Readers of H-Diplo will likely wonder “who is that?” when they see identity of the author of this essay since I am neither a historian of diplomacy nor a specialist in international relations. I am a historian of the nineteenth century United States who focuses on slavery, the Civil War, and emancipation, with a teaching sideline in the history of baseball when I need something a little lighter. After a roundtable on Jeremi Suri’s *Politics by Other Means* in which I participated, Diane Labrosse kindly extended the invitation to contribute this essay about my formative years as a scholar and my path to academia. The invitation—both unexpected and delightful—alerted me to how much my career owes to saying “yes” to invitations I did not expect to get.

Foremost among those invitations is the one to be a historian at all. As a devotee of the Little House on the Prairie books and television program, I spent endless hours of my childhood outdoors pretending to be Laura doing her chores, going to school and getting the better of Nellie Olson, so the pull toward the nineteenth century came early, but I had no idea that there was such a thing as a historian, much less that I could be one. The very first college brochure to arrive after I took the PSATs in high school came from Mount Holyoke College, which looked exactly how I imagined college should look, plus it was founded in my favorite century and was in the same state as the Red Sox. I enrolled and for the first time I discovered a place where it was not weird to both be a girl (though I soon learned to use the word woman) and to be interested in things simply because they appealed to my curiosity.

In college, I discovered the life of the mind and a new sense of volition and efficacy. I distinctly remember one day shortly after my arrival at University College Galway, Ireland, where I studied my junior year. Walking down Shop Street in Galway and noticing a bookstore, I realized I could go in, just because I wanted to, without asking or disrupting or inconveniencing anyone. I sat on the floor and read poetry by W.B. Yeats, who I had loved as long as I could remember, and Seamus Heaney, whose work I discovered at Mount Holyoke in a class taught by Mary McHenry. Empowered by new senses of volition and efficacy, I enjoyed myself enormously in Galway doing many things besides reading poetry, but I also kept thinking about how Yeats and Heaney used the past in their poetry, and how Irish nationalists used poetry in their versions of the past. In my senior year at Mount Holyoke, I turned that fascination into a thesis comparing the literary creation of a national past in the writings of Declaration of Independence draftsmen Thomas Jefferson, President Abraham Lincoln, poet W.B. Yeats, and the 1916 Easter Rising rebels. That thesis is probably best forgotten now except for two things. First, Joseph Ellis, my thesis advisor, championed my interest in such a crazy topic and told me that I could write. Second, it alerted me to how deeply satisfying researching and writing history could be.
My thesis did not immediately steer me to the historian’s path. I assumed I would teach primary school, and had an offer to teach third grade after graduation, when I learned that I had been awarded a fellowship from Mount Holyoke that would enable post-graduate study in pretty much anything, anywhere. I did not yet recognize that fellowship as an invitation exactly, but I recognized it as a wildly generous gift, and a gift means you can do what you want with something whether it is practical or not. I went back to University College, Galway and pursued a two-year MPhil degree in Irish history and literature, writing a thesis about contrasting versions of the Irish past and Irish national identity in the poetry of W.B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney, and Eavan Boland. In my first year, the tutor (teaching assistant) for all the US history classes left suddenly. Professor Tom Bartlett, then of UCG’s history department and MPhil program (now at the University of Aberdeen), asked me to step in: another unexpected invitation. For awhile I was overwhelmed, but once I found my feet, I really enjoyed it. Most important, Tom told me I was good at teaching university students, and I should consider applying to do a PhD in history. After that academic year, I worked in Boston for the summer at the Old North Church and at the Adams National Historic Site in Quincy, spent as many evenings as possible in the standing room section at Fenway Park, and applied to PhD programs, though with precious little idea about how one should choose a graduate program. Back in Galway for the second year of the MPhil, I completed my thesis and waited to hear back from graduate schools. When responses to my applications arrived, I chose my graduate school on the basis of proximity to Fenway Park. The next fall, I began a PhD in nineteenth century US history at Harvard with William Gienapp as my advisor.

I would not advise anyone else to use my method of choosing a graduate school, but it worked very well for me, despite a first year that brought a few bumps. In the first paper that I wrote for my advisor, I unwittingly took a position opposed to the one he took in his most important book.1 When one of my fellow first-years pointed out what I had done, I made an appointment with Professor Gienapp and headed to his office with great trepidation. I apologized and promised to read his book immediately. First, he told me he admired my courage. Then he said, “There are two kinds of graduate advisors. Those who want you to think like them, and those who want you to think. I am the second kind.” I remain grateful for those words, and I have tried to live up to them by making them the central focus of mentoring my own graduate students.

Early hiccups notwithstanding, I was ridiculously happy in graduate school. I loved the total immersion of graduate study. At the same time, I worked as a Park Ranger for the National Park Service at Boston National Historical Park and Adams National Historic Site, which allowed me to interact with people from many walks of life with an interest in history, plus I met my spouse. Designing education programs and giving tours also made me confront—not just in a library but everywhere—the fundamental contradiction between the Freedom Trail story and the basic, foundational fact of US slavery, which stood out all the more starkly after I wrote an MPhil. thesis about a country without that foundational fact. Books outside my field—Medieval Households by David Herlihy, From Memory to Written Record by M.T. Clanchy, The King’s Two Bodies by Ernst Kantorowicz, and Way of Death by Joseph Miller—deepened my appreciation and understanding of history as a discipline.2 Dated though that list looks now, it was important for me at the time. So were my fellow graduate students, especially Christine Dee, Dan Hamilton, Isa Helfgott, Lisa Laskin, Rob MacDougall, Jon Schrag, Eva Sheppard Wolf, Silvana Siddali, Julia Torrie, and Susan Wyl Sayers. Amy Greenberg was just enough ahead of me to serve as more of a model than she probably realized, and she persisted in that role (probably also unwittingly) long after. Also important was volunteer service at a largely volunteer-run immigration organization headed by an indefatigable nun named Lena Deevy whose wise admonition to learn to “hold success and failure in the one hand” still shapes how I try to make sense of the past.

Coming off my MPhil thesis about Irish national identity, giving tours of historic sites connected to US origin stories, and spending time with people who felt exiled or excluded from their native and adopted nations, I longed to find a way to study how ordinary, unheralded people—not just famous poets—thought about their nation’s past, and how what they thought affected what they did. If I wanted to understand how ordinary people’s thoughts affected what they did, I needed sources that would provide access to those thoughts, and here I returned to my childhood fascination with the nineteenth century. During the US Civil War, a group of roughly three million ordinary men with much higher literacy rates than most armies before that time were separated from their loved ones, which made letters home the only way for them to share their thoughts and ideas. Civil War soldiers’ letters, in other words, offered a window into what a wider swath of Americans thought at a pivotal moment in the nation’s history. That body of sources invited me into my dissertation.

In figuring out what to do with those sources, I initially drew inspiration from a 1925 speech about founding a new Irish educational system delivered by W.B. Yeats who was at that time serving as a senator in the Irish Free State. Yeats advised beginning “geography with your native fields…history with local monuments…and then to pass on from that to the nation itself.” I would read soldiers’ letters for how their authors understood the connection between their own particular, local, home and the nation for which they were fighting. Beyond any simple North/South dichotomy, I was interested in regional variations. What did the Union mean to an Iowa grain farmer compared to a Rhode Island millhand compared to a clerk in a Pennsylvania railway office? What did the Confederacy—or even the South—mean to someone from the Chesapeake Bay compared to turpentine-producing piney woods compared to bustling Charleston or New Orleans?

In retrospect, it sounds like a question that only a graduate student could love, but I was a graduate student and it was a particular historiographical moment. For one thing, the notion of agency—and specifically the agency of non- elites—was hot. Meanwhile, the field of Civil War history was taking on questions of unity and dissent within the Union and the Confederacy, puzzling over whether class or other fault lines prevented national unity or were transcended by it. At the same time, Joseph Glatthaar’s call for a “new military history” in the early 1990s had inspired an outpouring of attention to how social, political, and cultural factors on the home front affected the battlefield. One way was by molding the men who fought on those battlefields, which prompted avid debates about the experiences and ideology of Civil War soldiers as correctives to a post-Vietnam consensus view of Civil War soldiers as non-ideological and even non-thinking. Larry Daniel’s Soldiering in the Army of Tennessee, Earl Hess’s Liberty, Virtue and Progress: Northerners and their War for the Union Reid Mitchell’s The Vacant Chair and For Cause and Comrades by James McPherson—the latter of whom I would later meet and find to be a very generous scholar—all excited me. I did not stop to notice that none of these books was written by a woman; the challenges of being a woman writing about Civil War soldiers would arise later.

Off I headed to read dead people’s mail in state and local archives scattered throughout the states that fought in the US Civil War, alert to the role of ideology in ordinary people’s lives, armed with questions about the connections between the local and the national…and in for some big surprises. One of the most exciting was a type of source: camp newspapers. In their down time, Civil War soldiers made camp newspapers out of any

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4 One such example was Rich Man’s War: Class, Caste, and Confederate Defeat in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).
means available, from setting type on the back of a civilian newspaper left in the presses when the army got into town, to printing on wallpaper, to handwriting on foolscap. Historians knew that soldiers had created such things, but conventional wisdom said that only a handful survived. I found over one hundred unique titles, sometimes running only to an issue or two and sometimes lasting for months. These uncensored sources provide a uniquely unvarnished look at how soldiers talked among themselves. Combined with soldiers’ letters and diaries, they spoke to my interest in ordinary people’s thoughts.

Even with mounds of source material, my original animating questions remained unanswered, and in many ways still do, though decades later parts of The Calculus of Violence by Aaron Sheehan-Dean speak to the connection between locality and national identity. I really wanted to find soldiers writing things like “when I look at the flag, I think of my farm,” but they simply did not cooperate. Instead, they kept talking about the last thing that I anticipated regular soldiers would have much to say about—slavery—which flummoxed me. I was interested in enlisted soldiers rather than high-ranking officers. The majority in the Confederate army were non-slaveholding and in the Union Army I assumed most had not thought much about slavery before the war. So what business did they have going on and on about it?

At first, I was frustrated by this disconnect and wished that the sources would just stop talking about slavery and start talking about native fields and local monuments and the like. Eventually I realized that, rather than wish away the gap between what I expected and what I actually found, my job was to explain it. Why did all these soldiers have so much to say about it? Why did they so clearly name it as the reason for the war?

The resulting dissertation became my first book, What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War. In explaining why the men who fought the war understood slavery to be at the center of the conflict, the book argued that for Confederate soldiers, including nonslaveholders, the institution of slavery anchored the social order of their world so completely that they believed that abolition—which they assumed from the outset to be the Union’s goal—would destroy their own aspirational prospects for upward mobility, their own sense of themselves as men, and the safety and well-being of their loved ones, so it had to be stopped on the battlefield. White Union soldiers began the war divided among themselves on the issue of slavery, but time spent in the Confederacy convinced them that slavery had started the war. In doing so, it endangered not just the United States but the fate of self-government all over the world, since surely if the Union failed, nations everywhere would deem self-government a failure. Believing that the great threat that slavery posed to the Union and to the worldwide fate of self-government meant that only the destruction of slavery could end the war and prevent its recurrence, white Union soldiers began calling for an end to slavery in late 1861, well in advance of most white northern civilians and long before the Emancipation Proclamation. Despite the loud exceptions, the rank-and-file as a whole were early advocates, not reluctant resisters, of wartime emancipation. Black Union soldiers placed the destruction of slavery at the center of the conflict from the outset, and envisioned the war as about far more than just an end to the institution, but also the beginning of full inclusion within the nation’s promises. Fred Arthur Bailey read the dissertation and encouraged me to take millennialism more seriously, and the book’s improvement over the dissertation in this regard owes a great deal to him.

Sadly, my dissertation advisor, William Gienapp, passed away shortly after I completed the dissertation and long before the book’s publication. His death was a great loss to the field. Moreover, I could have used his guidance in navigating both the acclaim and the fierce resistance that the book met. I suspect he would have told me not to pay very much attention to either. At the time, I think I let myself pay too much attention to

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7 Aaron Sheehan-Dean, The Calculus of Violence: How Americans Fought the Civil War (Harvard University Press, 2018). This book is not primarily about national identity, but it is one of the most deeply thoughtful recent books about the Civil War that I know of, and in its thoughtfulness about how and why Civil War Americans justified violence against each other it asks “how did people think about their communities and their nation—what held people together and legitimized their voice?” See 13.

8 Chandra Manning, What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War (New York: Knopf, 2007)
both. Luckily, I was teaching in the history department at Georgetown University, and then-chair John Tutino stepped in with mentorship on which I still rely.

Still, I had to think more about what it meant to be a woman historian partly because of where the blowback to my book came from, and partly because I had small children and was entering a phase of my life that, if it had a chapter title, would be called “Failing at Everything All of the Time.” The work of women Civil War scholars—Drew Faust, Thavolia Glymph, Nina Silber, and also Annette Gordon-Reed even though her field isn’t exactly Civil War—became important to me intellectually.9 The simultaneous commitment to their work and personal kindness of Lesley Gordon, Elizabeth Leonard, and Anne Sarah Rubin took on great meaning.10

Nor could I ignore questions of structure and capacity. It became inescapably apparent to me that no matter the amount of determination, persistence, intention, or will, sometimes the mightiest efforts fail. Both my undergraduate discovery of being able to do things one wanted to do, and my scholarly coming of age in an era that was excited about agency, led to an emphasis on and celebration of volition and efficacy. Yet my efforts to make headway on my second book project, the things that happened to the people I was studying in that book project, and my own daily life all said the opposite: that dedication and intention often fail despite sincerity of effort, and “working harder” does not change that outcome. Three unrelated works around this time proved pivotal, although it took me a long time to recognize it. One was a book review by Richard White that hailed the importance of the failed alternative.11 Another was William Sewell’s essay “A Theory of Structure” and its further elaboration in Logics of History.12 And the third I first heard as a talk but it eventually appeared as the book, After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War by Greg Downs.13

All of these works emphasized hard, unbending limits that shape human history as much as the intentions or actions of individuals or groups do. I remembered Lena Deevy’s advice to hold and success and failure in one hand. Meanwhile, Amy Greenberg told me for heaven’s sake, get over myself and get a clothes dryer; the planet would not immediately combust but I would be able to spend an extra couple of hours thinking rather than hanging up laundry. Acknowledging failure, understanding reasons for it, and doing what was possible about it, I came to realize, were all essential in the life of the scholar.

I bring up all of these quotidian matters because I think it that younger scholars who might be reading this essay need to hear that the stuff of our lives does affect our work, and I wish that I had learned earlier to attend to how rather than to fight it. My second book project illustrates this point.

I began with much too large a question about how the US got from 1865 to Jim Crow, just as the sesquicentennial of the Civil War meant that I received several invitations to give talks about “emancipation


and citizenship.” At first, that pairing seemed straightforward, but I soon stumbled because emancipation and citizenship were not at all the same thing. Moreover, nobody in the nineteenth century really seemed to know what citizenship was, not even the attorney general of the United States, who admitted as much in 1862. As for emancipation, we know a lot about the laws and proclamations and amendments that outlawed slavery, but I could find nothing to explain what the experience of emancipation—of exiting bondage—in wartime was really like. I decided to start with that question, the place where half a million formerly enslaved people exited bondage was a type of place: contraband camps.

Contraband camps were ad-hoc encampments of formerly enslaved people who ran away from their enslavers to the Union Army whenever it showed up in Confederate territory. A couple of books (and one article) on specific contraband camps existed, but there was no go-to source on the whole phenomenon, so I decided the first step was to learn about life in contraband camps.

This time I could not rely on a voluminous source base of letters sent to loved ones. Instead, I would have to piece together fragments. I had a good idea about where to start thanks to the single most important development in the field of Civil War history of the past half-century: the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, which sent an army of researchers into the National Archives and published a selection of military and federal records where freedpeople appeared. Though it ran to several volumes, the project still only culled a tiny portion of the massive records at the National Archives and it felt like cheating to just use the published volumes. Still, its references were enough for me to start looking through army records for any tiny scrap—like dock records or ration lists—that could alert me to the movement of freedom-seeking people into and out of Union lines. The Army kept papers that served its purposes, not my purpose of finding freedpeople’s voices, so there was a lot of trawling through pages and boxes without finding much of anything. Yet more often than I expected, the voices of Black men and women came through as they aided the war effort and put their own needs on the Union’s agenda. Anxious to expand the source base beyond just the federal government, I cast a wider net to include missionary papers, collections from churches and aid organizations, newspapers, and postwar records like Black soldiers’ pension files and Freedmen’s Savings Bank records where freedpeople mapped out kin connections and war experiences. It was a thoroughly unmanageable source base. Into chaos I plunged.

I ran into an account of a formerly enslaved woman that stopped me in my tracks. A woman in North Carolina put her two children and a basket of eggs into a canoe and then walked that canoe along twelve miles of North Carolina shoreline to a contraband camp, where she delivered the eggs to Union General Ambrose Burnside and herself and her children to freedom. Eggs! Something so fragile, so easily broken, in a canoe rocked by waves with two children who could jostle or roughhouse or break the eggs or fall overboard or come to harm in so many different ways. I could not stop thinking about that woman, and at the same time, I did not see how I would ever come up with a framework for this obstreperous project that made any sense of her story. I nearly gave it up.

In addition to being overwhelmed by a too-big research question and a sprawling source base over which I had no command, I was also overwhelmed in family life. I loved my kids beyond all understanding and I loved being their mom, and at the same time, they presented challenges that seemed different than those of anyone we knew, and did not dissipate no matter what we tried or how hard I worked at anything.

Then my older son was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum (as, later, would my younger son), and these diagnoses offered me an invitation I certainly had not expected into the fascinating world of neurodiversity. This world has taught me innumerable valuable things, but one of the first things it taught me

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was that my son’s brain encounters and approaches the world in much different ways than that of a typical person. One such way is that, while most of us perceive from the general to the specific, he perceives in the opposite direction. If I walk into an unfamiliar room, with no effort on my part, I am first aware of the general structure: there is a ceiling, a floor, four walls, a door, maybe some windows, enough to tell me immediately that I am in a room and I have been in rooms before so this is a familiar kind of place. Then I start to fill in details: desks and a chalkboard, it must be a classroom. Then maybe things like a clock or posters on the wall register. In contrast, my son walks in and at first might notice the writing on one particular poster or the pattern in the carpet, and then another tiny detail and then another, all in disconnected and chaotic fashion, and only eventually will his perception widen out to take in walls, ceiling, and floors and he will realize that he is in a room. It is quite an exhausting and disorienting way of perceiving (though now years later he has developed coping strategies) but he always notices things that the rest of us miss.

One day I asked myself, what if I approached evidence the way my son would? What if I set aside looking for an explanatory framework that made sense of it all, and just started from the details, like the eggs in the North Carolina woman’s basket? What would I notice that I had missed before? I noticed that the woman with the eggs in the canoe had no explanatory framework, either. All she had were the details of what the day brought her, and from them she had to try to forge a path out of slavery, with no way of knowing if it would add up to anything. She could be caught. The eggs could break. She could lose her children any number of ways. Yet she ran. I understood far more clearly that to exit slavery was to step into the unknown in the face of great danger, and to decide to do it anyway.

That breakthrough finally made my second book, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War*, possible.\(^{15}\) I dug into the details to try to understand the experience of exiting slavery without, at first, trying to make those experiences add up to anything.

Meanwhile, the field of Civil War history, which, aside from a sprinkling of histories of Union and Confederate diplomacy, had largely resisted the turn toward the transnational, began to consider other parts of the world and I was influenced by that turn.\(^{16}\) In particular, I found myself returning to Linda Kerber’s January 2007 AHA Presidential address, “The Stateless as the Citizen’s Other: A View from the United States,” which had deeply impressed me at the time and now called me to consider it anew.\(^{17}\) The first half of *Troubled Refuge* argues that contraband camps were refugee camps in an era that predated organized humanitarian aid and plunged readers into the daily detail of what it meant to exit slavery there. The second half argues that formerly enslaved people entered contraband camps with the vulnerability of the stateless because the United States government before the war did not recognize any obligation to or direct relationship with enslaved people. Yet in helping the Union Army to defeat a shared enemy—the Confederacy—freedom seekers parlayed their service to the war effort into the federal government’s recognition of obligation to and relationship with formerly enslaved people, which would be codified in the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and later the Fourteenth Amendment. In so doing, they not only helped to


overthrow slavery, they also changed the meaning of citizenship for all Americans. Yet the return to civil
authority led to a retraction of rights and protection for freedpeople.

The discomfiting discovery that military authority proved more effective at furthering freedpeople’s ends than
civil authority did raises a series of questions that need more attention, including from scholars of diplomatic
history and international relations, such as questions about statelessness, the relationship between individuals
and national governments, and especially the relationship between civil and military authority.

As for me, in trying to get to the bottom of a question that has long puzzled me, namely how and why the
South has been such a disproportionately (compared to its area and population) powerful section of the
United States, I am currently working on a book about the global origins of the US South. At the moment I
am a bit lost and overwhelmed, but having been that way before I have some hope that I will come through
the other side, especially by continuing to say yes to unexpected invitations.

Chandra Manning graduated summa cum laude from Mount Holyoke College and holds the MPhil degree
from University College Galway, Ireland and the PhD from Harvard University. She has taught at Pacific
Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, and is currently Professor of History at Georgetown University,
where she teaches classes on the Civil War, slavery and emancipation, the American Revolution, and the
History of Baseball. Her first book, She What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil
War (Knopf, 2007) won the Avery O. Craven Prize awarded by the Organization of American Historians,
earned Honorable Mention for the Lincoln Prize and the Virginia Literary Award for Nonfiction, and was a
finalist for the Jefferson Davis Prize and the Frederick Douglass Prize. Her second book, Troubled Refuge:
Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War (Knopf, 2016), won the Jefferson Davis Prize awarded by the American
Civil War Museum for best book on the Civil War and was a finalist for the Lincoln Prize. She is also a
former National Park Service Ranger and continues to work closely with museums and historic
sites. Currently, she is researching and writing a book about the US South.