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## *On Learning the Scholar's Craft*

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Essay by Charles E. Neu, Brown University, Emeritus

I was brought up in a small town in west-central Iowa, where my father was a lawyer and long-time mayor. He was a conservative Republican, critical of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal; Charles Tansill's *Back Door to War: The Roosevelt Foreign Policy,* was his favorite book.[1] Politicians would seek him out in their travels across the state since he was a local opinion leader. In 1952, when I was a junior in high school, he encouraged me to support Senator Robert Taft for the Republican nomination and, after Taft's loss to Dwight Eisenhower, he endorsed the Republican nominee and joined in the Republican campaign in Iowa. I heard Eisenhower speak in Boone, Iowa, and shook the great man's hand as he moved down the aisle of a campaign train.

In the fall of 1954 I entered Northwestern University. I enjoyed being at a major research university and found Chicago a fascinating city to explore. At Northwestern I read more English literature than history, but my junior year I took a survey course in American history. I was inspired by the lectures of Arthur Link and now began to reconsider many of my father's political views. In my senior year I took Richard Leopold's demanding course in what was then called diplomatic history. He was both a taskmaster and a generous mentor. I now began to read more widely in history—Link's *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era,* Leopold's *Elihu Root and the Conservative Tradition,* and Howard Cline's *The United States and Mexico.*[2]Leopold encouraged me to go to Harvard, where I could work with Ernest May, a person he regarded as a young but promising scholar in the field. With the help of a fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, I arrived in Cambridge in September 1958.

The books and lectures of Leopold and Link had drawn me into the politics and diplomacy of the "Progressive Era," and into the leadership of presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. At Harvard I had the privilege of listening to the lectures and reading the books of an extraordinary group of scholars and teachers, including Bernard Bailyn, Frank Freidel, Oscar Handlin, William Langer, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr.[3]

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[1] Charles Tansill, *Back Door to War: The Roosevelt Foreign Policy, 1933-41* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishers, 1952).

[2] Arthur Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954); Richard Leopold, *Elihu Root and the Conservative Tradition* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1954; Howard Cline, *The United States and Mexico* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953).

[3] Their books, published before or during my stay at Harvard, included: Bailyn, *New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955); Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Apprenticeship* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1952, Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt, The Ordeal* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1954), Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Triumph* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1956); Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1952); Langer, *European Alliances and Alignments* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931), Langer, *The*

I found the study of American foreign relations an especially compelling field, since it allowed me to reach beyond the American experience and to learn more about the interaction of the U.S. and other nations. Thus my own emerging interests coincided with those of May, whose *The World War and American Isolation*[4] was a remarkable work of scholarship, notable for its breadth of learning and for its ability to fuse together American and European history and diplomatic and political history. I knew that I wanted to study with this man, who turned out to be a gentle but relentless graduate adviser. May told me what I surely would not have discovered on my own, that Thomas Bailey's *Theodore Roosevelt and the Japanese-American Crises* was thinly researched. I jumped at this suggestion, for it was a subject that combined my strong interest in Theodore Roosevelt and Japanese-American relations with an opportunity for intensive archival research. The result was a dissertation and my first book, *An Uncertain Friendship: Theodore Roosevelt and Japan, 1906-1909.*[5]

During the winter of 1962-1963 I was hard at work completing my dissertation, but in January of 1963 I visited Houston, Texas, and received an offer of an assistant professorship from Rice University. I had not traveled extensively in the U.S., and Texas seemed a long way off, but I did not have the temerity, as did some of my Harvard colleagues, to insist on staying in the Northeast, in part because May had grown up in Fort Worth, Texas. So in August 1963 I found myself dealing with the heat and humidity of Houston and experiencing my first freeway city.

I was, however, fortunate to have a position at such an ambitious and well-funded institution. Moreover, I soon found congenial company. The novelist Larry McMurtry lived only a few houses down the street and became a life-long friend, and three colleagues in history, Allen Matusow, Leonard Marsak, and Louis Galambos, helped to guide me through my early years at Rice.

After the publication of *An Uncertain Friendship* I wanted to find a larger, more ambitious project. A biography of Colonel Edward M. House, Woodrow Wilson's confidential adviser, seemed an obvious choice. A study of House would carry me into the inner workings of the Wilson presidency and would also allow me to focus on the administration's foreign policy. I wanted, however, to write a full biography of House, explaining his rise from a Texas political operator to a famous diplomat. With help from the National Endowment for the Humanities, I spent the 1968-69 academic year working through the House papers at Yale. But given the size of his manuscript collection and the scope of his life, this promised to be a long-term project.

In 1970 I accepted a position at Brown University. Brown was an older and more established institution than Rice, and I was now part of a talented group of U.S. historians (including Howard Chudacoff, Bary Karl, James Patterson, William McLoughlin, John Thomas, and Gordon Wood). Soon after I arrived at Brown, Robert Divine invited me to write a book on the U.S. and Japan for his "America and the World Series." I accepted his invitation, since it allowed me to pursue my

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*Diplomacy of Imperialism, 1890-1902* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1935); Langer, *The Challenge of Isolation: The World Crisis of 1937-1940* (New York: Harper and Brothers,1952); Langer, *The Undeclared War: 1940-1941* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953); Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959); Schlesinger, *The Crisis of the Old Order* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957); Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960).

[4] Charles E. Neu, "The Emergence of a Master Historian," in Akira Iriye, ed., *Rethinking International Relations: Ernest R. May and the Study of World Affairs* (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 1998); Ernest May, *The World War and American Isolation, 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959).

[5] Thomas Bailey, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Japanese-American Crises* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1934); Neu, *An Uncertain Friendship: Theodore Roosevelt and Japan, 1906-1909* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

interest in American-East Asian relations. The result, *The Troubled Encounter: The United States and Japan*, appeared in1975.[6]



Throughout the following years I pursued a variety of interests, such as the historiography of American foreign relations, the organizational dimensions of American foreign policy, and the role of American diplomats in East Asia during the 1920s.[7] I continued to pursue Colonel House, travelling frequently to New Haven and, in the spring of 1977, making a long research trip to Texas to explore House materials scattered around the state. I also watched, with a certain amount of envy, the remarkable production of *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, the first volume of which appeared in 1966, the last in 1993.[8] John Milton Cooper Jr. and I both admired the achievements of Arthur Link, and we decided, with his permission, to invite twelve historians to write essays that would explore various facets of his career. All of the participants in May 1989attended a conference held at Princeton in his honor, and the result of these efforts, *The Wilson Era: Essays in Honor of Arthur S. Link,* appeared in 1991.[9]

In the early 1960s, as a graduate student at Harvard, I had begun to follow the Vietnam War. It seemed a distant struggle in an exotic land; I never dreamed that it would become a major conflict that would bring a sea change in the life of the nation. At Rice the war became a major issue for many of my students. While I was too old for the draft, those I taught were not so fortunate, and they were bitterly divided over the rights and wrongs of the conflict. After moving to Brown, I waited for the literature on the war to develop and finally, in 1980, I began to teach an undergraduate seminar on the war, and nine years later I started teaching a lecture course on one that I termed "America's Longest War." From the start it was one of the most popular courses in the university.[10]

I first travelled to Vietnam in January 1993, as a faculty lecturer on a Harvard-Brown alumni trip. We boarded a small cruise ship in Hong Kong, and then sailed down the Vietnamese coast, stopping at various ports and making short trips inland. I was overwhelmed by impressions of this extraordinarily beautiful country and by evidence of the war, which seemed to be everywhere. Two years later I travelled through South Vietnam with a car and guide, and in June 1997 I was part of a large conference on the war, one that was sponsored by the Vietnam War Project at Brown and one that brought together scholars and participants on both sides of the conflict. That same year Louis Galambos invited me to organize the Albert Shaw Memorial Lectures at Johns Hopkins on the legacies of the Vietnam War. In May 1998 the five authors delivered lectures at Johns Hopkins, and in 2000 *After Vietnam: Legacies of a Lost War*, appeared.[11]

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[6] Neu, *The Troubled Encounter: The United States and Japan* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975).

[7] Neu, "The Changing Interpretive Structure of American Foreign Policy," in John Braeman, Robert Bremner, and David Brody, eds., *Twentieth Century American Foreign Policy* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971); Neu, "*1906-1913,"* in May and James Thomson, eds., *American-East-Asian Relations: A Survey* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); Neu, "The Rise of the National Security Bureaucracy, in Louis Galambos, ed., *The New American State: Bureaucracies and Policies Since World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

[8] Neu, "In Search of Colonel Edward M. House: The Texas Years, 1858-1912,"*Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 93 (July 1989); 25-44; Arthur Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson,* 69 vols., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966-1993).

[9] John Milton Cooper, Jr., and Neu, eds., *The Wilson Era: Essays in Honor of Arthur S. Link* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson Inc., 1991).

[10]Bruce Fellman, "A New Generation Confronts Vietnam," *Brown Alumni Monthly* (September 1990).

[11] Neu, *After Vietnam: Legacies of a Lost War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

In June 2003, after thirty-three years, I retired from Brown, and my wife and I moved to Miami, where I joined a talented and congenial group of colleagues at the University of Miami. I felt that the time had come to make a transition to the next phase of my professional life. Over the years I had taught large courses on U.S. foreign relations and the Vietnam War, had chaired the History Department for six years, and had served on a variety of important university committees. But I had accumulated too many unfinished projects and badly needed time to write full-time. As a result, I published in 2005 *America's Lost War: Vietnam, 1945-1975,* a volume in Harlan Davidson's American History series, in 2006 an edited volume, *Artists of Power: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Their Enduring Impact on U.S. Foreign Policy*, and finally, in 2015, *Colonel House: A Biography of Woodrow Wilson's Silent Partner.*[12]

As I wrote my House biography, I became fascinated with the men and women Wilson drew into his inner circle of advisers and wrote a book about ten of them, exploring their individual life- histories and the way in which their relationship with Wilson changed their lives. And amid all of the criticism of Wilson (the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, my early benefactor, renamed itself the "Institute for Citizens and Scholars"), these essays explore a side of Wilson that historians have often obscured—his ability to bring together a talented group of advisers.

After so many years thinking about Wilson and his presidency, writing *The Wilson Circle: President Woodrow Wilson and His Advisers* (which Johns Hopkins University Press will publish in the spring of 2022)[13] served as a kind of transition, as a way to leave the subject behind. Robert K. Massie, after finishing his great biography of Catherine the Great, wrote about the sadness of ending this project. "You were with the subject every day. Now this companion has departed and left you behind. He or she has concluded the time shared with you. That part of your life is over."[14]

Looking back over what has become a long career, I realize that I was fortunate to have avoided law school and instead to have chosen an academic career. Academic life is not, I think, as easy one, since the demands of teaching, scholarship, and administration are relentless and can never be fully met. Even so, it is a deeply satisfying life, providing a great deal of autonomy and certainly the possibility of substantial creativity. Amid all the pressures and perils of an academic career, I would urge younger scholars to remember the experience of Ray Stannard Baker, Wilson's biographer, who interrupted his work on his Wilson biography (he published eight volumes over fourteen years) with visits to his garden, where he spent "long afternoons and evenings, in looking after my honey-bees, and meadow, and my apple and peach and plum trees." He had learned, as he tells us in *American Chronicle*, that "a man must somehow learn to live as well as how to work"[15]

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[12] Neu, *America's Lost War: Vietnam, 1945-1975* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson Inc., 2005); Neu, ed., *Artists of Power: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Their Enduring Impact on U.S. Foreign Policy* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006); Neu, *Colonel House: A Biography of Woodrow Wilson's Silent Partner* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[13] Neu, *The Wilson Circle: President Woodrow Wilson and His Advisers* (Baltimore.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022).

[14] Robert Massie, "Parting Words," *New York Times Book Review* (March 4, 2012).

[15] Ray Stannard Baker, *American Chronicle: The Autobiography of Ray Stannard Baker* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945), 514.