wowed my friends with the final version, printed by handfeeding each page into a remote terminal: 250 pages in *under four hours*. (As I tell my students, they've lost a sense of awe.)

My boss wanted out, and he offered to turn his consulting business over to me. But life in a computer center wasn't for me. I wanted to do research that "counted." For personal reasons, I wasn't all that mobile. So, I sought work with an LA-based defense consulting firm, with an office in the Washington, D.C. area. I was hired (given my Middle East interests) to work on a project under contract from the Department of Energy.

I thought of that teach-in, a decade earlier—with its promise of a satisfying research career. I was finally living the dream—living the dream, and hating it: a cubicle, nine-to-five, satisfy the client. But good fortune appeared—surprisingly—in the form of Ronald Reagan. He was elected president—the company celebrated the victory (cigars and champagne in Beverly Hills). Then, the budgetary axe. Reagan had campaigned promising to dissolve the Energy Department, but who thought that he meant *that* Energy Department? After less than a year on the job, I was out of work.

Yet I had acquired a "skill" to burnish my resume. I had energy "expertise" at a time when California was leading the charge in the energy field. No less importantly, I was addicted now to regular eating and had to find work to feed my habit. I sought out sympathetic ears in government and consulting firms in Sacramento, talked to chief economists and vice presidents at oil companies, and—wait for it—applied for openings remaining in the academic market (given the late timing on the academic calendar). I was still bound to the West Coast since mobility remained a problem. I looked at a map, and the job ads, and determined that the West Coast ended somewhere in New Mexico. As good fortune would have it, the Chair of the Government Department at New Mexico State University was looking for a visiting IR faculty member who could teach Middle East classes and, for budgetary reasons, could tie into energy work at the University. Low and behold, I had studied the Middle East and had acquired energy "expertise." I had risen to the top of the pile. I went out for my interview and quickly accepted the job when offered.

I started teaching there in Fall 1981, and I loved it. I felt at home in the Department with wonderful colleagues—and I greatly enjoyed the classroom. With a heavy teaching load (and five-day schedule), I found it hard to get research out the door but, at least, I knew my calling. I wanted to stick around for a while. But I was hired to fill a one-year position, with only a faint promise—given budgetary realities—of a renewal. Reluctantly, I applied for other positions, without geographical limitations. For *this career*, I decided to relax the constraints despite the personal complications.

The Political Science Department at the George Washington University was advertising a tenure-track quantitative IR position to start in Fall 1982. I was fortunate to know enough people in the loop who could put in a word for me, a still unpublished Ph.D. from outside the traditional hiring pool. I interviewed there and was offered the position. The teaching demands were great—a 4-3 load the first year, MA and Ph.D. comprehensives, and dissertation-committee service. Adding to my challenge, articles were my publications of choice, given my quantitative skills and interests. An academic book was necessary, however, if I expected to get tenure. I had parlayed the dissertation into a couple of quantitative articles and conducted new research for a couple more (on foreign aid and military spending). But I could not envision a book in any of that research. I was well along on the tenure clock and had to reinvent myself.

It seemed like a stretch, given my prior research. But nuclear weapons, deterrence, and strategy had been one of my consistent interests. Much of my undergraduate IR coursework centered around the big strategic thinkers, and I'd sometimes carry their books with me. (I once joked with Eugene McCarthy about signing my Henry Kissinger book¹—and, yes, he laughed.) In graduate school, I even took a course from William Van Cleave, renowned for his uber-hawkish views

¹ Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969).

on nuclear weapons—the solution, in his view, to all problems.² (In time, I'd come to wear the blemish of his B+ on my transcript as a badge of honor.) I'd spent significant time in the IR classroom covering nuclear issues, and I'd sit through job talks on nuclear questions and think, "I could do that."

With nose to the grindstone, and a ticking clock, I set about writing a book on the United States and nuclear deterrence. The contract from Columbia University Press arrived the week before my tenure decision.³ I had beaten the clock.

I could now research what I wanted to research. But then the question: what exactly was that? A book on the United States and weapons acquisition struck my fancy. I delved into the subject matter with a passion. (Nothing says "I love you" more than a suitcase full of GAO reports on your honeymoon.) But the road to completion was long and arduous. Although the project generated a couple of good quantitative articles,⁴ and a book,⁵ the Cold War had ended and, along with it, the market for books on weaponry, nuclear and otherwise.

Fortunately, for me, the Department, and its ethos, changed remarkably for the better when Lee Sigelman was hired from outside the Department as chair. His joy for research, enviable talent with the pen, good humor, and appreciation for the absurdities of academic life made him a cherished colleague. As chair, he led through example, with sound judgment and steady hand. His mandate to hire and prioritization of community-building immeasurably contributed to the growth and quality of the Department. I felt lucky that I had bought into the Department when the property values were lower. Relatively late in my career, over the next two decades, I had a mentor. I still miss him.

My research took off over the ensuing years. But, if the truth be told, I never gave thought to a research strategy. I didn't seek to ask a "big question"—even in small parts to fulfill some research agenda. I tended instead to follow interests of the moment,⁶ or the "logical progression" of one project to the next, often returning to prior areas of research after a hiatus. I'd finish one project and then, without much forethought, I'd start another (sometimes after insinuating myself onto the projects of a talented colleague).⁷ In hindsight, it seems that my research clustered around certain topics and methods and sometimes produced a fruitful application of ideas from one cluster to another. Over the decades, then, I published

² William R. Van Cleave and Samuel T. Cohen, *Tactical Nuclear Weapons: An Examination of the Issues* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1978).

³ James H. Lebovic, *Deadly Dilemmas: Deterrence in US Nuclear Strategy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

⁴ Lebovic, "Riding Waves or Making Waves? The Services and the US Defense Budget, 1981-93," *American Political Science Review* 88:4 (1994): 839-852, and Lebovic, "How Organizations Learn: US Government Estimates of Foreign Military Spending," *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (1995): 835-863.

⁵ Lebovic, *Foregone Conclusions: U.S. Weapons Acquisition in the Post-Cold War Transition* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).

⁶ See, most recently, Lebovic, "The Selling of a Precedent: The Past as Constraint on Congressional War Powers?" *The Journal of National Security Law and Policy* (Georgetown University Law, forthcoming) and Lebovic, "Predilection or Prediction? Country Selection for the President's Daily Intelligence Brief, 1961-1977," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 18:1 (2021), orab036.

⁷ Deborah Avant and Lebovic, "US Military Attitudes toward Post-Cold War Missions," *Armed Forces and Society* 27:1 (2000): 37-56.

quantitative articles related to event data,⁸ foreign aid,⁹ military spending,¹⁰ peacekeeping,¹¹ democracy,¹² human rights and international organizations,¹³ and travel diplomacy.¹⁴

Only rather late in my career did I come to see myself as a “security scholar.” Close colleagues, like Debbi Avant,¹⁵ would say to me, “of course you are.” But, for some reason, I couldn’t see it. Perhaps, I was in denial. I came from subfields where those interests were not fully accepted. “Security studies” was linked wrongly to an exclusive preoccupation with states, their militaries, and their potentially bad intent when security scholars do focus on peace building, human rights, and other life-affirming stuff.

With time, however, even I could read the clues. I was, in fact, preoccupied with states, their militaries, and their potentially bad intent. I was hanging out at conferences with people who weren’t, but they nonetheless self-identified as “security scholars.” I joined the board of ISA’s International Security Studies Section, serving finally as section chair. Surely, they

⁸ Lebovic, “The Limits of Reciprocity: Tolerance Thresholds in Superpower Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 40:2 (2003): 139-158, Lebovic, “Unity in Action: Explaining Alignment Behavior in the Middle East,” *Journal of Peace Research* 41:2 (2004): 167-189, and Lebovic and William R. Thompson, “An Illusionary or Elusive Relationship? The Arab-Israel Conflict and Repression in the Middle East,” *Journal of Politics* 68:3 (2006): 502-518.

⁹ Lebovic, “National Interests and United States Foreign Aid: The Carter and Reagan Years,” *Journal of Peace Research* 25:2 (1988): 115-135, Lebovic, “Donor Positioning: Development Assistance from the US, Japan, France, Germany, and Britain,” *Political Research Quarterly* 58:1 (2005): 119-126, and Lebovic, “The Millennium Challenge Corporation: Organizational Constraints on US Foreign Aid, 2004-2011,” *World Development* 58: June (2014): 116-129.

¹⁰ Lebovic and Ashfaq Ishaq, “Military Burden, Security Needs and Economic Growth in the Middle East,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 31:1 (1987): 106-138, Lebovic, “Consider the Source: Organizational Bias in Estimates of Foreign Military Spending,” *International Studies Quarterly* 42:1 (1998): 161-174, and Lebovic, “Using Military Spending Data: The Complexity of Simple Inference,” *Journal of Peace Research* 36: 6 (1999): 681-697.

¹¹ Lebovic, “Uniting for Peace? Democracies and United Nations Peace Operations after the Cold War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48:6 (2004): 910-936 and Kerry Crawford, Lebovic, and Julia Macdonald, “Explaining the Variation in Gender Composition of Personnel Contributions to UN Peacekeeping Operations,” *Armed Forces and Society* 41:2 (2015): 257-281.

¹² Lebovic, “Spending Priorities and Democratic Rule in Latin America,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45:4 (2001): 427-452; Lebovic, “Democracies and Transparency: Patterns of Reporting to the UN Register of Conventional Arms, 1992-2001,” *Journal of Peace Research* 43:5 (2006): 543-562; and Cynthia McClintock and Lebovic, “Correlates of Levels of Democracy in Latin America during the 1990s,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 48:2 (2006): 29-59.

¹³ Lebovic and Erik Voeten, “The Politics of Shame: The Condemnation of Country Human Rights Practices in the UNCHR,” *International Studies Quarterly* 50: 4 (2006): 861-888, Lebovic and Voeten, “The Cost of Shame: International Organizations and Foreign Aid in the Punishing of Human Rights Violators,” *Journal of Peace Research* 46:1 (2009): 79-97, Faradj Koliev and Lebovic, “Selecting for Shame: The Monitoring of Workers’ Rights by the International Labour Organization, 1989 to 2011,” *International Studies Quarterly* 62:2 (2018): 437-452, and Koliev and Lebovic, “Compliance under Pressure: Country Reporting of Convention Adherence to the International Labour Organization,” *International Interactions* 48: 2 (2021): 258-291.

¹⁴ Lebovic and Elizabeth N. Saunders, “The Diplomatic Core: The Determinants of High-Level U.S. Diplomatic Visits, 1946-2010,” *International Studies Quarterly* 60:1 (2016): 107-123 and Lebovic, “Security First? The Traveling U.S. Secretary of State in a Second Presidential Term,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 48:2 (2018): 292-317.

¹⁵ Avant, “Pragmatic Networks and Transnational Governance of Private Military and Security Services,” *International Studies Quarterly* 60:2 (2016): 330-342.

would have rejected me as an outsider. I also went back to writing books—*always* on security topics. A book on deterrence,¹⁶ followed by another on the Vietnam and Iraq conflicts,¹⁷ and then another on arms control,¹⁸ then a book on Vietnam, Iraq, and *Afghanistan*.¹⁹ Always, security—and now Afghanistan. If anything, my behavior was escalating.

With another security book forthcoming on the false promise of nuclear superiority, I've found peace in my choice of subject matter. I won't say that I now know who I am as an academic or that I spend much time evaluating the contributions of my work. If pushed into self-reflection, I would acknowledge that my shift from articles to writing books, and their topical content, are no more a fluke than the sessions I devote to World War II in my security classes. I likely study security politics to reignite the passion that brought me to political science as an undergraduate. But I study and teach the past less to help us avoid history's mistakes and more to affect the story, to change how that history ends. Whatever the motivation, I know that I am happiest teaching—and researching and writing, first, for myself. For me, the secret is simple: relish each paragraph.

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¹⁶ Lebovic, *Deterring International Terrorism and Rogue States: US National Security Policy after 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

¹⁷ Lebovic, *The Limits of US Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Lebovic, *Flawed Logics: Strategic Nuclear Arms Control from Truman to Obama* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

¹⁹ Lebovic, *Planning to Fail: The US Wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan* [Bridging the Gap Series] (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).