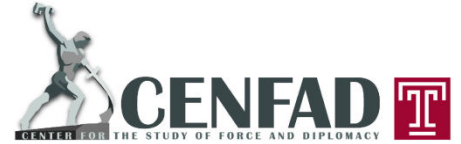


**CENFAD interview with Timothy A. Sayle
Conducted by Brandon Kinney
February 6, 2020**



Q: What inspired you to study NATO?

A: That's a good question and a complicated one. I was never really sure, and I had never really planned to do a history PhD, and the idea to apply for one came up sort of haphazardly, and so I needed a topic. And Canadians study NATO, so NATO's on the mind of all Canadians. There are a lot of Canadians who have written about NATO, so I just said to my supervisor for my Master's "oh, I'll write on NATO." And that just sort of snowballed. When I got [to Temple] though and started worked with people who would be on my committee, there was a little bit of resistance to NATO as a topic. It was not very popular at the time. It wasn't in the news. It seemed like an old dinosaur. We were really in the midst of the war on terror, so it just didn't seem relevant at all. But we all worked together, and I went forward with the project. So what really drew me to it I think was the complication of states working together, so that really interested me, and at the time, we were really talking in our grad seminars about transnational history and international history and the difference between them, and we still are talking about these things. And it seemed like it was a good laboratory for exploring whether states cooperate because of transnational links or a combination of national interests. And it really grew from there, and the dissertation ended up covering thirteen years, some time in the fifties and sixties, what I thought was sort of an understudied period of NATO. And then going on after I finished the PhD, I decided to expand the project.

Q: What was the most interesting aspect of that research process?

A: One of the most interesting things was the need to use different archives to put together even a single event that happened at NATO. So there's all sorts of different declassification rules and release rules in different NATO countries. And then again at NATO archives, and so the history of even a single meeting at NATO – the records are sort of spread in different forms across all sorts of different national archives and NATO itself. So just to write the history of one particularly important

meeting, let's say you have to get the formal document from NATO headquarters, you can get the American telegram, you get a Canadian numbered letter, and then you could get some British diplomat, sort of gossipy personal letter about the meeting and sort of put together the story. So it was interesting to have a subject that you had to come at from many different archival angles, and I really enjoyed that part of it. That was a lot of fun.

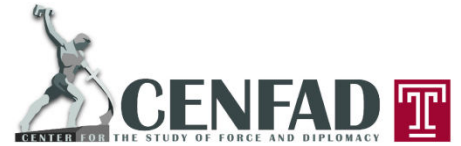
Q: In [*Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Alliance*], you assert that, due to their experiences in the first half of the twentieth century, NATO allies on both sides of the Atlantic often subordinated their national interests in favor of the *Pax Atlantica*. You mention the tug of war between national interests and the alliance. Can you speak a bit more towards that, particularly thinking of the United States as a unilateral power as we see it now?

A: Yeah, I'm really glad you asked about that, it's something that I continue to think about a lot even though the book's done. And it is really a question of generations. So you have a generation of men – and they were all men – at the beginning who, some of them actually fought against each other, but many of them fought together, and they all had a real common understanding of what was in their state's national interest but also agreed that was in each of their states' national interests was in all of their interests, and that interest of course was avoiding general war, and that is the theme that runs through the book. A sort of agreement that it's in all of the allies' interests to ensure that war doesn't happen. There's some disagreement as to how that can happen. What I think is really interesting for me is that different states would try to harness NATO for their own national interests. The French were hoping that NATO could help in Algeria. The Americans hoped that NATO would help in Vietnam. All of these efforts, and there are many more, where leaders hoped that NATO could help them out of a jam, and almost always, the other states would not agree. It was sort of the lowest

common denominator of cooperation. They could all agree that there was one basic interest they shared, but they wouldn't press NATO beyond that. So I guess if you would connect it to today and American policy, I think that maybe that memory and that way of working is lost a little bit for some policymakers who don't understand why NATO wasn't helping in the showdown with Iran, for instance. If you look at its history, that's actually quite natural, really. All sorts of states have strived to harness NATO to their needs.

Q: Another important element in your book is a clash between NATO and voters, particularly in Europe, over things like denuclearization, disarmament, and budgetary concerns. How do you think NATO balances military decisions and processes made in secret with public accountability?

A: Yes, NATO has never been very good at public relations. It's a major theme in the history of NATO. I think you can see different posters they've developed over time. Different speeches that have been given. If you go to the NATO archives, there's all these pictures of sailors and airmen and soldiers standing on parade grounds spelling out the word "NATO" with their bodies. This is what they thought was effective public relations, and so it's pretty easy to mock that now, and that was just bizarre, but more seriously I think what they tried to do was to present a public image of shared values and an alliance of democracies, and that was sort of NATO's public relations campaign. And I think that really did make it harder for NATO leaders to explain just what they were doing, because what they were doing, they were trying to keep the peace by demonstrating that they could deter and if necessary fight another war. It's just not a pleasant thing that's easy to go and tell people about, it's not something you get votes for. So there's always this inherent tension between how NATO advertised itself and what its leaders thought its mission actually was. And at the root of this problem, I think, is that NATO wasn't formed to deter a Soviet invasion but to prevent the Soviet Union using political blackmail or crises to sort of force diplomatic concessions in Europe. And so what's at the heart of Allied leaders' fear? Well, it's their own people. They don't want their people to come to them and say "let's concede, let's not have a conflict." So there's this tension at the heart of NATO, and I don't think NATO's



ever really resolved it, but they've been doing a much better job on social media these days than they have in the past. They actually recruited this Norwegian male model who's also in the Norwegian navy, and this was two years ago or so, and they made him the poster child of the alliance. He had long hair that he kept in a ponytail in a naval officer's uniform, and they moved away from that, and now they're doing a lot more videos of training operations in the Baltics and such, showing what these forces are actually doing, which is training to fight.

Q: You conclude by looking at the post-Cold War world. So what place do you see for NATO in a world of cyber-warfare and stateless enemies such as ISIS or Al-Qaeda?

A: It's interesting, ISIS in a way helped save NATO. And this is sort of odd, but in 2014 there were two events – two sort of trends in international relations – that had a huge effect on NATO. And one of them was the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the other was the need to put together a coalition to counter ISIS. And these two events coming together as they did in 2014 bolstered the alliance in a really remarkable way. They caused some states to commit, because they were worried about Russian encroachment. And they caused some states to really take notice of NATO again, because they were worried about ISIS and saw NATO as a tool for helping to organize the coalition to counter ISIS. And I think that 2014 was really, really critical. And I think that if NATO hadn't had that big boost then, I'm not sure we would have NATO in any real form today, given the challenges that it has faced over the past few years. You go back to 2014, that's when you can see a real reinvestment in NATO by European leaders and dearth of increased defense spending that some American politicians point to, and the work of President Trump. And I think that really began in 2014.

Q: For those who weren't able to attend today, are there one or two points that you want to highlight that you feel are most important that we didn't cover here?

A: Let me go back to this issue of generations. I only mentioned one of the generations, it was the generation that fought the Second World War and lived through the Second World War. And what's fascinating is that, by the 1960s, those leaders and people with war experience were seeing a new generation coming of political age who were born after the war. They hadn't lived through the war and hadn't fought through the war. And they were really worried in the late sixties that this new generation, the CIA called them the successor generation, was going to reject power politics. It was just going to reject the idea that defense was necessary, that defense spending led to peace. So this major sort of crisis in the late sixties and early seventies over this sort of "kids these days, these kids that hadn't fought in the Second World War." And when Secretary of Defense Robert Gates left at the end of the Obama Administration, he gave a speech in which he said 'those who didn't live through the Cold War just can't understand NATO.' So now we have the next generation. So I think that there's this tension that we haven't resolved and one to think about. This constant fear leaders have about the next generation, and how natural that fear is, and how in many ways it makes a lot of sense, and yet here we are a few generations later. We're starting to hear that same concern raised, but I'm just not sure international relations works like that.

