

## *The pleasure of the unplanned life and the unexpected turn*

When Tom Seymour invited me to write something for the Class of 1964 Newsletter, I was honored to be asked and pleased to take on the assignment. Tom suggested that I might want to share some reflections on my service as president of Dartmouth; alternatively, he proposed that I describe what I have been doing in the last few years. I decided to focus on the latter in this essay.

While service as Dartmouth president was one of the greatest experiences I can imagine and I enjoyed it immensely, I knew it was important for the College—and for me—to move on once I stepped down. Susan and I have a great affection for President Jim Kim and Doctor Younsook Lim. We are happy to applaud the many accomplishments of the Kim administration. We do miss our colleagues, our contacts with alumni/ae, and our many interactions with students, but we have tried to proceed to the next phase of our lives and this essay will reflect upon that experience.

In June 2009 when I stepped down from the Dartmouth presidency, many people, including my adoptive classmates at the 45<sup>th</sup> reunion, asked me what I was going to do next. I acknowledged that I didn't really have a plan. I often thought at that time, defensively perhaps, about my frequent advice to Dartmouth students: Lives are to be lived rather than planned. I told students that they need always to consider what comes next and where they think that they want to go, but I would urge them always to protect the flexibility to take advantage of unexpected encounters and opportunities.

But of course what might pass for good advice for a twenty-year old might not be as good for a soon-to-be seventy-year old!

My problem was that I had no real plans laid out. People asked if I was going to write a book. I said no I was not going to do that. Shelves were filled with books written by former college and university presidents reflecting upon their experiences and scolding current presidents for not doing those things that the writer had not done either. When the question of writing or teaching history came up, I acknowledged that I was too long out of my field. I quipped that I had higher standards for Dartmouth faculty than I could meet!

Susan and I moved to Sunapee in June 2009. We knew that we would travel some more—actually, we would travel less but now our travel would be for sightseeing and pleasure! We would see our seven grandchildren more than we had. I also knew that I would want to increase some of my work on behalf of veterans.

I had accumulated leave dating back to a sabbatical I had to cancel in 1989 when President James Freedman and the faculty search committee invited me to serve as Dean of the Faculty. That deferred sabbatical, plus others earned over the next 20 years, provided me with a wonderful opportunity. The Board of Trustees generously provided an office in a college building south of the post office. I set out, with an assistant, to sort through papers and to prepare for my oral history interview sessions. I also had agreed to deliver two lectures that first year, one on the liberal arts in October 2009 at

Seoul National University and a second one in February 2010, the Jefferson Lecture at the University of California, Berkeley.

Now, nearly three years later, Susan and I have gone to Sanibel, Florida for a week or two each winter. We have been visiting Sanibel for 20 years and still enjoy the quiet and warmth of that special place. In 2010 we drove down and were able to visit friends and grandchildren along the way and to have a wonderful day at Monticello—a visit too long delayed for an American historian but one that was fully enjoyed. Since 2009 we have walked along the walls of the Grand Canyon and on the sands of Omaha Beach in Normandy. We have been in the Coliseum in Rome and walked to the top of Mont Saint-Michel in France. We have sat in sidewalk cafes in Paris, Rome, and Florence and along the canals in Venice. We have enjoyed Sonoma wineries and French chateaus and Broadway plays. We have walked along Cemetery Ridge at Gettysburg and visited and reflected at the 9/11 Memorial. We have sailed on a Maine Windjammer and we have savored 1000 marvelous sunsets in all seasons from our hilltop home in Sunapee.

Susan has become involved as a trustee at Colby-Sawyer College and we both admire the school and its leadership. She is on the board of the New Hampshire Humanities Council and continues her engagement with the Norris Cotton Cancer Center, including her fundraising efforts for the annual Prouty events there. She has recently signed on as a docent for the Hood Museum and is enjoying that training program.

I have been to Korea on two occasions to present lectures and to participate in programs there. I spent Veterans Day of 2009 at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington where I was one of the speakers. In that address I spoke about two names on the Wall, the young son of a miner whom I had known back in my hometown of Galena, Illinois, who died on Hamburger Hill in May 1969, and Billy Smoyer of the Dartmouth Class of 1967 who died in a rice paddy in An Hoa in May 1968. These comments have been subsequently distributed by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund.

In 2010 I observed Veterans Day in Seoul, Korea with veterans of the First Marine Division who had fought at the Chosin Reservoir sixty years earlier. I spoke at Yonsei University about American veterans of the Korean War. On Veterans Day 2011 I was the Rockefeller Center Lecturer and spoke about the history of American recognition of war veterans.

These Veterans' Day lectures represent well the essence of how I have spent the last three years. I have, without really thinking about it, become a historian again. When I was invited to deliver the Jefferson Lecture at Berkeley the faculty committee had hoped that I would talk about my work with wounded veterans. At that time I had already been visiting hospitals for nearly five years. These visits involved bed-to-bed conversations with seriously wounded young men and women. They always moved me and inspired me. I had been involved in establishing a counseling program at a few of the major hospitals to encourage wounded veterans to continue their education. I told the Berkeley program committee that I would be happy to talk about this experience but that I was a historian and I wished to understand better the ways in which Americans had thought about and

treated those who had fought our wars historically. As I got into the research for the lecture, I was a bit surprised to discover that there were no standard sources that surveyed this subject. I needed to do more research than I anticipated. When I expressed my disappointment at this circumstance, someone said to me that I shouldn't complain but should just write the book myself.

Even though I had regularly assured those who cared that I was not planning to write a book, this was one of those unexpected--and wonderful--turns that life can take, even for a 70-year old. I decided that maybe I would write a book on this subject. I engaged an agent and a few presses expressed an interest in my proposal. Part of the interest was curiosity, I am sure. Here was a historian but one who had been an Ivy League president and a Marine—the only time the latter two experiences had ever overlapped. And I had been visiting military hospitals and had been working with veterans of the current wars. These experiences contributed to some observations and suggestions about the current state of affairs, observations and suggestions that would be freely expressed in my writing. Public Affairs Books signed me on to do a book—and even gave me an advance. All of my previous publishing was essentially with university presses and I had never before had an advance. So I gave the money to various groups supporting veterans.

Over the last three years I have been reading about and reflecting upon America's wars, from the Revolution to Afghanistan. I have studied how we have recruited wartime armies and I have especially been interested in knowing how we have looked upon those who have served and sacrificed. I have written a history describing this and reflecting upon it. This required a

great deal of reading and research. I had not been active as a historian for 20 years and even then I had not been a military historian.

The book introduction includes some autobiographical elements, starting with my growing up in Galena, Illinois during World War II, with my father serving in the army in Europe, my enlistment in the Marine Corps at age 17, and my student days at the University of Wisconsin during the Vietnam War. I describe coming to Dartmouth in 1969 and the Vietnam War tensions on campus then and discuss my trips to military hospitals over the last seven years. I describe my own evolving thinking on ROTC. Despite these personal reflections, the book is history rather than memoir, but history with an opinion!

Three different Dartmouth students have worked as my research assistants. Last spring someone at the library told one of the students that I had more books checked out than anyone else. I could believe it. I had books in my office and at home, on shelves and in stacks on the floor. We worked the web for casualty data and I followed news accounts. I visited with some leaders of veterans groups to get information and insights from them. I continued visiting the wounded in hospitals, now over two dozen times since 2005. And I sent a draft manuscript out to historians, political scientists, and retired military officers with an interest in history and/or strategic policy. They provided important criticism and warm encouragement.

Just a few weeks ago I signed off on the manuscript. It is in production. It was a moment of mixed feelings. I was pleased to have finished the book and I was also troubled to know that it was about to be set in indelible ink.

For a compulsive tinkerer this was an intimidating thought! My book, *Those Who Have Borne the Battle: A History of America's Wars and Those Who Fought Them*, will be released in late April. I have already scheduled some appearances and presentations on the book. I had told the editor of the press when we first signed the contract that I respected their interest in a financial return, but that my interest was as an old teacher—I wanted a large lectern to talk about war and our obligation to those who fight our wars, an increasingly small and unrepresentative sector of our population.

Just as I was finishing my book and wondering what would come next, I was contacted by a senior civilian official at the Pentagon with a challenge. He asked me if I could help to establish a counseling program in several hospitals that would provide effective support for wounded warriors. The program that I had worked with the American Council on Education (ACE) to establish in 2007 was to be the model for these. I was interested—and ready. So in late January, accompanied by the deputy undersecretary responsible for the Wounded Warrior program at the Pentagon, I spent a day in meetings at the Pentagon, at the Walter Reed/Bethesda Hospital, and the Dupont Circle offices of ACE. I hope we have set in motion a study that will lead to a proposal and plan. And I have already signed on to help raise money to support this—there is general agreement that we should develop this as a private program rather than a Department of Defense initiative. I am enthused about taking on this project because I believe it is critically important.

As you know, your adopted classmate is a couple of years older than most members of the Class of 1964. As a result, I can assure you now that turning

70 is no big deal—I did it six weeks after I stepped out of Parkhurst in 2009. I encourage you to assume that even at this new marker, lives remain things to be lived rather than planned! Remember, when I stepped down from the presidency I assured all who asked that, no, I was not going to return to the classroom. As I write this I am preparing to teach a class next winter on the subject of America’s wars and those who have fought them. I came here as a historian and now, with the completed book and the pending course, each unplanned, I will finish my Dartmouth service as a historian. And who knows what will come next?

James Wright

Class of 1964a

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