ABSTRACT  This essay is part of a roundtable titled “The Scholarship, Influence, and Legacy of David F. Schmitz.” The roundtable includes an introduction from Andrew L. Johns; essays by Vanessa Walker, Steven J. Brady, Kimber M. Quinney, and Kathryn C. Statler; and a response from David F. Schmitz.  KEYWORDS  U.S. foreign relations, Cold War, historiography, David F. Schmitz

In his presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1950, Samuel Eliot Morison asserted that “No person without an inherent loyalty to truth, a high degree of intellectual honesty, and a sense of balance, can be a great or even a good historian. Truth about the past,” he continued, “is the essence of history and historical biography, the thing that distinguishes them from every other branch of literature. . . . The fundamental question is, ‘What actually happened, and why?’”1 Morison practiced what he preached. The author or editor of nearly sixty books, he taught history at Harvard University for over forty years and was the recipient of two Pulitzer Prizes, two Bancroft Prizes, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He stands as one of the most distinguished and decorated American historians of the twentieth century.2


2. Samuel Eliot Morison won the Pulitzer Prize for Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1942) and for John Paul Jones: A Sailor’s Biography (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1959). He received the Bancroft Prize for The Rising Sun in the Pacific (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1948) and for The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). In addition to the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which he received in 1964 from President Lyndon B. Johnson, Morison achieved the rank of Rear Admiral in the U.S. Navy, received the Legion of Merit for exceptionally meritorious conduct during World War II, and received numerous other awards and honorary degrees.
While he would almost certainly demur and reject the comparison due to his deep sense of humility, David F. Schmitz should be recognized as a historian whose career and legacy measure up to the standard set by Morison in his presidential address. Throughout his stellar career as a scholar, a teacher, a mentor, and a friend to countless undergraduates, graduate students, and colleagues in the profession, Schmitz has epitomized what it means to be an engaged intellectual and has created a profound and lasting legacy. The essays that follow in this roundtable demonstrate the significance and depth of his influence on the historiography of U.S. foreign relations and on those who have had the privilege of working with and knowing him. Schmitz’s “loyalty to the truth” reflects his status as an elite historian; his integrity, character, and commitment to serving those with whom he interacts distinguish him as an outstanding person.

For those who have not had the pleasure of knowing David Schmitz personally—as all of the contributors to this roundtable have—a little background is in order. As a graduate student at Rutgers University, David worked with one of the preeminent historians in the field of U.S. foreign relations, Lloyd C. Gardner. He earned his doctorate in 1985, completing a dissertation which examined U.S. policy toward fascist Italy from 1922 to 1940. He then went on to teach for over three decades at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, retiring from teaching in 2018 as the Robert Allen Skotheim Chair of History, a position to which he was originally appointed in 1995 and continues to hold. For some scholars, teaching at a small (1,500 students) liberal arts college would militate against an active research agenda as they embraced undergraduate teaching and advising and lacked the more robust resources to which faculty at research universities have access. Yet not only is Schmitz an extraordinarily popular teacher at Whitman, but also is he a remarkably prodigious scholar. The author or editor of ten books on the history of U.S. foreign relations along with scores of articles, book chapters, and reviews, his imprint on the field and the trajectory of its scholarship is undeniable. Schmitz has received numerous honors throughout his career, including the Robert A. Fluno Award for Distinguished Teaching.

in Social Science, the G. Thomas Edwards Award for Excellence in Teaching and Scholarship, and the Burlington Northern Foundation Faculty Achievement Award.

Many contemporary historians devote their careers to a narrowly defined chronological period or concentrate on a specific subject. This focus should not come as a surprise given the desperate need to publish, the alarming and growing scarcity of resources to support faculty research, and the increasingly siloed nature of dissertations and monographs in history. Indeed, the historical profession has come to resemble medicine, with highly specialized practitioners who produce research that dives deeply into a topic but is increasingly myopic. Not so with David Schmitz. Rather than occupying a discrete niche in the field or concentrating on a particular historiographical question, Schmitz has instead resembled a historical polymath who displays keen insights, expertise, and understanding of a wide swath of the history of U.S. foreign relations. From his first monograph on the United States and fascist Italy, Schmitz has explored the U.S. role in the world during the entire span of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As such, he is a throwback to earlier generations of scholars of U.S. foreign relations like Samuel Flagg Bemis, Alexander DeConde, Norman Graebner, and Walter LaFeber, whose scholarly interests and publications reflected an impressive temporal and topical breadth.

Beyond the broad scope of his research, Schmitz’s scholarship contains substantial connective tissue in terms of the themes and ideas that he explores. As Vanessa Walker discusses in her essay included in this roundtable, Schmitz’s publications reflect a “constant questioning of democracy’s role in U.S. foreign policy,” which she argues is “at the core” of his work. This focus on democracy and democratic principles also engages with the nexus of domestic politics and foreign policy, a key but often overlooked approach in the field, which Kathryn Statler discusses in her contribution to the


5. Samuel Flagg Bemis wrote books on Jay’s Treaty, Pinckney’s Treaty, U.S.–Latin American relations, and John Quincy Adams; Alexander DeConde’s scholarship engaged Herbert Hoover and Latin America, George Washington’s diplomacy, presidential machismo, and the role of the U.S. secretary of state; Norman Graebner’s publications include books on the Versailles Treaty, the end of the Cold War, U.S. foreign affairs and the founders, and nineteenth-century U.S. diplomacy; and Walter LaFeber wrote on American expansionism, the origins of the Cold War, the Vietnam War, U.S.-Japanese relations, and Michael Jordan and global capitalism.
roundtable. Other familiar and overlapping themes in Schmitz’s work include how ideology and ideas influence the evolution of U.S. foreign policy; the important role of human rights and U.S. values—whether as a factor in policymaking or in their absence—in the U.S. engagement with the world; American internationalism, which Steven Brady considers in his essay; and the congressional abdication of its constitutionally defined responsibilities in foreign policy, just to name a few. Regardless of the topic, all of Schmitz’s research forces the reader to rethink their assumptions about the past and take his arguments seriously. When one considers the major historiographical developments, arguments, and themes of the past three decades in the field of U.S. foreign relations, it is incredible to realize Schmitz’s substantive contributions to so many of those conversations.

From a methodological perspective, David Schmitz is the quintessential “archive rat.” The meticulous nature of his archival research defines his scholarship on every page of every publication. His ability to shape a complex narrative from disparate and voluminous documentary sources is...
beyond impressive, as Statler notes in her essay, because he is able to effortlessly integrate scattered material to paint a picture for the reader that places them in the Paris peace negotiations, the White House Situation Room, or the private conversations between a president and his closest advisers. Schmitz weaves the disparate threads of the historical record into a coherent and convincing analytical tapestry, allowing the facts to speak for themselves and to explain not only what happened but also why events unfolded as they did. Yet, unlike some scholars whose research and arguments outpace their ability to write, Schmitz’s prose never reads like a turgid or forced series of connected quotations. As Statler notes, Schmitz is a “master of his craft.”

Schmitz has also made significant contributions using biography as a lens to understand U.S. foreign relations, as Steven Brady observes in his essay. In books on Richard Nixon, Brent Scowcroft, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Henry Stimson, Schmitz uses the lives, experiences, and choices of these key decision-makers to illuminate the making, implementation, and ramifications of U.S. engagement with the world across more than eight decades. For Schmitz, individuals matter and help to bring the past to life. Yet he never falls into the trap that captures so many biographers: identifying too closely with their subject or becoming entranced with the person rather than remaining cognizant of the entire historical milieu in which he or she lived. Schmitz manages to keep a professional distance, allowing his subjects’ idiosyncrasies, perceptions, and decisions to speak for themselves through his painstakingly constructed and elegantly written analytical narratives. In doing so, he accepts Virginia Woolf’s challenge that the biographer’s “sense of truth must be alive and on tiptoe...By telling us the true facts, by sifting the little from the big, and shaping the whole so that we perceive the outline, the biographer does more to stimulate the imagination than any poet or novelist save the very greatest.”


Perhaps Schmitz’s most notable contributions to the field of U.S. foreign relations have come in his work on the relationship between the United States and right-wing dictators, including one of the best book titles of all time, *Thank God They’re on Our Side.* As Schmitz traces the U.S. involvement with autocratic leaders like Fulgencio Batista, Anastasio Somoza, Ngo Dinh Diem, and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, he highlights the cognitive dissonance between the lofty ideals and rhetoric about liberal democracy that U.S. leaders have promoted both at home and abroad and the reality of U.S. support of repressive, illiberal, and authoritarian regimes. Schmitz makes it clear that the pursuit of international order and the embrace of reflexive anti-communism allowed successive U.S. administrations to rationalize and justify their involvement with dictators whose only redeeming quality was their support of U.S. foreign policy goals. In his usual meticulous and thoughtful way, Schmitz lays bare the contradictions of U.S. policy over the course of seven decades and demonstrates how these relationships, forged in the crucible of expediency, would have profound and tragic results for the United States and the rest of the world. These two volumes represent Schmitz at the peak of his analytical and narrative prowess and continue to shape the historical conversation on these issues.

Historical figures frequently display concern about their legacies, worrying how history will judge their actions, decisions, and reputations. To understand this phenomenon, one need only look at the way that presidential libraries and foundations make concerted efforts to shape the narrative about their presidents’ administrations, or how presidents spend their post–White House years justifying their decisions and actions. Yet as Kimber Quinney...
observes in her essay, David Schmitz actually has a discernable legacy as an academic, both in terms of his scholarship and with those whose lives and careers he has influenced. Walker is a perfect example. As Quinney notes, Walker’s academic career began as an undergraduate at Whitman, and she and David eventually co-authored an article based on their common interest in the role of human rights in U.S. foreign policy.12 With Schmitz’s support and encouragement, she went on to earn a doctorate in history from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and she now assigns Schmitz’s books to her own students at Amherst College. Statler also touches on Schmitz’s legacy, discussing how her students reacted so strongly and positively to Schmitz’s work on the Vietnam War and the Tet Offensive.13 And Brady describes how David’s scholarship and generosity, especially with his time, have benefitted both his students’ experience in the classroom over the years and his own career.

On a personal level, I can confidently state that without David Schmitz, my career as a historian would have evolved much differently. I first met him during graduate school when we participated on the same panel at the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association conference in Maui, Hawai‘i, in 1999. It was and will remain the only time that I dressed more formally than he did: I was in a suit (and those who know me can testify to the rarity of that occurrence); David wore the most outlandish Hawaiian shirt I had ever seen. But beyond our respective sartorial choices, his comments on my paper displayed keen insights—many of which eventually made their way into my subsequent book—and he took the time after the panel to take me to lunch and spend several hours talking about our scholarly interests, the profession, and life in general. Since that conference, we have remained good friends and I have valued his advice, his input on my scholarship, and—more recently—his willingness to write essays for the journal I edit. More than most of the scholars I have encountered in over twenty-five years in the profession, David Schmitz has had a positive and lasting influence on my career, and that is a debt that I can never truly repay.

The second century A.D. historian Lucian wrote that the ideal historian should be:

fearless, incorruptible, free, a friend of free expression and the truth, intent on calling a fig a fig... sparing no one, showing neither pity nor shame nor obsequiousness, an impartial judge, well disposed to all men up to the point of not giving one side more than its due, in his books a stranger and man without a country, independent, subject to no sovereign, not reckoning what this or that man will think, but stating the facts.14

Throughout his career, David Schmitz has lived up to this lofty standard, producing a corpus of scholarship grounded in copious research and keen analysis that will challenge and influence scholars for the foreseeable future while simultaneously having an incalculable influence on his students and colleagues in the profession. He represents the model of an insightful scholar, engaged teacher, indispensable mentor, collegial colleague, and caring friend, and his legacy at Whitman College and in the historical profession will resonate for decades to come. The essays that follow describe these traits and his influence in much greater detail, and all of the authors come to the same conclusion: thank God he’s on our side.

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