

A Conversation with Dr. Michael Brenes



The following interview was conducted with Dr. Michael Brenes several weeks after his visit and lecture at CENFAD. We discussed the scope of his research, his methodological approach, plus the ins and outs of his position as Co-Director of the Brady Johnson Program at Yale University.

Michael Brenes: Hey, Joe!

Joseph Johnson: Hey, Dr. Brenes. I appreciate you taking time out of your holiday to speak with me.

MB: No worries!

JJ: I have a few questions about your work, research, and experience speaking at CENFAD this semester. But to start, could you briefly summarize the argument of your book *For Might and Right* for our readers?

MB: Yeah! I was interested in how the military-industrial complex in the United States, or how the formation of a political economy in the United States centered around producing things for the military and how it shapes democracy.

I was attracted to this because of what was happening then. Around 2011-2012, I started thinking about this project, so almost fifteen years ago. I was interested in the rise of the right, how the right had shaped the Bush administration, and the contradictions inherent in the right's call for reduced government and tax cuts. But then, spending on the military seemed fundamental in shaping the state beyond military spending.

Again, if you're interested in a political economy, military spending creates jobs and industry, which creates communities out of defense spending. I thought that was a contradiction at the time, which I don't anymore. How does that contradiction shape politics and political economy regarding military spending. And then, how does that translate to an enduring military-industrial complex and defense industry?

The defense industry has a long history in the United States, but it was never seen as a permanent expansive entity until after the Cold War. I wondered why that happened. Why is it in a democratic context like the United States? Why does it happen,

considering the United States' historical reluctance to adopt standing militaries and standing military industries?

Again, I was interested in the rise of the right and started delving into conservative literature. I began to realize that this wasn't really a conservative story. This is a history of liberalism and how liberals mobilized behind the national security state. Liberal Democrats are the largest supporters of a greater presence for the United States abroad, but also spending at home to fulfill that promise of keeping democracy safe. So, this was a liberal story that became a conservative story.

JJ: How did you approach the chronology for the development of the military-industrial complex?

MB: I thought I'd take on the entire Cold War, which led me to an expansive research agenda to figure out where I would put my energies regarding how these chapters were built. I decided to make a series of decisions around my research, based on case studies in the book. I used a lot of newspapers and archives from senators and congress people, as well as the presidential papers of Harry Truman. I did not do so much with Eisenhower, so I did not use that.

I realized that if I want to understand the permanent military-industrial complex and how it has grown, I need to understand top-down decision-making, how that relates to people on the bottom level getting jobs, and what

that means. That meant looking into congressional archives, presidential archives, local newspapers, and correspondence between constituents and their representatives. Some of it also meant getting into the archives of labor unions to understand how labor experiences the defense industry.

If you read the book, you can see that the chapters begin with high policy-making and then go into how workers experienced the defense industry in their communities. My overall conclusion is that this is not a right-wing story, it is not a left-wing story, and it is not a liberal service story. It is a story of how American democracy is fundamentally reshaped by bipartisan support for this defense industry, and that is why it is so enduring. No party holds exclusive ownership of the defense industry. People benefit from it for all sorts of material and ideological reasons, and that's a bipartisan project.

JJ: Thank you for the summary and for digging into your book's scope. The topic is very capacious, and you tried to cover everything, which is a huge feat. Because of the book's expansive methodological approach and the various archives used, did you experience any difficulty getting into these collections? I can imagine that archives for labor unions, corporations, and some government organizations are quite tricky to access, especially if you have something critical to say.

MB: Yeah, it was the trickiest in some situations. If I wanted to do this project justice, how would I get funding for it

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like the general funding? I was fortunate to receive grants from my university, and I had a large external grant that allowed me to travel on the West Coast, starting with the Reagan and Nixon libraries, then San Francisco and Palo Alto for the Hoover archives, and things like that.

I organized my research agenda around what money I had and the time I had. I was fortunate to have relatives outside of the Hagley Library in Delaware, in Pennsylvania. One of my aunts worked for DuPont, so she lived in the area. I didn't have to pay for hotels, they fed me and sheltered me.

More to your question, I was concerned about bringing this together in a holistic way. It was haphazard at first. The first chapter I wrote was the second chapter, which was essential to me. I wanted to figure out the structure of the book. It's not just about the Cold War and the military-industrial complex but about these crisis moments when it looks like a drawdown in the Cold War. There's a cut in defense spending or a foreign policy crisis in the form of Vietnam that looks like it will move the enterprise somehow.

I wanted to know what happened when people mobilized for the first time around the impact of the Cuban Missile Crisis and how it influenced the idea that we maybe shouldn't carry out a Cold War in the style of the 1950s. That was built around an arms race and brinkmanship, so how do we rethink how much money we're spending on that? The military and congressional folks are thinking along these terms, and labor is thinking along these terms,

and here is a moment where they all come together.

It wasn't like I had a blueprint. And I did not have a series of books that I referenced methodologically. Instead, I had to figure this out for myself and how it made sense to me, and if it did not work, it did not work. I stirred it again and again to figure it out. I knew what I wanted to tell and how the national story reinforced the local story.

JJ: It is interesting to reflect on how you built this telescoping narrative that reinforces events at the national and local levels. Just thinking about your aunt, who worked for DuPont, shows the ubiquity of this experience and how the military-industrial complex impacts daily lives.

MB: I think that's right, and people don't necessarily think it informs their politics. Even if it doesn't, it informs their material connections regarding what they extract from this industry. I think, in some ways, that forms their opinions about things. Maybe it is not related to politics, but it is related to their community and the fact their community is dependent upon this industry. That connection forces them to mobilize in certain ways, especially when their jobs or communities are threatened with losing funds.

JJ: Since we have spoken so much about your book, I think it is important to highlight that CENFAD was the venue for your second-ever book talk. What was that experience like?

MB: My first was at Wesleyan, and I did a few podcasts because the book came out in October 2020, right in the middle of Zoom, pre-vaccines, and the height of

COVID. So everything was online and on Zoom then.

I knew about CENFAD before coming to lecture, and I knew of Alan McPherson and the work that was being done there. I didn't know what to expect. Of course, you never really know what to expect. I didn't know if I would talk to five people or twenty. I was pleasantly surprised that it seemed to be more like forty. The room was packed, and there was a really interesting, eclectic group of people. That's the kind of work I think is crucial right now for anyone who studies formulations of the US in the world. It was an interdisciplinary group with people from political science, history, economics, and philosophy. We try to do that here at the Institute for Security Studies at Yale. We bring together political scientists, economists, and historians to discuss issues of security and foreign policy.

That was really fantastic. I think having that kind of community where you are all coming from different perspectives, and respective of those perspectives, is really cool. The act of giving the talk was also something I was pleased to do because I hadn't done it many times. When I got the email asking me to come give a talk I was more than thrilled. It was clear that this was a group of people who came at my topic from interesting perspectives respectfully, but also in a way that challenged what I was trying to say. Having those conversations is really important to me because I don't really find solace in

talking to the same five people who agree with the same five things I say.

CENFAD is one of those places that I think are increasingly rare, and it's important to hold steadfast to those institutions and try to build.

JJ: Thank you for that. With CENFAD in mind, could you describe more about your current position at Yale with the Brady-Johnson Program? What is that, and how does it work?

MB: I'm Co-Director of the Brady-Johnson Program. The program has been around for almost twenty-five years, starting in 2000. It was formed by Yale professors John Lewis Gaddis and Paul Kennedy, and Charlie Hill, who worked as a diplomat. The story goes that the three of them were talking about the Clinton

administration and NATO expansion, saying that there did not seem to be a grand strategy behind Clinton's foreign policy. He did not seem to understand that expanding NATO could lead to a host of repercussions that might not be good for US-Russian relations. After commiserating, they agreed that they needed to teach grand strategy.

The idea was to create a class to attract graduate students who would think these things through. They found that graduate students were not altogether interested in the topic because they were focused on narrow topics, as graduate school demands. So, they turned to undergrads, who were much more willing to take on the sort of broad thinking that they wanted to do. They

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decided that it shouldn't be a class but a year-long program, and that is where the program is today.

The program is for one year and starts in the spring running through the fall, with a summer component included. Students have to apply to get into the program. We select around twenty students for the program. We teach the original visions using classic strategy texts, like Thucydides and Clausewitz. That is what they were teaching twenty years ago, but the program has evolved since then.

Nothing that's good stays in its place, it should evolve. It shouldn't be static. Given that strategy has changed, our ideas of teaching strategy have changed. In the spring we teach Martin Luther King Jr. as a strategist, or Marx and Lenin as strategists. The students who apply to the program aren't just interested in military history. They're interested in military strategy, climate change, or labor policy. If they're interested in mass incarceration or gender violence in a conflict zone, these students wouldn't necessarily fall into the rubric of grand strategy. But they are taking the class and we're hoping to give students a bigger sense of what problems are and how to tackle them.

JJ: It is awesome to hear everything that you are doing in terms of education and programming. I know that you have had a member of the Temple history department there this year. What has it been like having a Temple student on board?

MB: Well, we have a Temple grad who is also currently assistant director of the program, Katie O'Connell. She's fantastic. We also have a current

Temple student, Graydon Dennison, who's great. What we like about what Graydon is doing, is that he's a pre-doctoral fellow. We try to bring in people who are doing important work on US foreign relations, but might not necessarily have an Ivy League background and try to give them an opportunity to get immersed in what's happening here.

We're trying to broaden our understanding of what we do at the ISS outside of Yale. He has been fantastic and has become part of a ten- or eleven-person core we have here in grand strategy. We'd like to keep the CENFAD/Temple connection going. So, if you have more Temple students you want to send to me, please tell them to apply.

JJ: I'm sure our students would like to read that. And I'm sure that seeing one of our current students there would encourage others to apply. Thank you for all of this information. I just have one final question. Do you have any upcoming works currently in production?

MB: I just published an edited volume with Daniel Bessner called *Rethinking US World Power: Domestic Histories of US Foreign Relations*. That's an edited volume that just came out with Palgrave Macmillan a couple of weeks ago. I have a book coming out with political scientist Van Jackson that's on what's called "the rivalry peril," or how great power competition threatens peace and democracy. That will be published by Yale University Press sometime in the fall or winter. Then, I am working on a proposal for a book on a history of the War on Terror. I'm trying to take the entirety of the War on

Terror, actually pushing back against the idea that it began in 2001, but instead it began in the 1990s. That's the next project, and it is still in the research phase. Hopefully it will come out before 2030.

JJ: Well, congratulations on your recent and upcoming publications. I wish you the best of luck researching the War on Terror. Thank you again for taking this time.

MB: It was a pleasure, Joe.

Dr. Brenes's lecture can be viewed [here](#).

A Conversation with Dr. Stephanie Freeman



*This interview with Dr. Stephanie Freeman was conducted a week before her visit to CENFAD. We discuss her recent publication, *Dreams for a Decade*, and her current position at the Department of State's Office of the Historian.*

Stephanie Freeman: Hey, Joseph!

Joseph Johnson: Hey, Dr. Freeman, thank you for joining me today.

SF: Thank you for asking me!

JJ: Of course! Could you briefly summarize your research for our readers?

SF: Before we proceed, I will offer a disclaimer that “the views expressed here are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of State or the U.S. Government.” I’d also like to add that the book we’ll discuss was