

# Scholars as Teachers: Thoughts on Scholarship in the Classroom

Molly M. Wood

**Editor's note:** This essay is the latest in a series sponsored by the SHAFR Teaching Committee dealing with pedagogical issues and related topics, and reflects SHAFR's continuing commitment to enhancing the teaching of U.S. foreign relations. The Teaching Committee will also sponsor sessions focused on these issues at the 2015 SHAFR conference at the Renaissance Arlington Capital View. AJ

The 2014 Teaching Committee panel at the annual SHAFR conference featured four historians, Terry Anderson, Elizabeth Borgwardt, Mary Dudziak, and Fredrik Logevall, presenting their thoughts on ways in which their own books might be used in the classroom.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the panel, as I understood it, was to help spark conversations about the ways in which we might more thoughtfully use these four books in particular, and scholarly books in our field more generally, in our classrooms. What follows is a slightly expanded version of the comments I provided at that session.

Coming up with constructive comments for this panel proved to be a less straightforward task than I initially imagined it would be. I quickly realized that not all of these books are appropriate for my undergraduate classes. My comments, therefore, had to be entirely specific to my own experience as a college teacher at a small "liberal arts-plus" university in Ohio, to the particular kinds of students I engage, and to all the other contingencies of class size, curriculum, and departmental and university needs and requirements. In other words, I resisted the temptation to create a more perfect professional world in my mind, where I could teach anything I wanted to well-prepared, highly engaged, hard-working, curious and witty groups of students, clustered in groups of no more than fifteen. Instead, I stuck with reality, and while reality is more challenging, it's not impossible.

## *Bush's Wars*

My comments about Terry Anderson's book, a history of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan during the George W. Bush presidency, are based on my experience using the book in a class I teach at Wittenberg University called "The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan." One of the challenges in teaching this course has been selecting reading assignments from a quickly growing but uneven body of literature produced since 9/11. *Bush's Wars* is a highly accessible overview (of appropriate length for the undergraduate classroom at 240 pages of text) with a strong thesis. It provides a clear chronological narrative of events from 9/11 through the end of the Bush presidency and includes a brief epilogue on Obama's first term, as well as additional historical background on Iraq, Afghanistan, and American involvement in both regions. In terms of class structure and assignments, this was the students' second book; I wanted them to read it early in the semester, right after they had finished the abridged *9/11 Report*.<sup>2</sup>

Before the students began reading *Bush's Wars*, we

had also worked as a class through an analysis of key documents, including Bush's 2002 and 2003 State of the Union addresses, parts of the administration's National Security Strategy, parts of the Iraq War Resolution, and a few other important primary sources relevant to Anderson's narrative of events and analysis of Bush administration decision-making.<sup>3</sup> We focused in particular on the Bush Doctrine of pre-emptive strikes so that we could discuss it in some historical perspective before we looked at how Anderson emphasizes it in his text. Asking students to read, discuss, and become familiar with these documents meant that they had a common base of knowledge before reading the book and could therefore more confidently make points about Anderson's references to and evaluations of the documents.

Over two ninety-minute periods the class worked through a discussion of the book, chapter by chapter, based on a series of questions I had prepared in advance. The students found the two opening sections of the book ("Introduction East" and "Introduction West") particularly helpful. After working through these sections, they were able to articulate the reasons for the author's descriptions of Iraq and Afghanistan as, respectively, the "Improbable Country" and the "Graveyard of Empires," and they even felt comfortable using those descriptions as a sort of shorthand language in the classroom throughout the rest of the semester. "Introduction East" also provided the students with the necessary background and context for discussions about the complex legacy of Western imperialism and the early Cold War in these regions, the development of Arab nationalism, and the role of the United States in both Iraq and Afghanistan up to 1970.

The questions I had given the students ahead of time focused on both content and definitions as well as an understanding and articulation of Anderson's argument and critique of the Bush administration. Chapter 1, "Bush, bin Laden, and the Pinnacle of World Sympathy," was especially useful, since the students had just completed their reading of the *9/11 Report*. I was able to push them to compare and contrast the two sources—one an official government report and the other a scholarly monograph—in terms of purpose, content, and analysis. I also found chapter 1 helpful in prompting students to think about the ways that fear pervaded American society after 9/11.

In addition to answering previously distributed discussion questions in class, I also picked specific quotes from various parts of the book and asked students to explain what the author was saying and provide appropriate context. From chapter 3, "Operation Iraqi Freedom," for instance, I asked students to explain to the class, after working on the questions in small groups, what the author means when he writes that "the lawlessness meant that Iraqis' first taste of freedom was chaos" and what implications this state of affairs had for American goals.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, by the end of chapter 4, I wanted students to be able to answer with some clarity this basic question: How and why, according to Anderson, did the Iraq War become "Bush's War"?

## *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*

Fredrik Logevall's Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the French War in Indochina and the origins of American involvement in it is exactly the kind of book I would love to introduce to my students, as an example of exhaustive research and masterful historical writing. But as was noted in our SHAFR panel, the book is, at 714 pages of text, more than undergraduates can be expected to tackle. However, I do believe there are ways in which this book will benefit my students. First of all, reading this book persuaded me to incorporate in my own class on the Vietnam War more on the French War in Indochina as part of and prelude to American involvement in Vietnam. In terms of my own preparation and syllabus construction, this book will help me periodize the twentieth-century more coherently and devise a more global approach to the origins of American involvement in Vietnam. It will also facilitate student understanding that the "Vietnam experience" for Americans was not just "something that happened in the 1960s."

This class on the Vietnam War is perhaps especially suited for the integration of new scholarly work such as *Embers of War*, because it is designed as one of several "gateway" courses required for the history major and includes a historical writing and methodology component. So in addition to teaching the historical content of America's involvement in Vietnam, I am also introducing students to various methods of doing history and to historiography, a concept that is usually new to them. To help them process the idea that historians can have different interpretations of the same historical event, and that these interpretations can change over time, I sometimes use book reviews. Logevall's book was widely reviewed in the mainstream press, and those reviews are both short and accessible to undergraduates who might have a harder time parsing a review in a scholarly journal. Reading just three sample reviews from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* exposes students to examples of areas of agreement and key differences in the ways people summarize, interpret, and assess Logevall's book.<sup>5</sup> Discussing those similarities and differences leads us to discuss the purpose of a book review and to make lists for comparative purposes: What did the authors agree or disagree about? Why does that matter?

Another approach, which came up several times during our Q and A at the SHAFR panel, might be to require students to read selected parts of the book rather than the whole thing. For instance, the preface and prologue could be assigned as a way of introducing the concept of Vietnamese nationalism. The prologue opens with Ho Chi Minh trying to attend the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and then provides an overview of French colonial rule, characterized as a "civilizing mission"—an excellent concept to unpack and discuss with the students. Another possible assignment might be chapter 4, "All Men are Created Equal," for a discussion of Vietnamese independence in 1945, especially in conjunction with primary source material such as Ho Chi Minh's September 2, 1945 Declaration of Independence speech.<sup>6</sup>

As I continued to think about how I could steal material shamelessly for my class, I considered the vast number of absorbing and instructive quotes that Logevall includes from both French and Vietminh sources. Some of these quotes help to crystallize the tactics, attitudes, and ideologies of guerilla warfare and provide a preview of similar examples from the war with the Americans. I will cite just two examples that students could sink their teeth into as a way of understanding the mentality of the combatants. First, in 1945 French Commander Philippe Leclerc, who viewed his mission of recovering Indochina for the French

after the end of World War II with considerable skepticism, told his aides that "one does not kill ideas with bullets."<sup>7</sup> Providing students with the appropriate context for the quote—Leclerc's growing doubt about the reestablishment of the French colonial empire—will help them enter into a discussion of both French and Vietnamese nationalist goals and ideals.

The second quote appears in a 1946 interview between Ho Chi Minh and an American journalist. Ho explained how the Vietnamese would wage war against the French: "It will be a war between an elephant and a tiger. If the tiger ever stands still the elephant will crush him with his mighty tusks. But the tiger does not stand still. He lurks in the jungle by day and emerges only at night."<sup>8</sup> I would ask students to think about what point Ho Chi Minh is making about Vietnamese strategy and tactics and how this perspective helps us understand the American experience in Vietnam two decades later.

## *War-Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences*

How, then, to consider using Mary Dudziak's provocative book with my undergraduates? Dudziak asks a deceptively simple question: "When is wartime?" The length and accessibility of this book, which uses three main case studies (World War II, the Cold War and the War on Terror) to explore her main question, does make it a candidate for use in survey classes. It could either be assigned in segments or at the end of the semester (as long as the class covers 9/11 and the War on Terror). What I like most about the book, in terms of its potential use with undergraduates, is the basic question it raises about defining "wartime," which is especially relevant for students who have grown up during the "War on Terror" in a post 9/11 world. Ideally, after the students have finished reading it, I would initiate a discussion of the book as a whole, beginning with the recent post-9/11 context and then working backwards through the Cold War (as a point of comparison) and then to World War II.

I would challenge the students to think about, and talk about, the basic question posed by the author in the introduction: "How can we end a wartime when war doesn't come to an end?"<sup>9</sup> And I would push them to wrestle with and debate the argument that "there is a disconnect between the way we imagine wartime, and the practice of American wars."<sup>10</sup> What I believe might be particularly useful in class, especially with first- or second-year undergraduates, is simply to engage with the book in a discussion that revolves around ambiguity—a concept with which many undergraduates are uncomfortable. Simply posing questions for discussion such as "When was World War II?" or "Was the Cold War a War?" (as the author does in the book) is liable to make students uncomfortable or confused or both, because they tend to expect, in history classes, definitive answers about "what happened" and "when it happened." Pushing through these moments of discomfort, in an atmosphere of shared exploration with peers, can encourage students to challenge themselves to think differently about history and to question "known truths" and may therefore lead to some perspective-altering approaches to academic material.

## *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights*

Elizabeth Borgwardt's award-winning 2005 book analyzes the evolution of the idea and ideal of international "human rights" in the context of planning for the post-World War II world. This book has been the most challenging for me to think about in terms of classroom use, purely because of the limited flexibility I have right now in terms of curriculum and course offerings. While

the book's length (300 pages of text) makes it a candidate for upper-level students, I do not currently teach a course for which the book is well suited. However, the book did resonate with me (as a teacher) in numerous ways, and I did come up with some ideas for using parts of it. I focused on chapter 1, "The Ghost of Woodrow Wilson," which covers the August 1941 Atlantic Charter conference. The chapter (like all the book's chapters) has fabulous subheadings, sure to provoke conversation among students. For instance, the eminently quotable Winston Churchill remarked before he left England for the conference that "No lover ever studied every whim of his mistress as I did those of President Roosevelt."<sup>11</sup> This quote could be used to initiate a discussion and an analysis of the personal relationship between Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill as they prepared for and took part in the Atlantic Charter conference. But it could also initiate broader discussions about the language Churchill used, the point he was trying to make about the necessity of understanding Roosevelt, and how he conveyed that necessity using highly gendered language.

I would also consider this chapter an excellent example of compelling historical narrative, a detailed day-by-day, almost minute-by-minute recreation of the events of the conference itself. It therefore provides a number of opportunities to talk with students about exactly how historians write history. It is both a real page-turner ("Wow, what's going to happen next?") and an example, for students, of historical writing that makes the voices of the past come alive, the people very real and very human (that is, fallible and sometimes inconsistent), the situation uncertain and even frightening, and the outcome of events unknown. In other words, the author's skillful writing drives home the point that at the time Roosevelt and Churchill were talking off the coast of Newfoundland, no one knew if Hitler would be defeated, or indeed how or when the war would end. No one knew what was going to happen. This chapter therefore serves the purpose (a theme that could be projected over an entire semester once introduced by a good piece of writing) of asking students how "history" is made by the people who are making it. How do world leaders talk to each other? What do they think of each other? Do they realize they are "making history," and does that affect their behavior? And ultimately, how do we (the historians) figure any of this out?

The "how do we know" question can also be addressed by talking with students about the author's fascinating analysis of the Atlantic Charter as a document. The partial transcript, reproduced in the chapter, of FDR's exchange with reporters about the non-existence of an "original" Atlantic Charter document opens up all sorts of possibilities for students to think about how "history" is recorded and how source material becomes available (or does not become available) to historians. Finally, it occurred to me that working with the students to understand the *language* of the Atlantic Charter itself, the carefully chosen

words, could help them think about America's place in the postwar world. The author describes the charter as a series of "provisional aspirations," so it might be worth asking students to think about whether these aspirations were reached in the postwar world, or indeed if they continue to have any relevance in today's world.

Engaging in this sort of intentional thinking about the application of historical scholarship to the classroom, in this case the undergraduate classroom, has broadened my thinking about the ways I can continue to incorporate important and innovative research and writing into my classes beyond simply assigning a particular book for students to "read and discuss."

#### Notes:

1. I wish to thank all four authors for their willingness to participate in this panel, and especially for engaging in a stimulating Q and A with the audience after hearing my comments. I would also like to thank the SHAFR Teaching Committee, and especially Teaching Committee Chair Chester Pach, for organizing the panel. See Terry Anderson, *Bush's Wars* (New York, 2011); Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA, 2005); Mary Dudziak, *War-Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (New York, 2012); and Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York, 2012).
2. Ernest May, ed., *The 9/11 Commission Report with Related Documents* (Boston, 2007).
3. Texts are widely available online: See, for example, the National Archives website for the State of the Union addresses: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html> or the website [presidentialrhetoric.com](http://presidentialrhetoric.com). Documents and video are also available online at the George W. Bush Presidential Library website: <https://www.georgewbushlibrary.smu.edu/>. For a documents-based text option, see Robert Brigham, *The United States and Iraq Since 1990: A Brief History with Documents* (Malden, MA, 2014).
4. Anderson, *Bush's Wars*, 144.
5. See, for example, Alan Brinkley, "Why were we in Vietnam?" Review of *Embers of War*, *New York Times*, 7 September 2012, at [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/09/books/review/embers-of-war-by-fredrik-logevall.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/09/books/review/embers-of-war-by-fredrik-logevall.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0); Gordon Goldstein, "Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam" by Fredrik Logevall, 28 Sep 2012, at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/embers-of-war-the-fall-of-an-empire-and-the-making-of-americas-vietnam-by-fredrik-logevall/2012/09/28/bc9fcea6-00ef-11e2-9367-4e1bafb958db\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/embers-of-war-the-fall-of-an-empire-and-the-making-of-americas-vietnam-by-fredrik-logevall/2012/09/28/bc9fcea6-00ef-11e2-9367-4e1bafb958db_story.html); and Rufus Phillips, "It was Only Just Beginning," 17 August 2012, at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390444226904577559531715193166>.
6. The text of the speech is available at the Internet Modern History Sourcebook, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1945vietnam.html>.
7. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 119.
8. *Ibid.*, 44.
9. Dudziak, *War-Time*, 4.
10. *Ibid.*, 8.
11. Borgwardt, *A New Deal*, 16.