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Contingent Histories

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Maybe it was Laurence Olivier who made me a historian. One evening in late 1975, not long after my family emigrated from Västerås, Sweden, to Vancouver, B.C., I happened upon the BBC's "The World at War," which is still for my money the gold standard among World War II documentaries. The astonishing archival footage drew me right in, but so did Olivier's narration, with its calm authority and elevated diction. Even today I can recite from memory his opening lines in the first episode, written in spare, declarative style by Neal Ascherson:

Down this road, on a summer day in 1944, the soldiers came. Nobody lives here now. They stayed only a few hours. When they had gone, the community which had lived for a thousand years was dead. This is Oradour-sur-Glane, in France.

I caught most of the episodes that fall. A year or so later, at age thirteen, I watched the entire series, all 23 hours, if anything more enthralled than the first time. (My English had improved in the interval.) Hungry for more, I began reading books on the war—the first one, Peter Calvocoressi and Guy Wint's engrossing *Total War*, still adorns a shelf in my home office, ageless and imposing.¹ I wasn't exactly studious—my grades were middling, at best ("Fredrik needs to learn to apply himself," read report card upon report card), and I preferred to spend my time on the tennis court or hanging around with pals—but history fascinated me. The mind-numbing dreariness of Algebra 9 was endurable only because I knew Mr. Sankey's Social Studies class, with its heavy tilt toward political and social history, was next.

Even so, at Simon Fraser University I didn't choose history for my major—at least not officially. I went for political science, thinking it would have more utility if I went to law school upon graduation. But a close examination of my transcript shows a large number of history courses, enough to make me effectively a double major. Only later would I come to appreciate what made SFU such a marvelous place during my time there: smallish classes taught by talented, dedicated professors who placed a premium on sound thinking and good writing. Standouts for me on the history side were Don Kirschner and Michael Fellman in U.S. history and Martin Kitchen in European diplomatic and military.

But it was a book I read in my spare time that, I can now see, changed everything. It was the autumn of 1984. My learned pal Stan, a polymath who could expound in complete paragraphs on seemingly any topic and always looked like he needed more sun, told me one day that I simply *must* get my hands on a volume he'd just devoured: the journalist David Halberstam's ironically titled *The Best and the Brightest*, about the American descent into Vietnam.² "You won't regret it, Freddy, trust me." As always with Stan, I did as I was told. And what a reading experience it was. Some critics complained that the book

¹ Peter Calvocoressi and Guy Wint, *Total War: Causes and Courses of the Second World War* (London: Allen Lane, 1972).

² David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972).

was overwritten, undisciplined, meandering; they had a point. But the sheer vitality of the prose, the vividness with which Halberstam described the scenes, in Washington and Saigon, leapt off the page, as did the palpable sense that for the author, no story in the world mattered more than the one he was telling. I loved that part of it. Though I had never met the man, I could picture him, hunched over his typewriter, his fingers pounding the keys, the pages flying out the machine, with stacks of the Pentagon Papers scattered about the room.

Halberstam wrote the book while the fighting in Vietnam still raged, and before a lot of documents were available. He got some things wrong—most notably for me, my later research indicated that he exaggerated by a considerable margin the amount of hubris in American decision-making in the Kennedy and Johnson years. But overall, *The Best and the Brightest* retains extraordinary power half a century after publication (suggesting, among other things, that first-cut histories, written soon after the events they describe take place, can hold up remarkably well over time). Not least, it demonstrated the vital role that perceived domestic political imperatives and careerist ambition played in the two Democratic administrations' choices in the early- and mid-Sixties. The book still commands a place on any short shelf of essential studies on the war.

I graduated, married my high-school sweetheart, and ditched the law school idea in favor of grad school. But which discipline should I pursue? Political science held certain advantages—a shorter average time to degree and better job prospects—but I always liked my history courses at SFU best. And I had Olivier whispering in my ear. History it would be, first at the University of Oregon for a master's degree and then, beginning in the fall of 1989, at Yale University for the Ph.D.

It was a heady time to be in New Haven, with the International Security Program just gearing up under Paul Kennedy's towering leadership and the campus seemingly crawling with people who shared my scholarly interests. I was in my element. Even so, I had no particular desire to linger longer than necessary in grad school. I was married, for one thing, and for another I already had a dissertation topic in mind: U.S. policy on Vietnam in the Kennedy and Johnson years, with particular attention on the period leading up to the so-called Americanization of the struggle in 1965. I had explored the general subject in my M.A. work, and been inspired by a public lecture in Eugene by Cornell's George Kahin, who had just come out with his incisive book *Intervention*.³ (Even more, I was inspired by what Kahin told me when I mustered up the courage to approach him after the talk: Yes, he said, much had already been written about the escalation, including by him, but I mustn't let that throw me off; serious scholarship, based on deep immersion in archival material, was still in its infancy.)

I would be on Halberstam's turf, in other words, but as an academic historian, able to draw on thousands of documents unavailable to him, including from foreign repositories. No one, I determined, not Halberstam and not any other author, had really placed American decision-making in the key period—late August 1963 through February 1965, which I would come to call "The Long 1964"—in its wider international and domestic political context. Only by doing so, I maintained, could one really determine why senior officials acted as they did, could one really identify the choices they did or did not have. My advisors Gaddis Smith and Paul Kennedy signed off, and I was on my way.

In my reading of the secondary literature, a pattern had emerged. The question that I found so vexing—why did President Lyndon Johnson take the United States into full-scale war in Vietnam in 1965?—turned out not to be all that vexing in most of these studies. The authors might disagree fundamentally on any number of questions—on whether the intervention was just, on whether the war was winnable in any meaningful sense, on what victory would have constituted, on the preferred strategy—but on one point they tended to converge: the war that began in earnest in 1965 was, for practical purposes, inevitable, however misguided it might seem in retrospect. Too much of a commitment to South Vietnam's survival had by then been made, too much U.S. credibility was at stake, for any president to have changed course and opted for some kind of face-saving political solution. And besides, almost no one was asking Johnson to alter course—a core feature of what I came to call the "inevitability thesis" was that American elites in and out of government in this period fully

³ George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

backed the staunch defense of South Vietnam. Add to that the broad (if not always enthusiastic) backing from allied governments, as well as Hanoi's intransigence of the subject of negotiations, and it becomes obvious there existed no realistic way of averting large-scale war.

These were reasonable claims, but they rested on a flimsy empirical foundation. The evidence presented on their behalf was often weak or non-existent. As I launched into my research, a different, much more fluid, picture emerged. Far from being overdetermined, the Americanization seemed to me difficult to explain—not impossible, in view of the short-term priorities of leaders and the permissive context in which they operated, but difficult. Given the gloomy realism among top policymakers and the deep misgivings on Capitol Hill and among most allied governments, given that Johnson had just demolished Republican Party nominee Barry Goldwater in the 1964 election and had huge majorities in both houses of Congress, and given the apathy and infighting among Saigon officials, it became clear to me that there was nothing preordained about this escalation. It did not have to be.

Moreover, though credibility concerns incontrovertibly helped drive the decision for war, it wasn't just U.S. credibility on the international stage that mattered; political (partisan) and personal (careerist) credibility did too. I called this three-part conception "Credibility³" (cubed). I further decided that for John F. Kennedy and especially for Johnson, the most important dimensions were the second and third: partisan credibility and personal credibility. The keys to the Americanization were not in Saigon or Hanoi or Beijing, but in Washington, DC.

One evening in late October 1991, during my third year in the program, Gaddis Smith called. A tenure-track position had opened up at UC Santa Barbara, to replace the recently retired Alex DeConde, a prolific and highly respected diplomatic historian who had helped found SHAFR and been its second president. Gaddis thought I should apply. It seemed premature to me, as I had yet to begin writing dissertation chapters, but I went for it, and a few weeks later got a call inviting me to a preliminary interview at the American Historical Association's annual meeting in Chicago in late December. Unschooled in the ways of the discipline, I blithely replied, "Thank you, but I've made other holiday plans." We did the interview right there on the phone. In early January came another call, this time inviting me for an on-campus visit. I prepared a job talk and did a dry run before my sagacious wife, using a plant stand in our living room as my lectern. From the moment I landed at Santa Barbara's picturesque airport, nestled next to the ocean and with the campus nearby, I knew I wanted the job, and was thrilled when the offer came soon after my return to Connecticut.

(Here was another sign of my greenhorn ways: I did not think to ask the UCSB department chair, Sears McGee, if I could delay my start date by a year, to July 1993, in order to complete my dissertation beforehand. Instead, Danyel and I moved west that summer of 1992 and I spent the first year writing chapters and lectures. Both enterprises no doubt suffered, but the work got done and I graduated with the Ph.D. the following spring, four years after matriculation.)

There followed a wonderful dozen years at UCSB, interrupted only by a postdoc year back at Yale. I didn't know it at the outset, but I had landed in one of the best history departments in the UC system, with particular depth in twentieth-century U.S. studies. Serious, cutting-edge research was being done in faculty offices up and down the halls; one felt the thrill of being part of an exciting, vital collective endeavor, involving colleagues who genuinely cared for one another. First-rate graduate students came too, and during my time in the department I had the privilege of supervising a dozen splendid doctoral advisees, including two who have contributed essays to this series and one who has become a grandfather. (Could it be that I'm getting old?) Sensing an emerging cluster of strength in the department in the area of post-1945 international history, Tsuyoshi Hasegawa and I formed the Cold War History Group, which a few years later we rebranded as the Center for Cold War Studies. We invited prominent scholars to campus to give talks and lead workshops, and we put on an annual grad student conference on the Cold War (which still goes strong a quarter century later, now in partnership with George Washington University and the London School of Economics). But what I think Toshi and I loved most were not these big-ticket events but the informal in-house get-togethers, always in the evening and always at someone's home, in which we discussed a grad student's or faculty member's work-in-progress over wine and cheese.

Meanwhile, I made the first of numerous visits to Vietnam, and promptly became infatuated with the place. Hanoi became one of my favorite world cities, a distinction it still holds. With the publication in 1999 of my revised dissertation, *Choosing War*, I had intended to move on to a new topic—namely “Walter Lippmann’s Cold War”—but I couldn’t shake the sense that I had more to say about Vietnam.⁴ Seemingly on cue, there came an invitation from Random House editors Jason Epstein and Scott Moyers to write a large-scale narrative history of the long-term origins of the American war; I leapt at the chance. The resulting book, *Embers of War*, was a long time in the making, but I loved the project—the deep dive into World War II and the Franco-Viet Minh War that followed, the effort to craft an analytical narrative that gave close consideration to the role of human agency alongside structural factors in the making of the long and bloody conflict that followed. It was, in its way, a kind of prequel to *Choosing War*.⁵

As I had done in *Choosing War*, I attached particular importance to the close connection between domestic politics and foreign policy—in this case with respect to the French in Indochina as well as the Americans. This was becoming a theme in all my work, including in several articles and in a book I co-authored with Campbell Craig, *America’s Cold War*.⁶ Already in grad school I’d had the sense that historiographical trends among American diplomatic historians had worked against a prominent place for domestic politics. Rarely if ever, it seemed to me, did the “orthodox” scholars or the “revisionists” or the “post-revisionists” who followed them inquire deeply into the domestic political calculations that shaped American policy; almost always, if for different reasons, they evaluated the U.S. government as a unitary actor largely unencumbered by partisan or electoral pressures.⁷

More recently, the sharp trend among foreign-relations historians toward international and transnational approaches has moved the scholarship even farther away from a close consideration of domestic politics. Much of this work has been exceptionally valuable, enriching and broadening the field in myriad ways. I myself have contributed to it, as have my graduate students. Yet an international history approach can introduce its own tendency toward narrowness, its own limitations, including an inadequate attention to the internal sources of a state’s external behavior—or what Craig and I call the “intermestic” (international-domestic, whereby the two are dynamically intertwined) dimension of policy.

Admittedly, getting a handle on this intermestic dimension can be difficult, given the staunch refusal of American leaders to admit, even to themselves, that their foreign policy decisions are often affected by private political interest. They seek at all costs to hide their self-serving motivations. But the work can be done, as various historians have shown, if one goes beyond official documents, to newspapers, oral histories, interviews, private correspondence. Foreign archives, too, can be a goldmine, as I found in my own overseas archival research concerning the Vietnam buildup: “What U.S. officials almost never dared say, certainly not on paper—that Johnson throughout his first year in office was obsessed with winning election in November 1964, and that both before and after voting day he considered all Vietnam options in light of how they would affect his standing at home—foreign officials remarked with regularity.”⁸

⁴ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁵ Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012).

⁶ Campbell Craig and Logevall, *America’s Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009; rev. ed., 2020); Logevall, “Domestic Politics,” in Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 151-67.

⁷ The revisionists, led by William Appleman Williams and several brilliant doctoral students of his, emphasized the importance of domestic forces in the making of American foreign policy, but had curiously little to say about party politics or careerism.

⁸ Logevall, “Domestic Politics,” 159.

Maybe it's because I'm primarily a historian of policy and decision-making, but I tend in my work to put more weight on contingency than on structure, even as I acknowledge the limitations imposed on human agency by institutions, conditions, demographic patterns, public opinion, and other circumstantial factors that operate beyond personality.⁹ To the policymakers of the past, I remind myself and my students, the future was often merely a set of possibilities. More than one course was open to them. My own professional story, too, is a contingent one, filled with forks in the road, filled with unexpected breaks, and I often reflect on my good fortune at each step. To think that for almost three decades, I've been able to spend my days teaching and writing at three marvelous institutions—UCSB, Cornell, and now Harvard—and somehow been paid for doing so, all the while with a magnificent life partner and two loving kids by my side.

Much has changed in these years, and as I write this essay our world and my adopted homeland face an uncertain future, including in the area of higher education. But some things remain constant. Not long ago, while channel-surfing I came across Episode 5 of “The World at War” and again heard the sonorous tenor fill the room. *Russia, mid-June 1941. A bewildered, uncertain country. Rumors abounded of invasion by Hitler's Germany.* I put down the remote and settled in.

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⁹ Logevall, “Presidential Address: Structure, Contingency, and the War in Vietnam,” *Diplomatic History* 39:1 (January 2015).