

# In Conversation with Faculty:

## Dr. Gregory J. W. Urwin

**Editor’s note: I had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Gregory J. W. Urwin about his decades of service at Temple University as he approaches retirement. A leading historian of military history, Dr. Urwin reflects on the evolution of the field, the importance of mentorship, and the work that continues to shape his intellectual life. The conversation also considers his contributions to CENFAD, his approach to teaching, and his ongoing research projects. It was a privilege to learn from his insights and experiences at this important moment in his career.**

**Marcella Aline Toledo:** Good morning, Dr. Urwin. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today.

**Dr. Gregory J. W. Urwin:** Thank you.

**MAT:** First of all, congratulations on your upcoming retirement. How are you feeling as you’re heading into this next chapter?

**GU:** Well, you know, this is a phased retirement, so I’ve completed the first year. I didn’t teach in the fall, and I teach this semester, and I’ve got two more years - I’m

easing into it. But the reality is beginning to hit. I’m not as involved in departmental governance and other matters. But I like having the extra time for writing, you know, I’ve enjoyed that. I think it’s important to retire to something, not just to say, “I’m going to watch reruns and eat popcorn all the time.” I originally envisioned teaching till I dropped. But I’ve seen some colleagues over the years that have lapsed into dementia, others just lost their vibrancy and weren’t connecting as well with students. So, I’d like to go while I’m still, I think, capable and giving the students value for their tuition dollars. I’m resigned to doing that, but it’s going to be an adjustment. I think I really won’t know what that means until it happens, but I’m ready for it.

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*“I still think It’s important for historians to reach a wider public, and I still do that from time to time”*

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**MAT:** If you could go back and give advice to your younger self at the start of your career, what would you say?

**GU:** When I was younger, I published a lot in popular outlets, commercial publishers, magazines and things like that. I would have started writing more for juried journals. I don't know why I didn't start doing that much earlier than I did, because the constructive criticism sharpened my skills. I still think it's important for historians to reach a wider public, and I still do that from time to time. But to be sure that I'm publishing something that is of worth to the profession, going through juried journals is important.

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*“If you do your job right, they [students] become even stronger, and that's always a joy to witness”*

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**MAT:** Is that the same advice you would give to students today?

**GU:** Oh, yeah. I've always encouraged my doctoral students to start publishing as soon as they had something they thought was of the proper caliber. I said in the research seminar, if your professor is enthusiastic about your work, then make the revisions necessary to make it look like an article rather than a paper and send it out. Because with our tight job market, you need something on your résumé to make you stand out from your peers. It's not just enough to have a PhD in hand anymore. The

degree helps, but publishing early also tells prospective employers that this person is less of a risk and that they already understand how this business operates. They're already operating like professional historians and if they're doing it at this young age we can expect them, as they mature, to produce even stronger material.

I mean, I was lucky when I wrote my master's thesis, because I was writing popular articles. My advisor said, “Why don't you write it as a book?” The poor man ended up getting a 300-page master's thesis, which I would never want to happen to me, but it became my first book. It created a favorable impression to have it in press before I had my PhD in hand. At that time, there were anywhere from 150 to 200 applicants for most jobs, so I think that's what made the difference between my application going into the “thanks for applying” pile and the “worth a second-look” pile.

There are all kinds of different ways to do that. Obtaining outside funding, for example, but it's good to get internal funding too: money is money. But again, to give evidence that you're an academic entrepreneur, that's an important way to build a career. Another way is to gain administrative experience, what you're doing now. You're helping to run an important center of academic excellence. Depending on the needs of whatever department receives your application, that could carry a lot of weight.

**MAT:** I know that you are especially happy to talk about your graduate students. What has mentoring them meant to you over the course of your career?

**GU:** I've helped guide 26 people through the PhD process thus far, with five more on the conveyor belt. It forced me to stretch, because you can't count on students duplicating what you do. They're going to be looking at different facets. They may look into periods where you've not done original research. So, I've overseen dissertations ranging from Puritan interpretations of just war theory in the 17th century to the Army's adaptation to the Global War on Terror. Most of my research has focused on the American Revolution through World War II. I've had to read not only the work I receive from students but also outside material to better understand what they're doing, guide them more effectively, and give them stronger feedback. It's been a good experience because it's forced me to grow.

In my opinion - and I hope this doesn't sound snobbish - it's the pinnacle of the teaching experience, because you're dealing with a select body of keenly intelligent men and women. If you do your job right, they become even stronger, and that's always a joy to witness. Now, most of that depends on them as they do the work. You can give them advice, but the fact that they are willing to go

the extra mile is quite satisfying, especially when it results in a strong dissertation that becomes a book and leads to a career.

On the other hand, it also brings a great deal of anxiety, at least in my case, because I worry about whether they'll be able to establish careers, whether I've done enough to help them produce their best work. So far, they're all working. Some are in traditional civilian academia, others work for the government or various branches of the armed forces, where some teach and others hold research positions. Three work for the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (the Military version of the CIA), helping identify lost military personnel and provide closure for families. That's something I never imagined training people for, but they're making meaningful use of their education.



*Dr. Urwin during a Gettysburg staff ride, March 2016  
(Photo Courtesy of Dr. Gregory J. W. Urwin)*

**MAT:** You have a long career of extensive publications and professional engagements. After nearly three decades as general editor

of the Campaigns and Commanders Series, how have you seen military history evolve as a field over time?

**GU:** That's an excellent question. When we started, "military history" still carried the connotation of traditional operational history, battles and campaigns. But we made it clear we were interested in any time period, any continent, and especially work that bridged traditional military history with what was then called the "new military history." Back in the late 1990s, that term still had currency, but it really emerged in the 1980s. Now it's not so "new" anymore. What we were looking for - and still are - are works that incorporate other methodologies: political history, social history, gender studies, environmental history, and so on.

We've published traditional biographies and campaign histories, but we published a lot of books that I guess one could describe as kind of hybrid, which means that they appeal to not only a broader sample of military historians, but also people in other disciplines. I think this helps also with broader engagement, allowing people outside on the field to approach to military history.

**MAT:** In spring 2024, CENFAD hosted the "All Roads Lead to Gettysburg" conference. If you were to choose a theme today, what would you choose and why?

**GU:** At this point, probably something on the American Revolution, since we're approaching the 250th anniversary and all roads are leading to Philadelphia or Boston.

I recently gave a keynote address at the Society for Army Historical Research on the British Army and the American Revolution. It was a historiographical talk about how the field is stronger than ever in the 21st century. There's been a lot of really interesting research done on the Continental Army: social history, the intersection of race and military affairs. There really hasn't been a good book on what used to be called camp followers, or soldiers' women, for a long time. So, I think maybe a conference dedicated to new scholarship in that field. More is being done to unearth the histories of the common soldier. Traditionally, so much has focused on officers, because they were the ones who left letters and diaries, or wrote more of them. Some common soldiers did as well, but many may have been illiterate. Still, they left testimonies if they lived long enough to apply for pensions. They had to supply narratives of their service to go with those applications, and there's a lot to be ferreted out from those documents.

One of the books I published in the *Campaigns and Commanders Series*, *Standing in Their Own Light* by Judith Van Buskirk, is about Black Continental soldiers. She got into the pension records and, besides reconstructing the experiences of some of

these men, she concluded that it was important to them - despite living in a time when Black Americans were being pushed back in many ways - to assert that they had served, that they had helped to create the United States of America. Obtaining those pensions was not just about support in old age. It was also about recognition they felt had been, in some ways, swept under the rug since 1783. I think one might be able to find other threads like that to tell us more about the experiences of these men who bore the brunt of the war, how they adjusted to life in the early Republic, and what kind of agency they may have exercised afterward.

**MAT:** That would be super interesting! Thinking about your work with CENFAD more broadly, are there any speakers or lectures that really stood out to you, and why?

**GU:** Well, it's interesting because we used to do an annual lecture when we started out, and we had some interesting people. Probably our first really big success was when we had General Wesley Clark, who had been the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO during the Kosovo War in 1999. We got him here in October 2001. He had retired but was contemplating a run for president, and he had published a book called *Waging Modern War*. He was a headline-maker, and having

him come to Temple was a real coup for us - really a great moment.

We've had a lot of important speakers. The center was founded, at least in part, to keep my predecessor, Russell F. Weigley, at Temple. He really made Temple an important center for the training of professional military historians. Because of his stature, especially while he was alive, it was easier to bring people in. His rival for the title of top U.S. military historian in the early 21st century, Allan R. Millett from Ohio State, came and spoke to us for our Spring 2000 lecture. Richard Immerman, who was co-director of the center for a long time, really did the day-to-day work of running it, Russ was more of a figurehead. Richard was able to draw in diplomatic historians and expand our reach.

We also had people who weren't as widely known as General Clark but were just as interesting. One was Colonel John Bonin who ended up being my first PhD student, partly because Russ died while John was still working on his dissertation. John became a leading Army intellectual and played a key role in the Army's reorganization around the time of Desert Storm and into the 21st century. He came here in spring 2003 and gave a talk on Army operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. That was well attended and memorable, but what was even more revealing was the private dinner we had beforehand. It was a small group, and he

spoke more candidly than he could in public, and that kind of insight is something you only get in those smaller, off-the-record settings. That was part of the experience then, and it still is today.

Now the center has the endowment to bring in a dozen or so speakers a year, rather than just one. Back then, it really was a one-shot deal each year. You hoped people would come and that the speaker would be a success.

**MAT:** In a different context, you've also created hands-on learning experiences in your teaching. You've been leading staff rides for Temple's ROTC program for many years, and in your *Army History* article you describe them as both an intellectual and sensory experience. As a student, I've found that kind of "learning by doing" really effective. How can we bring some of that into the classroom to maintain engagement?

**GU:** Well, you know, it depends on what you're teaching. But, for example Bench [Ansfield], as an urban historian, has done tours of areas involved in civil disobedience or demonstrations, etc. Seth Bruggeman regularly does that in his public history courses. Of course, he either links up with a museum or some other significant site somewhere in Philadelphia, and then has students research that site and examine it from all kinds of different angles.

When I started teaching American military culture, I used to take the class down to the Independence Seaport Museum to walk on the Olympia. And this was, you know, the spearhead that America used to project its power in 1898. This is the ship that led the way in the Battle of Manila Bay, which made us a great power, which made us an East Asian power, which put us on the road to Pearl Harbor and on to Vietnam, and so on. But just seeing the technology, the space, and getting an idea of how people lived and operated... there's also a submarine lashed alongside, and we went through that as well - it's a painless way for people to learn. And again, it's exposing them to the environment in which things happened. It helps them better understand why things happened the way they did.

The first time I led a tour of Gettysburg with Temple affiliates, it was for what was then the undergraduate student group, and we took them over the battlefield. I thought, "I don't know why ROTC isn't doing this." So, I connected with them, and we got a staff ride restored to Army ROTC, which is a good thing because it's a graduation requirement. Cadets have to do it before they get their commission.

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*“You can learn a lot from this [historical reenactment]. It’s like a museum, except the artifacts come to life and you see them in motion”*

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**MAT:** I asked this because I’ve even seen you teaching dressed as a soldier a few times - it’s funny, more professors should do that.

**GU:** You know, when I was young, living history heightened my appreciation for a lot of things. In a military story, you hear about different maneuvers and formations, and how well they worked or didn’t work. It’s one thing to read the drill manuals, etc.; it’s another thing to actually try to do it. It’s nothing like being in a real war, because no one’s trying to kill you, but still, being exposed to the mechanics has allowed me to better visualize things when I write about them. But in the classroom, living history is kind of a show-and-tell. You not only give students particulars - this is how soldiers dressed, these are the weapons they carried - but military fashions of any era mirror civilian fashions to a certain extent and reflect societal values.

In the 18th century, for instance, it was still a hierarchical, patriarchal culture. Male fashions were designed to flatter an older

man’s figure. I mean, the coats were hooked at the top but then open below, which left plenty of room for a spreading midsection. Men wore tight stockings because the lower legs are one of the last parts of the body to go, especially in a culture where you walk everywhere. And then you point out things like, their uniforms were made out of wool, whether they were in New York or South Carolina, because that was the hardiest cloth available and the most economical solution. People ask, how could they stand it? Well, they weren’t spoiled by air conditioning. They were quite a bit tougher than we are, although many of them also died younger than we do.

It starts to give students a kind of knowledge that lets them look at these things more critically and encourages them to explore the “why.” It’s not just a matter of people wanting to change styles. By the time of Napoleon, for example, uniforms and male dress were designed to flatter a younger man’s figure: broad shoulders, a slim waist, that sort of thing. And if you wanted to, it doesn’t have to be just military, you could get into women’s history as well. The way respectable women were hemmed in by all that clothing, the fact that they weren’t supposed to go outside without gloves, that they were never supposed to extend an ungloved hand to a man except their husband in the privacy of the home. They weren’t supposed to speak to a man unless he

had been introduced by their husband or, if unmarried, by their father or brothers. It was all about protecting “female purity,” but at the same time, it imposed clear restrictions. Of course, that mainly applied to middle- and upper-class women. Depending on circumstances, different rules applied elsewhere.

You can learn a lot from this. It’s like a museum, except the artifacts come to life and you see them in motion. I could teach an entire class that way. You can read about battles in a textbook, but this shows how and why things were done, what the capabilities of the weapons were, and why tactics developed the way they did, to take advantage of strengths and protect against the enemy’s weapons systems, and so on.

**MAT:** To conclude, even as you step into retirement, you’re still deeply engaged in the field. In the last few months, you’ve given invited lectures, participated in conferences, and you’re helping shape a new exhibition at the Museum of the American Revolution. What else can we expect from you next?

**GU:** Well... it depends, in the coming year, on what offers, I guess. I’m going to continue to research and publish. I am writing a book titled *When Freedom Wore a Red Coat*, and I am halfway through chapter 12. The book covers the Black Virginians who waged a parallel revolution. They sought liberty by

casting their lot with the British. That’s something that kind of gets slipped under the rug, but I want to get this project done. I also have some ideas for articles. Jeremy Black, a prolific military historian - he’s in his 70s and has published close to 200 books - only needs two hours of sleep a day, he tells me, so he has to do something with all that time. He’s putting together a special edition of the *Journal of War Studies* on the American Revolution, and he’s taking an article I wrote, so I have to get that to him by October.

I will also be speaking at [Historicon](#). You’ve heard of those conventions, like Comic-Con? This is for wargamers, about 2,500 of them, and they want some military history lectures. I’ll be speaking about [how the British Army adapted to American conditions and altered its tactics from the Seven Years’ War and into the War of Independence](#).

And every so often, you get contacted by a TV producer. There’s also a [podcast](#), “[Based on a True Story](#),” I do that deals with history in Hollywood. They bring me in once or twice a year, and we’ve done *Gettysburg*, *Little Big Man*, *They Died with Their Boots On*, *Glory*, and *Wake Island*. So, who knows? Thanks to the Internet, people can find you and follow a trail of other things you’ve done. At this point, I don’t have to do as much if I don’t want to, but it keeps you intellectually active. And I’ll have a book to publicize, so that will shape what I agree to.

**MAT:** Well, thank you so much for your time, Dr. Urwin. It's been a pleasure speaking with you, and we wish you all the best in this next chapter.

**GU:** I appreciate it.

**Dr. Gregory J. W. Urwin** is a military historian whose work spans the American War of Independence through World War II. He holds his Ph.D. from the University of Notre Dame, and taught at Saint Mary of the Plains College in Dodge City, Kansas, and the University of Central Arkansas before joining Temple's History Department in 1999. Urwin has published nine books, including *Facing Fearful Odds: The Siege of Wake Island*, which received the General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Award from the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation, and *Victory in Defeat: The Wake Island Defenders in Captivity, 1941-1945*. Urwin is a past president of the Society for Military History, a fellow in both the Company of Military Historians and the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Center for the Study of America and the

West, and the former editor of the Campaigns and Commanders Series from University of Oklahoma Press. He has appeared in numerous documentaries for the History Channel including [\*Civil War Journal: The 54th Massachusetts, A&E, October 6, 1993\*](#), [\*Wake Island: The Alamo of the Pacific\*](#), and [\*History Channel - Last Days of World War II Set 1 Episode 1 18-24 February\*](#)



*Dr. Urwin and his wife, Dr. Cathy Kunzinger Urwin, at a University of Oklahoma Press reception marking his retirement as general editor of the Campaigns and Commanders Series, a position he held since 1998. (Society for Military History Annual Meeting, Arlington, Virginia, March 27, 2026, Photo Courtesy of Dr. Gregory J. W. Urwin.)*