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"A Career of Chapters"

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What do you want to be when you grow up? It's a question that I playfully ask my daughters from time to time. Still pre-teens, they don't face high-stakes decisions any time soon. Their answers are nevertheless fascinating. Veterinarian, scientist, musician, coach, writer—I've heard a lot of good possibilities that instill a bit of parental pride along with relief that my example hasn't put them off careers entailing long years of study or unspectacular incomes. Sometimes, though, they respond not by mentioning their goals but by turning the question back on me: Dad, what do *you* want to be when you grow up? It's a query that I relish—and not just because it makes me feel younger than I am. I'm delighted if I give the impression that I'm open to fresh career twists and that new turns might even lie ahead.

I counsel young people that a key to career contentment is to know broadly what you like to think about and how you like to spend your time but also to be flexible about how you act on those preferences. Stay alert, in other words, for opportunities that might enable you to do what you like to do in fresh and interesting ways. I recognize that this advice reflects no small amount of privilege. Making career decisions with an eye to finding new challenges is not, alas, an option available to everyone. Fueled by the advantages that I have been fortunate to enjoy, though, it is an approach has enabled me, with big assists from a string of mentors and more than my fair share of dumb luck, to cobble together a career of distinct chapters, each of which has brought fascinating new challenges and opportunities.

I discovered as far back as elementary school what I liked to do: think and write about public affairs. Like so many young people who wind up in PhD programs, I was lucky to have parents who loved intellectual pursuits and fostered conversation about serious matters. The house where I grew up in southeastern Massachusetts was nothing fancy but groaned under the weight of books, particularly tomes on American history. Summer vacation meant hitting the road in our succession of clunky station wagons to tour Civil War battlefields or dusty historic sites of the American West. The smell of summer rain in my adopted home state of Texas still conjures memories of long-ago visits to places like the Little Bighorn Battlefield, Deadwood, and Canyon de Chelly. Although my parents sometimes nudged me toward medicine (my grandfather had been a surgeon), it was perhaps inevitable that my favorite subject in school would be history.

If family led me in this direction, I also benefitted from educators who gave shape to my interests and helped me find opportunities to pursue them. The first of these was an eccentric history teacher at the Quaker school I attended in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, a gifted classroom instructor who breathed life into the past through field trips and creative projects even as she taught her pupils how to take notes, critique books, and craft argumentative essays. I owe her for my budding sense of confidence that I was a capable student with a

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knack for writing. She helped me, too, to look beyond my corner of rural Massachusetts for the next stage of my schooling. Starting in sophomore year of high school, I attended Milton Academy in Milton, Massachusetts, alma mater to luminaries like T.S. Eliot and Robert F. Kennedy. If life as a boarding student was a little more spartan than I might have liked, the education was top-notch, particularly in English and history. I recall especially what seemed like endless exercises in writing five-paragraph essays. Thesis statement, three body paragraphs, conclusion that summarizes and introduces new analysis—the formula drilled into me on cold New England afternoons still shapes my approach to writing.

Increasingly captivated by history and current events, I was enthralled during these years—the early 1980s—by the dramatic events taking place around the world. Crises in El Salvador, Granada, Lebanon, the Falklands, and Poland, along with the dangerous surge of US-Soviet hostility, stoked a desire to understand these developments and the deep histories behind them. Books like Penny Lernoux's *The Cry of the People*, John Le Carré's *The Little Drummer Girl*, and Helen Caldicott's *Missile Envy*, along with the 1983 TV movie "The Day After," made strong impressions on me.[1] What were the sources of US-Soviet hostility, and why had the rivalry reached so dangerous an impasse as to threaten the humanity's future? This teenager saw no more important questions than these.

Another key mentor channeled my interests in productive directions. True, I bonded with my eleventh-grade history teacher, Mr. Warren—it still feels too weird to call him "John"—through our mutual love of baseball. But I also appreciated his rigorous approach to the study of history and his eagerness to probe the historical background of issues making headlines. I learned for the first time how to conduct serious research, though I admit that my initial foray resulted in a paper explaining not weighty geopolitical themes but the rise of baseball as the nation's most popular sport in the late nineteenth century. I still treasure the paperback copy of Frank Norris's novel *McTeague* that I received as a prize from the history faculty for my essay—my first special recognition for academic work.[2] I also treasure Mr. Warren's passion for a subject that quickly became mine as well—the history of the Vietnam War. Under his tutelage, I reckoned with historiographical debates (though I had no idea that this term existed) and saw how history reverberated in the headlines of the day.

Mr. Warren also influenced me in another way: he had graduated a few years earlier from Stanford University and planted the seed that it might be a place for me to consider when it came time to apply to colleges. That seed came to full flower in the winter of my senior year, when I was admitted to Stanford and, after a hastily arranged visit with my dad, took the plunge. In retrospect, all this was a little bit crazy. Going to school 3,000 miles away hardly made sense when I had also been accepted at great schools in New England. But Stanford had obvious charms, and my parents, who had lived in California at one point, were supportive, a notable act of patience and generosity that I did not come close to appreciating at the time. So off I went in the fall of 1984.

It was a great decision. Over the next four years, I took a broad array of courses in history, political science, and related fields and was fortunate to have teachers like James Sheehan, Alexander Dallin, Norman Naimark, Jack Rakove, and George Fredrickson. My interests in American politics and foreign policy only deepened as the momentous events of that era played out: Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power, the Chernobyl disaster, the Afghan war, and the series of summit meetings that led, step by step, to the end the Cold War. Professor Barton Bernstein, the eminent New Left historian of the American nuclear program and other topics, became my most important mentor, modeling what a career fueled by interest in the historical background of contemporary issues might look like. Under his guidance, I learned how to dig into primary

[1] Penny Lernoux, *The Cry of the People: The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America* (New York: Penguin, 1982); John Le Carré, *The Little Drummer Girl* (New York: Knopf, 1983); Helen Caldicott, *Missile Envy: The Arms Race and Nuclear War* (New York: Morrow, 1984); and "The Day After," directed by Nicholas Meyer (ABC Motion Pictures, 1983).

[2] Frank Norris, *McTeague* (New York: New American Library, 1981).

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sources and conducted my first extensive archival research, leading to a well-received honors essay about the Berlin crisis of 1961.

The possibility of graduate study in history loomed large as the end of my undergraduate years came closer. But another field—journalism—drew me even more powerfully and became the first chapter of my career. At Stanford, I worked tirelessly as a reporter and editor for the student paper, the *Stanford Daily*. In my junior year, I was elected editor-in-chief for a six-month term. I loved everything about the *Daily*—the comradery with peers, the quick gratification of mastering varied topics and seeing my byline on the front page, and the sense of performing a meaningful service to the community. I did well enough to land summer internships with the *Washington Post*'s national desk and then, a year later, the Washington bureau of the *Los Angeles Times*, life-changing experiences that enable me to write about national affairs for two of the nation's best dailies. And then, after finishing at Stanford, I went to work for the Washington bureau of the *New York Times* thanks to the entrée provided by Philip Taubman, a former *Stanford Daily* editor who'd gone on to big things at the *Times*. The job entailed more mail-sorting than reporting and writing, but I loved every minute. It was at the *Times* bureau, a few blocks from the White House, that I watched Berlin Wall collapse in the company of luminaries like Tom Freidman, Maureen Dowd, and Howell Raines. I dreamed of a career like theirs.

A few months later, I parlayed my growing journalism c.v. into a job with the Associated Press in Brussels, Belgium. I had gone to Brussels for an internship with NATO's parliamentary organization, the North Atlantic Assembly. I used that position as an opportunity to seek a reporting job in a city that was rapidly expanding as a base for American journalists. The end of the Cold War and the growing ambitions of the European Community (soon to be renamed the European Union) made Brussels a veritable Mecca for someone with my constellation of interests. As usual, I benefited from the help of a generous individual with whom I clicked, a veteran Dutch journalist who was chief of the small AP bureau. Under his mentorship, I got to write about all the high-profile stories of that critical moment in international affairs. The EU and NATO angles on the transformation of the Eastern bloc, German unification, the crackup of Yugoslavia, and the first Gulf War, along with the negotiations for European monetary union, were my daily beats.

Exciting as all this was, I knew that I didn't want to settle permanently in Europe. If I stayed in journalism, my best move was to return to the United States and work my way up at the AP or with a major daily. But graduate studies still beckoned too. Conflicted between career paths, I decided to split the difference—I would apply to PhD programs but keep an open mind about whether I headed into academia over the long term or returned to journalism. Everything, I figured, would depend on where I found the best opportunities. An indisputably great opportunity soon opened at Yale University, where I was admitted to study with Professor Paul Kennedy, who was a celebrity thanks to his 1987 best-seller *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.[3] Here, I knew, was precisely the sort of supervisor who would help me delve into the study of international affairs while understanding that my career might ultimately lie outside the academy.

Frankly, I didn't much like grad school at first. Compared to the exhilarating job I'd had in in Europe and the excitement of Stanford, Yale felt dusty and austere. It took only a phone call from my old bureau chief in Brussels to pull me away from New Haven for another year back in Europe. But I was determined to finish my PhD, and things improved dramatically the more I focused on my dissertation. In retrospect, it was crazy to write about the origins of the American war in Vietnam, a subject that had been worked nearly to death by innumerable historians. But a mix of naivete, genuine fascination, and enthusiasm for my multi-national research strategy led me into a project focused on international diplomacy culminating in the first US commitment to war in Indochina in the spring of 1950. Research trips to London, Cambridge, Paris, and Aix-en-Provence, along with Washington and Independence, Missouri, made for a truly memorable year of archival digging. But the highlight of my PhD program was the year I spent back in New Haven, writing it up. The notion that I was crafting not just a dissertation but a book carried me along, as did the support of Paul

[3] Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

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Kennedy and other mentors, including John Gaddis, John Merriman, Gaddis Smith, and Ben Kiernan. All of these faculty members offered crucial feedback but also increasingly created a community where I quietly morphed, without even realizing it, from student to scholar. I learned that training PhD students is, at its best, a social activity almost as much as an intellectual one—something I've tried to bring to my own mentorship of doctoral students.

Given the allure of journalism up to this point in my life and even a brief (and highly unimaginative) flirtation with law school, it's puzzling to me in retrospect how easily I settled into an academic career. Teaching and research, not journalism, would be my next chapter, though I was determined to keep writing op-eds and book reviews for newspapers. Like most of my peers at Yale, I applied for academic jobs at a huge array of schools—the University of Miami, the University of Alaska, and dozens of others in between. I was enormously lucky in two ways. First, Yale's International Security Studies hired me as a lecturer just as I finished my degree, enabling me to stay on the job market without feeling pressure to take the first job—most likely a one-year post with a heavy teaching load—to come along. Second, Professor Penny Von Eschen's departure from the University of Texas at Austin opened a slot in the history of US foreign relations at just the right time for me. I learned later that many members of the department opposed hiring a diplomatic historian or ranked such a hire far down their lists of priorities. But just enough of their peers, keenly aware of the legacy shaped by Professor Robert Divine over decades, thought otherwise. The stars aligned, and I arrived in Austin in the summer of 2000, a little daunted by the size of Bob's shoes but extraordinarily grateful to be assistant professor of history at an R-1 university in a great city.

Though this New Englander struggled at times to adjust to the heat and deep-red conservatism of Texas, UT-Austin proved a wonderful new home. Senior colleagues like Michael Stoff, George Forgie, David Oshinsky, Alan Tully, Judy Coffin, Tony Hopkins, and Jackie Jones provided both friendship and sound professional advice. They also offered encouragement to follow my interests and instincts in forging a scholarly path that suited me, rather than intellectual fads or peer pressure. At a time when many diplomatic historians bemoaned the marginalization of their field, I found support—or at least a respectful live-and-let-live attitude—among my peers in trendier historical subfields. Professor Divine's legacy undoubtedly had something to do with this openness to me and my field. The sheer size of the history department—more than 60 tenured and tenure-track faculty—also no doubt helped; in a department of that size, it was hard to argue that there was no room for a specialist in international affairs. And then there was the obvious drawing power of courses in foreign relations and the growing conviction among the Texas elite of their state's deepening connection to the global economy. Fueled especially by the latter consideration, my arrival at UT, coinciding with the arrival of another assistant professor of American foreign-relations, Frank Gavin, across campus at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, proved just the start of UT's rise as a major center of diplomatic history. By 2015, UT employed perhaps the nation's largest cohort of historians in these fields: H.W. Brands, Will Inboden, Aaron O'Connell, and Jeremi Suri, along with me and a number of regional experts who were open to working with our PhD students. We competed—often successfully—with Yale, Columbia, Harvard, and Johns Hopkins for some of the best entering graduate students in the field.

For at least my first decade at UT, I envisioned myself mainly as a practitioner of "international history," the sort of multi-national, multi-archival, multi-lingual research that dominated among diplomatic historians at that time. The end of the Cold War had fueled a powerful wave of new interest in combining US records with documentary materials from other nations to cast American decision-making as part of a web of international give-and-take. My dissertation, soon converted into my first book, was precisely this sort of project. The main point of my *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* was to reexamine an old question—how did Washington first become involved in Indochina after the Second World War—by showing how two other powers (Britain and France) influenced US behavior.[4] The success of that project encouraged me to accept an invitation from Oxford University Press to write a brief "international history"

[4] Mark Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

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of the Vietnam War, a book that appeared in 2008.[5] After that, though, I decided to try something different. My intellectual interests began turning in the direction of American political and bureaucratic history, just as the difficulty of ambitious travel was becoming clear to me following the births of my two girls. I refocused my attention on the 1960s and proposed to write a book examining U.S. policymaking toward the Third World as a whole. If the scope was global, this would be a book rooted in American sources and aimed at understanding how presidential styles and bureaucratic debates in Washington shaped policy outcomes. Tenure enabled me to make methodological choices that cut against the still-pervasive emphasis on multi-national research. Princeton University Press published *The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era* in 2021.[6]

That topic also grew from another simple reality of my life in Austin: the LBJ Presidential Library loomed across campus from my home in the history department. Even before accepting the job in Austin, I had understood the potential bonanza of having a presidential library so close by. I began conducting research on the LBJ presidency and got to know the library's director, the legendary Harry Middleton. I started serving on advisory committees, organizing events, and giving presentations under the auspices of the library's education department. With Harry's encouragement, I started to think about applying to become the library's director if the position ever opened up at a fortuitous time for me. That happened in 2019, and I started as the library's sixth director in early January 2020, opening another chapter in my career.

The LBJ position flexes some of my historian's muscles. I give countless presentations about the LBJ presidency and the Johnson presidency's evolving legacy, and I still teach a course on the 1960s. I get to brainstorm and host academic events from time to time even as headliners like Nancy Pelosi and David Brooks grab most of the attention. And I've found time to move forward with academic projects including an anthology of essays about LBJ that will be published by Cambridge University Press in the fall of 2023. In other ways, though, the job has led me to think about history in new ways, especially by giving me authority over a well-respected museum and a stream of programs aimed at educators and students. Fascinating though these new responsibilities are, though, I'd be lying if I denied being tempted to return to the academic life. The intellectual freedom and control over one's time that comes with a scholarly career undeniably has its charms. But I also wonder sometimes whether other unforeseen paths might yet lie ahead, chances to think anew about matters that have fascinated me as long as I can remember.

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[5] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[6] Lawrence*, The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021),

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