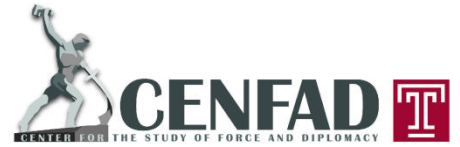


CENFAD Interview with Thomas Schwartz

November 21, 2019

Conducted by Brandon Kinney



Q: What inspired you to study what you study?

A: Well, a lot of it is serendipity. I wanted to do history, I was lucky enough as an undergraduate to earn a fellowship at Columbia University which allowed me to go to England for two years after I finished, and for me, that was really eye opening. I had never left the country. I didn't have a broader view, and I met lots of people from all over the world. I got very interested in international issues and the rest of it. I thought I was going to do something in comparative history when I came to Harvard for my PhD. The first week I walked in, the professor who I thought I was going to work with told me he was retiring in two years, and he wasn't going to be there, and I should look around. And then Professor Ernest May, who did international relations and history - I got inspired. I took his seminar on the Cold War, I got interested in some of the topics there, and then - again, serendipity - my older sister who worked at a law firm in New York - Milbank, Tweed, Hadley, and McCloy. John McCloy was the name partner at the time. She said "John McCloy, he's been involved in international relations." I didn't know anything about him, looked him up, and of course discovered that he had been High Commissioner to Germany and involved in all these issues, and she arranged an interview for me. I went down, nervous, but I got a chance to talk to him about some of his experiences, and then I went to talk to Ernest May about it, and he said "that's a great dissertation topic." And from there, it sort of expanded into doing research, but as I say, a lot of it was very serendipitous, a certain amount of things just happening and meeting people. And McCloy got me interested in what you might call the American foreign policy establishment relationship with Germany, went to Germany then as a graduate student doing research there and got very

interested in the U.S.-German relationship and it's centrality in foreign policy. McCloy also spawned my interest in the alliance that eventually led me to looking at other periods of the alliance, particularly Lyndon Johnson and other issues.

Q: What was the most exciting aspect of the research process for your upcoming book on Kissinger?

A: I think it was maybe Kissinger. He didn't want to talk to me, and there's a long story behind it, but he didn't particularly care for my advisor, and he had had issues at Harvard, so I had to go through some other doors to actually get a chance to sit down with him. It was just a one interview thing, but it was sort of an interesting - just to meet him and deal with him. But I think the most interesting thing has been the sense that, in looking at Kissinger, I've had the opportunity to not only see him has a figure in diplomacy, but because of Nixon's taping system, I feel like I have gotten a better sense of how foreign policy was really made and the discussions that took place and it certainly had an impact on my thinking of the nature and foreign policy, the nature of decision making, and Kissinger was just one of those people who, if you're an academic, and somebody asks you what you're doing and you mention Kissinger, they know who he is. It's not as obscure. McCloy is known to some people, but he's pretty - he was behind the scenes. He's not someone who courted publicity or tried to have his name in the public, whereas Henry Kissinger, that is what he was all about. It has probably led me to a whole series of interesting conversations with people. People who had encounters with Kissinger. At one point I even met one of Kissinger's dermatologists, who had to treat him because of a rash he developed sitting in a Japanese chair during negotiations. This is a story that I got

because I was giving a talk about Kissinger, and this guy came up and said “I was his dermatologist.” This type of thing was fascinating to me, and I’ve enjoyed that part.

Q: In addition to your forthcoming book on Kissinger, this year we got two books - by Robert Brigham on Kissinger’s “Recklessness” and Abraham Wagner on Kissinger as a “Pragmatic Statesman.” So even in 2019 and 2020, why do you think there’s such a sustained scholarly interest in Dr. Kissinger?

A: Well, my argument would be that a lot of people see him as having been either a successful practitioner of foreign policy, or, on the other side, a uniquely evil or disastrous practitioner, but I think he is, arguably, the most famous 20th century American diplomat. On practical terms, there are a lot of sources that we can use to look at Kissinger. He was involved in a lot of different parts of the world, so there’s also the opportunity to look at his involvement in a more global sense than someone like McCloy, [who] was predominately interested in Europe. He’s also interesting, and I think academics have a certain interest because he’s seen either as someone who represented what an academic could do or a traitor. Either side, again there’s this sort of polarized attitude toward Kissinger: the heroic statesman or the war criminal. I think he stirs up people’s attention. The fact that he’s been alive – that he’s still alive and still active in the public sector, still showing up and being involved in things, writing articles in *The Atlantic* on artificial intelligence – all of that has lent him a public career that’s more than sixty years. That is so rare in American history, to have someone have been involved that long. I think all of that probably contributes to the number of books, but I would also argue probably that we’ve overdone it. Maybe. I remember I was asked to write this book, the initial request was a series of books on biographies, the idea being how can a biography teach an issue in American history. So one of the early biographies was Pocahontas, of all things, by a scholar who wrote in a way, by writing a biography about



Pocahontas, to talk about early contact between the early settlers and Native Americans. I was asked whose biography would teach something about American diplomatic history, and I said Henry Kissinger. My adviser Ernest May was not a fan of Henry Kissinger, so before he died, he was quite skeptical of my role. He and I, we ended up not discussing it,

but he wanted me to pick either Dean Acheson or George Ball or someone more conventionally part of the old East coast establishment, and I, having done that with McCloy, I didn’t want to do that again, I guess.

Q: What are one or two major points you want the audience to take away from the talk or your book?

A: Well, I think the thing that is going to be controversial, but I think I can sustain it, is that I’m looking at Kissinger less as a statesman-theorist on international affairs - someone who provided advice to presidents. I’m looking at him as a political figure, as someone who sought to influence and exercise political power. And that he recognized that in the United States, because of our government system, domestic politics, especially the struggle for power at home, is connected to foreign policy, and they are intertwined, and that presidents are looking in fact to use foreign policy for domestic purposes frequently. And Kissinger understood that, and Kissinger acted as a political figure very much within what he – both as an advisor and when he actually exercised power when Nixon was in the throes of Watergate, and even in some ways with Gerald Ford, where he saw himself almost as a co-president with Ford. So that political element. I also am highlighting Kissinger’s use of the media by using, particularly, the

television archive at Vanderbilt, which is a unique resource in the sense that there's not collections of television news.

Television news was the most dominant way most people got their news in the 1960s and 70s, even into the 80s. It was just television. The three networks dominated, their newscasts were central to how people saw things, and Henry Kissinger became a key figure in that. And his role in becoming, in effect, a sort of celebrity diplomat, someone who personalized foreign policy also made him quite a significant figure and a

dominating figure in American public discourse in the early 70s. He was the most admired man in the United States for three years in a row. Some of that is all forgotten. I remember it more because I'm a little older, but he was a very dominating figure, and then even after he left office, and the interesting thing is, when he left office, he was only fifty-three. And I think the assumption was he would be back as Secretary of State or in some other foreign policy position. And he never was. He briefly chaired a commission on Central America for Ronald Reagan, but other than that, he had no official position. And he went on to carve a career partly in the private sector as Kissinger and Associates Consulting Company, but he is also in the background of trying to influence and advise on foreign policy all the way through, meeting and talking to every president from Carter on to President Trump, with whom he was sitting down and talking the same day Trump fired Comey - which I thought was a fascinating moment connecting histories there.

Q: Following your book, what comes next for you?

A: I've chosen to pursue some limited projects now. Projects that don't involve many years of research and the frustrations of dealing with someone who's sort of a larger-than-life figure. So I've done some work, interestingly, on the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the settlement in Asia, looking at the negotiations with Japan that ended the Second World War,



and that established, you might say, the security system in Asia that's being challenged now, and some of the issues connected there, and not so long ago published an article about the territorial dispute over the island of Dokdo between Korean and Japan, and how that issue was debated and discussed within the U.S. government. I'm also interested possibly in looking at the expansion of NATO as an issue, although there are so many people working in that I may pick a fairly specific aspect of that to examine. But the argument over whether and how much the expansion of NATO contributed to subsequent deterioration of relations with

Moscow is something that I'm interested in. Again, there's a personal connection there, the Clinton Administration Ambassador to Germany is a man by the name of John Kornblum, and he's decided to retire to Nashville, and he's interested in collaborating on some sort of a project discussing this issue of the expansion of NATO and its relationship to the U.S.-German situation in the 1990s, and I may find myself working in that project .