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"A Gratifying Career in Federal History."

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I came to a career as a professional historian naturally but indirectly. I began my college education at the University of Delaware as a pre-med major. The curriculum was heavily weighted toward the sciences, and I quickly concluded that biology was tedious, chemistry was bewildering, and physics was incomprehensible. By contrast, my history courses were interesting and easy for me, in part because my father was a history professor at what was then called Millersville State College in Pennsylvania. I switched my major to history, and told him that the change would mean that I could earn the title of doctor "the easy way" by going to graduate school. Rather than disabusing me of my naïve notion, he just smiled.

When I arrived at the University of Maryland as a first-year graduate student in September 1969, I discovered for myself how foolish I had been. I had only a vague idea of the requirements of sound historical scholarship in carrying out research, evaluating sources, presenting arguments, and sorting out historiographical issues. I had a steep learning curve, and it occurred to me that perhaps I should have stuck with pre-med as an undergraduate. But I gradually figured out what I should be doing, in no small part because I had the good fortune to study under the guidance of Maryland's diplomatic historian, Wayne S. Cole.

Wayne was an exemplary dissertation director. He was devoted to the craft of history and he expected the same of his advisees. He could be tough and demanding, especially if he thought you were careless, cursory, or worst of all, glib, in your approach to your topic. He promptly marked up draft chapters with thoughtful and sometimes deflating criticism. Reading his comments was a harrowing experience, but it was also an invaluable experience. It was primarily from Wayne that I learned the foundations of historical scholarship—the centrality of documentary research, the need to track down every possible source, the principles of clear writing, and above all, the imperative of reaching conclusions drawn on an open-minded reading of the evidence. He warned frequently and adamantly against the fallacy of conducting research to support a pre-determined thesis.

Despite his stern side, Wayne was an unfailingly supportive and caring dissertation adviser who took enormous pride in the accomplishments of his students. Under his supervision, I wrote my dissertation on Henry A. Wallace, and when it was published in 1976, he showed it off to his colleagues with obvious delight.¹

I completed my Ph.D. in 1974, just as the shortage of academic jobs in history had become a full-fledged crisis. I was unsuccessful in my quest for a teaching position, which was a huge disappointment. Eventually, I landed a job with the National Archives. There was much I liked about the Archives, especially the abundance of nice people and good scholars who were my colleagues. But a forty-hour work week prevented me from doing much research in primary sources. The only major project was a book of historiographical essays on American diplomatic history that I co-edited with my friend Gerald

¹ J. Samuel Walker, *Henry A. Wallace and American Foreign Policy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976).

K. Haines. It included the first historiographical essay I had ever written, covering the debate over the origins of the Cold War.²

By the time the book of historiographical essays appeared in 1981, I had started a new job. In 1979, I became the associate historian of the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC). The NRC was a successor agency of the US Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). It was assigned only one of the major functions the AEC had discharged—the regulation of nuclear power and other civilian uses of atomic energy. The NRC did not inherit the AEC’s responsibilities for developing and testing nuclear weapons.

The AEC had a highly-regarded history program headed by Richard G. Hewlett. Shortly after the NRC began operations in January 1975, its five commissioners decided that they wanted a history office modeled after the AEC to produce scholarly histories of nuclear power regulation. After a national search, the NRC hired Roger R. Trask, a well-known diplomatic historian from the University of South Florida. Roger soon selected George T. Mazuzan, a diplomatic historian who had studied under Lawrence S. Kaplan at Kent State University, as associate historian. Within a year, Roger decided to return to academic life, and George became the NRC historian (the agency never used the title of “chief historian”). He, in turn, hired me as associate historian. Quite by happenstance, I was the third diplomatic historian to join the NRC’s history office.

The move to the NRC was an exceptionally inviting opportunity. I would be paid to conduct research and write about a fascinating topic. I joined the agency just three months after the Three Mile Island accident, which put the NRC squarely in the center of a raging and bitter controversy over nuclear power safety. In establishing the NRC history office, the commissioners had made clear their commitment to sponsoring scholarly work that conformed with professional standards and that told the agency’s history, going back to the AEC’s regulatory performance, fully and frankly.

Despite the obvious advantages and exciting prospects of my job at the NRC, I had some concerns. The first was that I would need to acquire a working knowledge of the subjects I had hated as an undergraduate—chemistry, biology, and especially physics. Further, George and I would be tackling an unfamiliar, highly technical, and exceedingly complex topic that was new ground for both of us. Gradually, after plowing through thousands of pages of documents, attending courses on nuclear reactor engineering, and talking with experts at the NRC, we were throwing around terms like “negative temperature coefficient” and “maximum permissible dose.” By 1983, George and I had completed a book manuscript on the AEC’s regulatory policies during the 1950s and early 1960s.

This brought us to the second source of concern about writing NRC history—finding a publisher. By law, any book manuscript sponsored by a federal agency had to be published by the Government Printing Office. George and I were committed to having our manuscript published by an academic press, and we received a waiver from the congressional committee that presides over such matters, the Joint Committee on Printing. This allowed us to seek an outside publisher.

The waiver was an important step, but we were not out of the woods. Since the NRC would be buying copies of our book for its own use and to deliver to government depository libraries, we had to go through the government contract process to search for a publisher. The contract process was not exactly designed for such purposes. The NRC contracts office sent out a “request for proposal” (RFP) to prospective publishers and asked them to bid on our manuscript by estimating the price they would charge the agency to purchase several hundred copies of the book when it appeared. The RFP included information about the manuscript and its authors and a sample chapter. It also contained hundreds of pages of boilerplate requirements for government contractors; one provision specified that a contractor must encourage its employees to fasten their seat belts when driving.

² Gerald K. Haines and Walker, eds., *American Foreign Relations: A Historiographical Review* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981).

Not surprisingly, publishers did not line up to bid on our manuscript. The response George and I received from the editors we contacted was usually puzzlement, curt dismissal, or occasionally, barely suppressed laughter. But there was one notable exception. Jack Miles was an editor at the University of California Press and also an outstanding scholar. After he left the press, he published a book, *God: A Biography*, that won the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1996.³ Jack took a keen interest in our topic and was willing to wade through the contract process. California made the only bid the NRC received, and after going through press's own review, the book, to George's and my immense satisfaction, was published in 1984.⁴ It received excellent reviews and was a source of pride at the NRC.

In 1986, George decided to take a job as historian of the National Science Foundation, and I became the NRC's sole historian. The chairman of the NRC told me that although he was a strong supporter of the history program, which was absolutely true, I would have to carry on alone because of a budget crunch the agency was facing. Although I was not able to bring on a full-time associate, I was allowed to hire contractors to assist in conducting research. Over a period of years, four talented historians who worked for a first-rate consulting firm, History Associates Incorporated, furnished me with imposing piles of documents. One of my researchers, Anne L. Foster, went on to even greater things as editor of *Diplomatic History*.⁵

From 1986 to my retirement in 2010, I served as the NRC historian. I published articles in history journals of record I had never heard of before joining the NRC, including *Technology and Culture*, the journal of the Society for the History of Technology, and *Isis*, the journal of the History of Science Society.⁶ I wrote essays for widely-circulated journals that did not run articles by historians as their standard fare, *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* and the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.⁷ Most important, I published four more volumes of the history of nuclear regulation, all with the University of California Press.⁸

Of the five books that I co-authored or authored for the NRC, the one that commanded the most attention by far was my history of the Three Mile Island crisis. The book came out in 2004, just before the 25th anniversary of the most serious

³ Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995). I am equally indebted to the very able editors of my next four books with the University of California Press, Elizabeth Knoll and Stan Holwitz. They were willing to face the foibles of the government contract process and to guide my prospective books through the sometimes discordant requirements of two bureaucracies.

⁴ George T. Mazuzan and Walker, *Controlling the Atom: The Beginnings of Nuclear Regulation, 1946-1962* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).

⁵ Foster's essay for this series, "Connections across Boundaries, is available here: <https://issforum.org/essays/PDF/E248.pdf>.

⁶ Walker, "Nuclear Power and the Environment: The Atomic Energy Commission and Thermal Pollution, 1965-1971," *Technology and Culture*, 30 (October 1989): 964-92; Walker "Regulating against Nuclear Terrorism: The Domestic Safeguards Issue, 1970-1979," *Technology and Culture*, 42 (January 2001): 107-32; Walker "The Atomic Energy Commission and the Politics of Radiation Protection, 1967-1971," *Isis* 85 (March 1994): 57-78.

⁷ Walker "The Controversy over Radiation Safety: A Historical Overview," *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 262 (4 August 1989): 664-68; Walker, "Documenting Three Mile Island," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, On-Line, 18 March 2009.

⁸ The books are: Walker, *Containing the Atom: Nuclear Regulation in a Changing Environment, 1963-1971* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992); Walker, *Permissible Dose: A History of Radiation Protection in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000); Walker, *Three Mile Island: A Nuclear Crisis in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), and Walker, *The Road to Yucca Mountain: The Development of Nuclear Waste Policy in the United States* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009).

accident in the history of nuclear power in the United States. Partly for that reason, it received about 35 reviews in popular media and journals. The reviews were overwhelmingly favorable, with the exceptions of one critic who complained that I was pro-nuclear and another who thought that I was anti-nuclear. I was particularly happy that scholars and experts who ranged across the spectrum of opinion in the debate over nuclear safety found merit in my book.

One of the reviews I most appreciated was written by Robert L. Long, a former vice president of the holding company that owned the Three Mile Island plant. He described the book as “almost as difficult to put down as a Clive Cussler or Tom Clancy novel.” Nobody had ever said anything like that about my previous books. He praised my handling of technical issues and concluded by declaring, “This book is terrific.”⁹ Much as I enjoyed reading Long’s assessment, I was equally if not more pleased with reviews from nuclear critics. John Abbotts, co-author with Ralph Nader of a book on nuclear power titled *The Menace of Atomic Energy*, submitted, “Walker regards ‘fair and balanced’ as a standard, not just a slogan, and he meets that standard admirably.”¹⁰ Gene I. Rochlin, a knowledgeable skeptic of nuclear power, reviewed my book for *Science*, perhaps the most prestigious science journal in the world. He hailed it as “a superb and balanced account” and went on to say, “Although the book is not the first, or even the most detailed, account of the events of those tension-filled days and weeks, it is by far the clearest and most accessible.”¹¹

My book on Three Mile Island received much acclaim at the NRC. By the time of the 25th anniversary of the accident, many staff members who worked for the agency in 1979 had retired or moved on, and newer employees often knew little about what had happened during the most important event in the NRC’s history. Shortly after my book came out, the commissioners requested that I deliver a lecture to the entire agency. On the day of my talk, NRC staff members filled a large auditorium and many others watched on television sets located in elevator lobbies. After I gave a summary of my book, the commissioners offered comments. They made very complimentary remarks about the book and the NRC history program in general, for which I was grateful and relieved. For me, the most memorable statement came from Commissioner Jeffrey S. Merrifield. “We are very lucky as an agency to . . . have a resident historian. Some outside the agency, in government and elsewhere, might think this is an unnecessary luxury,” he said. “But I think anyone who has read Sam’s book recognizes that this is a valuable investment in understanding our past and helping us to make a better future.”¹²

As Merrifield’s comment suggested, the NRC did not invest in a history program to whitewash or glorify the agency’s past. The occurrence of the Three Mile Island accident was hardly a glorious moment for the NRC. From my experience at the NRC and my knowledge of other government history programs, I learned the crucial insight that agencies hire professional historians for the practical reason that careful, candid, and sound history provides invaluable information and insights. Historians explain the reasons behind decisions, actions, and procedures, along with historical context that is enormously and uniquely useful in understanding the present. One revelation of my job at the NRC was that professionals in many fields deeply appreciated history as a means of understanding the issues they faced. They seemed to recognize the benefits of reliable history that separates lore, myth, and faulty memories from fact. I never tired of hearing NRC commissioners and staff officials describe the history program as a great asset to the agency.

Despite my initial reservations, the NRC turned out to be a wonderful place to work as a historian. It provided the resources I needed, left to my judgment the approaches I took in writing agency history, and appreciated the fruits of my research. My

⁹ Robert L. Long, “TMI-2: Two Takes on the 1979 Accident,” *Nuclear News* 48 (April 2005): 22-25.

¹⁰ Ralph Nader and John Abbotts, *The Menace of Atomic Energy*, (rev. ed., New York: W. W. Norton, 1979); John Abbotts, “The Turning Point,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 60 (September/October 2004): 66-68.

¹¹ Gene I. Rochlin, “Meaning of a Meltdown, After the Facts,” *Science* 305 (9 July 2004): 181.

¹² Walker, “Why We Write: Another Look at the Value of Federal History,” *Federal History Journal*, Issue 10 (April 2018): 1-8.

career opened new horizons by introducing me to topics, fields of history, journals, and experts with a variety of professional backgrounds. I even learned a little physics.

While I focused my professional efforts on nuclear power regulation, I retained my interest in diplomatic history as an away-from-the-office sideline activity. One project was a historiographical article on President Harry S. Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb, which appeared in *Diplomatic History* in 1990.¹³ In late 1994 and the first few months of 1995, the article received a great deal of notice, largely because it was frequently cited in popular media outlets by a prominent revisionist, Gar Alperovitz. The quotations he used from the article were in turn picked up by other writers during the lead-up to the 50th anniversary of the end of the Pacific War.

Alperovitz selectively quoted from the article to support his argument that the bomb was used to intimidate the Soviet Union rather than to achieve victory in the war with Japan. I was troubled that he made a point of identifying me as the "chief historian" of the NRC, thus implying that even a government historian found a consensus that supported elements of his thesis. He cited this passage from my article on numerous occasions: "The consensus among scholars is that the bomb was not needed to avoid an invasion of Japan. . . . It is clear that alternatives to the bomb existed and that Truman and his advisers knew it." I did not regard my statement on alternatives to the bomb as particularly significant; Herbert Feis, after all, had discussed other possible means of ending the war in a book published in 1961.¹⁴ Alperovitz neglected to quote other conclusions I had drawn in my article: "No scholar of the subject accepts in unadulterated form Alperovitz's argument that political considerations dictated the decision," and "the consensus of the mid-1970s, which held that the bomb was used primarily for military reasons and secondarily for diplomatic ones, continues to prevail."¹⁵

Partly out of pique but mostly for more exalted reasons, I decided to write my own book on Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb. For one thing, I believed that there was a need for a short book that would be suitable for the general public and for students. Since I would be writing it during evenings and weekends, brevity was a built-in requirement. More importantly, I wished to reach my own conclusions about why the bomb was used. Although I had published the historiographical article, I had not conducted original research on the topic or decided on my answer to the key question, "Was the use of the bomb necessary to win the war with Japan on terms acceptable to the United States?"

The book, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, was published by the University of North Carolina Press in 1997.¹⁶ Within a short time, the paperback edition fulfilled my hope that it would be a popular supplemental text in courses. Scores of college professors and secondary school teachers assigned the book to their classes, and it soon became one of the best-selling titles among scholarly books on UNC Press's list. It has now gone into multiple printings and three editions, and even after 25 years, it remains high on the press's roster of best sellers. It has come out in large print, Braille, audiobook, audio CD, and

¹³ Walker, "The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historiographical Update," *Diplomatic History* 14 (Winter 1990): 97-114. I later wrote another, and better, historiographical essay that discussed the serious weaknesses in both the revisionist and traditional interpretations: Walker, "Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground," *Diplomatic History* 29 (April 2005): 311-34.

¹⁴ Herbert Feis, *Japan Subdued: The Atomic Bomb and the End of the War in the Pacific* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

¹⁵ Gar Alperovitz, "Beyond the Smithsonian Flap: Historians' New Consensus," *Washington Post*, 16 October 1994; Walker, "Decision to Use the Bomb," 110-11. He used the same quotation in many articles. See, for example, Alperovitz, "We Didn't Have to Drop the Bomb," *Wall Street Journal*, 13 September 1994; Alperovitz, "Was the Enola Gay's Mission Really Necessary?" *Houston Chronicle*, 28 October 1994; Alperovitz, "Enola Gay: A New Consensus," *Washington Post*, 4 February 1995; and Alperovitz, "Hiroshima at Fifty," *Tikkun*, 10 (July/August 1995): 37-38.

¹⁶ Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs against Japan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997, 2004, 2016).

Japanese language editions. *Prompt and Utter Destruction* also received many splendid reviews from scholars who stood somewhere between the poles of the debate over the use of the bomb.

As I neared the end of my tenure at the NRC, I began to think about books I might like to write in retirement. I quickly dismissed any idea of continuing to work on topics relating to nuclear energy. As a big fan of college basketball, I decided to do a book on the early history of the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC). In addition to discussing games, players, and coaches, I examined the serious off-the-court issues of academic-athletic relations at ACC schools and the racial integration of conference basketball.¹⁷ Next, I collaborated with Randy Roberts on a study of the 1973-1974 college basketball season and how it opened the way to March Madness.¹⁸ After two books on basketball, I wanted to move on to something else, so I wrote a book on the enormously destructive riots in Washington, DC that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968.¹⁹ In my most recent book, I returned to the fold of diplomatic history by covering the story of 9/11 as both a critical public policy issue and an intense human drama.²⁰

Looking back on almost half a century as a professional historian, I have much to celebrate. I have been blessed with supportive mentors, colleagues, editors, and institutions. My career has not unfolded the way I wanted or anticipated when I completed my graduate studies. If someone had told me then that I would spend most of my career as a government historian, I probably would have fallen on a sword on the spot. Like many academic historians then and now, I was plagued with the misconception that government history is inherently dishonest. During my career, as I moved from studying Henry Wallace to nuclear power safety to the atomic bomb to college basketball to urban rioting to 9/11, I have had my share of difficulties, disappointments, and dismissals of my work. Not to mention some bad reviews. But the balance is emphatically on the favorable side of the ledger. My career has been an adventure—intellectually challenging, engaging and rewarding. And it has been great fun. I could never have asked for more.

J. Samuel Walker is the former historian of the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

¹⁷ Walker, *ACC Basketball: The Story of the Rivalries, Traditions, and Scandals of the First Two Decades of the Atlantic Coast Conference* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Walker and Randy Roberts, *The Road to Madness: How the 1973-1974 Season Transformed College Basketball* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Walker, *Most of 14th Street Is Gone: The Washington, DC Riots of 1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²⁰ Walker, *The Day That Shook America: A Concise History of 9/11* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2021).