The Last Word: Goodbye to All That

Francis J. Gavin

No one likes moving. Unpacking, however, can provide a chance revisit your past. While emptying my boxes in my new office at School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, I found the program for the first academic meeting I ever attended. The Bradley conference on diplomatic and international history, sponsored by Yale's International Security Studies Program (IIS), was held almost 25 years ago. I was halfway through my second year of a Ph.D. program in the department of history at the University of Pennsylvania, studying under wonderful mentors—Marc Trachtenberg, Walter McDougall, and Bruce Kuklick. During the conference, I ended up losing (then miraculously re-finding) the only nice suit jacket I owned at the time, an unnatural blue-ish blend of cotton and man-made fibers purchased by my grandmother as a present at *Today's Man*. I still have it.

I had no idea what to expect when I got off the Northeast Regional at New Haven's dilapidated Union Station, the first of what would be many such trips in the years to come. Yale can be both magical and ridiculous all at once: gleaming spires and gothic buildings, the Whiffenpoofs and Mory's, all nestled uncomfortably within a gritty and resentful urban setting. ISS were wonderful hosts; Paul Kennedy was constructing an intellectual empire which, in retrospect, did much to revive if not save diplomatic and military history during the 1990s. I was awe-struck walking amongst the legendary scholars that I had studied during my seminars: Volker Berghan, Akira Iriye, William McNeil, Geoffrey Parker, Stephen Schuker, Gaddis Smith. Exciting panels on new approaches to international history, the state of field, aspects of imperial Russia, and "national" security in early modern Europe fed my hopes that diplomatic history would be an inspiring and welcoming intellectual home. Most exciting, however, were the graduate students I met from institutions up and down the Amtrak corridor. In the early 1990s, Yale, Georgetown, Rutgers, Harvard, Columbia, University of Virginia, and Temple University each had thriving programs with multiple Ph.D. candidates working on diplomatic and military history. It was at this conference that I first met scholars who I greatly admired and would become life-long friends—Mary Sarotte, Will Hitchcock, Ted Brommund, Drew Erdmann, and Matt Connelly (the latter with whom I spent a legendary evening being overserved adult beverages, resulting in hijinks which are embellished with each retelling).

For all the intellectual firepower and comradery gathered by ISS, there was an underlying sense of unease during the meeting. Many of the historians in the room complained they felt unappreciated and at times besieged by departmental colleagues whose work came from cultural and social perspectives and who were suspicious of their efforts to study the thoughts and actions of immoral states run by powerful men. The recent end to the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union had generated naïve hopes that the relevance of war and peace as a historical force in the world had receded. Prominent diplomatic and military historians were retiring and not being replaced, and the number of assistant professor positions was continuing its steep decline.

Twenty-five years on, I've been reflecting upon that Yale meeting quite a bit, especially as I think about how to implement the mission of the new Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs: "to generate and apply rigorous historical thinking to the most vexing global challenges." As a diplomatic historian on think tank row, I often confront two worlds. On the one hand, spirited communities like journalists, international relations scholars, students, diplomats, and policymakers are hungry for historical insight about the questions surrounding American foreign policy in an uncertain world. Philanthropists, think-tanks, university leaders, the larger public—all cheering on our mission of teaching and researching historically informed statecraft and strategy. Then I look at another world—academic history departments—and the picture appears much different.

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I recently attended a workshop sponsored by the Brookings Institution and the Tobin Project on new scholarship on politics and international history, with panels on the politics of authoritarian regimes, leaders and the use of force, and new historical perspectives on U.S. national security policy, which overlapped with the annual American Historical Association meeting. Joining four excellent diplomatic historians on the last panel, I bluntly pointed out that while the subjects my colleagues from Brookings had selected were obviously important and worthy of rigorous scholarly treatment, I could not in good conscience advise a Ph.D. student in history—unlike those in political science or public policy—to purse them. To do so would be asking a young person to commit what would amount to career suicide, in the unlikely event they could even find a department willing to entertain the notion. Policy relevance is not the most important goal of historical study, obviously, and contemporary history presents great challenges. But I had to point out, to the surprise of the non-historians in the room, that the discipline of academic history has done little to encourage work on the kind of broader concerns in which the organizers of the workshop were interested, such as world order, international politics, and American national security policy.

Not everyone shares this view, obviously. Mary Dudziak—a great historian and wonderful leader of

SHAFR—countered with a narrative I've heard elsewhere, that the last few decades has witnessed a renaissance and resurgence in diplomatic history, with a broadening of the subjects, perspectives, and methods employed by the sub-field to understand the past. I responded with two points.

First, while I was all in favor of new approaches, there were important questions of war and peace, strategy, diplomacy, and statecraft where there appeared to be little serious work being done by Ph.D. students in history departments. What had taken place in diplomatic history was not an *expansion* of subjects and perspectives, but a *substitution*. To give just one of many possible examples: in one of the areas I am interested in, nuclear history, there has been fascinating work on a range of issues from the portrayal of nuclear anxiety in comic books to what the design of nuclear reactors tells us about political culture. Despite massive declassification of archival materials around the world, however, there has far less support on critical questions such as why states do or do not pursue nuclear weapons, or how nuclear weapons influences international behavior. When these documents are used, it is usually by political scientists or researchers from outside of the United States, not Ph.D. students in top U.S. history departments. In a town where debates over Iran and North Korea's nuclear ambitions, renewed geopolitical competition with nuclear powers China and Russia, and a multi-decade, $1.2 trillion plan to modernize U.S. nuclear weapons are fiercely debated, when many of the basic historical and analytical questions are unanswered and prevailing assumptions remain unchallenged, this lack of intellectual engagement by the history profession both surprises and disappoints those outside of the ivory tower.

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Second, I pointed out that many of the historians under the age of sixty who still did this kind of work were as likely to be employed by policy schools, international relations programs, or political science departments as history departments. I asked the audience, which included many Ph.D.s in other fields and experienced policymakers, to make a mental list of their favorite historians of international affairs and foreign policy and check to see whether they were tenured full time in a history department. Some are independent scholars, like Walter Russell Mead and Robert Kagan, while others such as Arne Westad, Mary Sarotte, Will Inboden, Marc Trachtenberg, Sarah Snyder, John Bew, and Hal Brands, amongst others, were employed by policy schools, international relations programs, and political science departments. Professor Dudziak herself is employed by a law school, with a courtesy appointment in political science. Some of the largest, most prestigious history departments in the country employ dozens of tenured faculty, without any of them teaching courses or conducting research on questions of war, peace, and diplomacy, to say nothing of mentoring the next generation of international affairs scholars in their Ph.D. programs. This exposes the two worlds problem I face: while marginalized within academic history departments, important historical scholarship and teaching on war and peace was embraced and supported by others institutions like think tanks, foundations, international affairs programs, and policy schools.

I don't enjoy being the skunk at a garden party—I actually think it an exciting time to teach and research international relations.[1] Nor is my point is not to engage in yet another argument about the state of the field, or calls for inclusiveness, or debate whether SHAFR should change its name, though I would highly recommend my colleague Hal Brands' excellent piece that deals with some of these issues.[2] The fact is, though I think of myself as a historian, judged by the normal metrics of a profession, including where I am published and cited, who invites me to conferences and talks, and where I work, I've never really been a member of the guild.

Perhaps my story is anomalous: someone trained to research and study the past, who loves history and believes it possesses extraordinary power to help us understand and explain important questions in the world,[3] but who in his career has found far greater acceptance, encouragement, intellectual stimulation, and perhaps most tellingly, employment in policy schools, international relations programs, and political science departments. I've never felt defensive explaining to my colleagues in economics, sociology, political science, policy, or law, for example, why I was working on international monetary relations or nuclear statecraft; they immediately grasped why someone would think these subjects worthy of deep, rigorous historical treatment. It is a far more welcoming response than the blank stare or worse I've often received from historians when discussing my scholarship.

While I have been quite happy with how things have worked out for me, for a long time I worried quite a bit about what has happened, both in the history discipline and the sub-field of diplomatic history. To be clear, I never yearned for a return to the so-called world where diplomatic historians studied "clerk to clerk" exchanges or simply "marked time," though it is not obvious to me that the best work in international or diplomatic history was ever so dry or unsophisticated as its critics claimed. Nor is it to deny the political or ideological challenges that come with this kind of work; like every other historian, I wrestle with the challenges posed by ideology, perspective and position in that elusive search for "objectivity." Honest debates can be had over the "so what?" question, though given our privileged position as scholars and teachers, I believe we have a moral obligation to at least ask the question. I laid out my views on the scope and range of questions that might engage diplomatic and international history in the mission statement I crafted in my role as chairman of the board of editors for an exciting new interdisciplinary journal, the *Texas National Security Review*:

> "International conflict, competition, and cooperation shape the world we live in. War has been both a great scourge on humanity as well as a driver of historical change, for both ill and good. The profound consequences of war unfold along a wide spectrum, from heart-wrenching individual tragedies to the very structure and shape of the modern state and global economy. The study of war and peace goes far beyond assessing the tactics of the battlefield or understanding the diplomacy between capitals: it would be impossible, for example, to comprehend a variety of crucial issues, from modern medicine and public health, technology, finance, accounting, taxation, literacy, mass education, race and gender relations,

> to say nothing of how humans move about, what they eat and wear, and how they communicate with each other, without reference to war. Most national cultures, literature, music, visual art, and even language is suffused with reference to or inspiration from conflict. War and peace challenge and shape our core beliefs, our ethics, our sense of identity. Still, despite great intellectual effort, we know far less about the causes, conduct, and consequences of war and peace than we'd like."[1]

This statement also describes the type of courses and research we hope to undertake at the Kissinger Center for Global Affairs. It is not dissimilar from the themes and sentiments that so inspired me during that conference at Yale a quarter of a century ago, and which has inspired my teaching and research ever since. Whether it parallels what academic departments of history are interested in today is no longer my concern. It is what will animate our new center at SAIS, and we welcome all those who think of themselves as historians, even when the academic field of history does not.

Notes:

1. Francis J. Gavin, "It's Never Been a Better Time to Study IR," *Foreign Policy*, February 20, 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/02/20/its-never-been-a-better-time-to-study-international-relations-trump-foreign-policy/
2. Hal Brands, "The Triumph & Tragedy of Diplomatic History," *Texas National Security Review*, December 2017, vol. 1, no. 1 pp., 132-143. For two other, excellent reflections on the promise and problems of diplomatic history, see William R. Keylor, "The Problems and Prospects of Diplomatic/International History," April 10, 2015, *H-Diplo*, https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/66930/h-diplo-state-field-essay-"-problems-and-prospects Marc Trachtenberg, "The State of International History," *E-International Relations*, March 9, 2013, http://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/09/the-state-of-international-history/
3. Francis J. Gavin, "Thinking Historically: A Guide to Strategy and Statecraft," *War on the Rocks*, November 16, 2016, https://warontherocks.com/2016/11/thinking-historically-a-guide-for-strategy-and-statecraft/ Originally presented as the 12th annual Alvin H. Bernstein Lecture, The Philip Merrill Center for Strategic Studies, Washington, DC, November 10, 2016.