EDWARD BERKOWITZ

Ernest R. May

Ernest R. May, who came to Harvard in 1954 as a twenty-five-year-old UCLA Ph.D., taught history there for the next fifty-five years.[1]

Specializing in diplomatic history, he made his mark as early as 1959 with the publication of *The World War and American Isolation, 1914–1917.* This book won scholarly prizes. It also garnered a *New York Times* review by Samuel Flagg Bemis, who proclaimed it "the most thorough study yet presented of American politics and diplomacy vis-à-vis the European war, 1914–1917."[2] At the same time, May emerged as a leading departmental and university citizen, eventually serving as department chair and, in the perilous period after 1969, still only forty years old, as the dean of Harvard College.[3]

Unlike many of his colleagues who shared his interests in politics and public policy, May never left Harvard. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., another celebrated member of the Harvard history department, took a post in the Kennedy White House and never returned to the Harvard faculty. Similar things happened to McGeorge Bundy and Henry Kissinger (although not to economist John Kenneth Galbraith, who served on the margins of the Kennedy administration and made his way back to Cambridge). Once engaged in the realms of policymaking at the highest levels, they discovered that the experience changed them and altered the course of their careers. Ernest May, although a prominent consultant to the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency, never saw a reason to sever his Harvard connection, in the manner of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and cross over completely to the realm of public policy. Instead, he remained behind in the academy and taught generations of students how to combine the study of history and the conduct of public policy. Through such works as *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers*, he became arguably the most influential twentieth-century academic in the field of history and public policy.

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May did all of the conventional academic things superbly well. He mentored generations of graduate students in diplomatic history, such as Akira Iriye, who became a president of the American Historical Association. He lectured, in an era when lecture as performance went far toward establishing a professor's reputation, in a way that commanded the audience's attention, often speaking without notes to a packed lecture hall. He played the role of public intellectual, writing on such timely subjects as the president's role as commander in chief (1960) and American imperialism (1968).[4] He advocated that the government's records should be open to scholars, and he proved ahead of his time in his insistence that diplomatic history should be written from a multiarchival, multinational perspective.

Shy by nature, he conducted himself, as one of his students noted, without "a hint of arrogance or pretension."[5] He was laconic in his speech and in his writing, with a spare and unornamented writing style that nonetheless included perceptive character sketches and quick flashes of insight. In a book about the Monroe Doctrine (1975), for example, May described English statesman George Canning as looking "older than his years. His hairline had receded and he had begun to grow stout. Though his eyes could still flash, they often showed strain and weariness, and the small mouth that still so frequently curled around cutting epigrams now seemed to be set in a natural pout."[6] His writing, despite these literary touches, often took on a Socratic tone, much as if he were leading a seminar through some complicated historiographic question. He was never strident. The book reviewer for the *New York Times* described him as "the most courteous disputant I have encountered in recent historical discussions."[7]

Despite his impeccable academic credentials, May was not a conventional member of the academy. For one thing, he spent significant amounts of time in Washington, where, among other projects, he prepared a history of the strategic arms competition between 1945 and 1972 for the Office of the Secretary of Defense and served as a senior consultant to the Senate committee investigating the Central Intelligence Agency in the 1970s. At the end of his career, he advised the 9/11 Commission on its report. Much of his work for the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency remained classified and never reached the general public. He did this work largely as a public service, in the tradition of colleague William Langer, who spent the war at the Office of Strategic Services (as did Arthur Schlesinger Jr.) and later helped to set up the Central Intelligence Agency.

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Unlike many of his departmental colleagues, May reached beyond the history department and collaborated with political scientists and others interested in such questions as why the results of public policy so seldom matched the original intentions. Along the way, he became involved with Harvard's Institute of Politics, met political scientist Richard Neustadt, and started a notable partnership. They had complementary interests and skills. Neustadt, a noted expert on the presidency, who had famously advised John F. Kennedy during the transition period after the 1960 election, practiced political science, but with a sympathetic eye toward history. He stressed in his writing that the formal powers of the office mattered less to a president than did the less tangible power to persuade. May's scholarship also focused on the president, but his history showed an appreciation for the institutional factors of interest to political scientists. When writing about the Monroe Doctrine, for example, May noted that "the relationship between government structure and foreign policy should command more attention than it has from historians, political scientists, official analysts and others who write about international affairs."[8]

By the 1970s, now colleagues in Harvard's new Kennedy School of Government, Neustadt and May started to teach a course on the uses of history. The audience was neither Harvard undergraduates nor history graduate students but rather midcareer civil servants or senior executives. Neustadt and May offered these experienced policymakers practical advice on how they might use historical methods to improve the quality of the decisions they made. The course started as an experimental part-semester seminar and, as the confidence of the instructors in the material grew, became a full-fledged offering in the Kennedy School curriculum. At the end of the 1970s, Neustadt and May received a substantial grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities that allowed them to prepare more case studies for use in the classroom and to take steps to export the course to other schools and other universities. In 1982, for example, the two hosted a Cambridge gathering of historians, including mental health policy expert Gerald Grob and presidential scholar Joan Hoff Wilson, to demonstrate the methods they used in the course. They also made their many case studies available to instructors at other schools.

For May, teaching led to publishing. He wrote two significant books on the subject of history's application to public policy. *"Lessons" of the Past* appeared in 1973 and served as a sort of rough draft for the larger book that he would later publish with Neustadt. He argued that policymakers already employed history in their deliberations, but that they tended to do so badly.

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They seized upon the first thing that came to mind, without stopping to think whether a particular analogy fit the case or whether it might be misleading.

The book contained numerous examples of how policymakers stumbled forward while looking backward toward the past. Americans planning for the end of World War II, for example, "were captives of an unanalyzed faith that the future would be like the recent past." As a consequence, they "visualized World War II as parallel to World War I."[9] A concerned President Roosevelt believed that the end of the war would mean a return to isolationism and to the depression conditions of prewar America. That prevented him from considering "alternate shapes that the future might take." When Truman took office, the bureaucracy fed him a picture of an "ambitious, ruthless, and deceitful Soviet Union" that could not be trusted as a partner in the postwar world.[10] Truman prided himself on his reading of history, but he read selectively and therefore missed examples that ran counter to his preconceived notions. Truman and his advisers failed to subject their history to "deliberate scrutiny and analysis."[11] When the Korean War came along, Truman saw the events of 1950 as analogous to those in the 1930s, without stopping to consider the similarities and the differences between the two periods. Hence he disregarded earlier advice he had received that Korea was of little value to the nation's defense. Similarly, those who advocated the bombing of the North Vietnamese in a later war did not remember that such bombing had had little effect in dampening England's resolve to pursue World War II. Instead, sophisticated analysts who would have been "scandalized by an inelegant economic model" made use of historical analogies without regard for the "inherent logic of their assertions."[12]

The book allowed May to use some of the material he had gathered in clandestine settings and to set down some of the lessons he had gleaned from his military service during the Korean War. His intended audience was not his fellow historians but rather the community of policymakers. He was writing, in effect, for his new Kennedy School colleagues, taking full advantage of his proximity to high-powered academics such as Cuban missile crisis expert Graham Allison and international relations guru Henry Kissinger and of his contacts with high-level former government officials such as Robert Lovett.

Although he continued to pursue his work as a diplomatic historian and a Washington consultant, May then entered into a formal collaboration with Neustadt in which the two tried to write a simple primer on how to apply history to public policy. They exchanged drafts and pared down their already lean prose so as to make the book fit for a trade press and a general audience.

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The collaboration with Neustadt enabled May to move beyond describing the problem of the misapplication of history to public policy and to begin offering some practical solutions. It also permitted May to expand the number of cases he could use to illustrate his points and in particular to tap into Neustadt's knowledge of domestic policy, as well as the lessons gleaned from Neustadt's stints in the Truman White House and as a consultant to agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services.

Thinking in Time, which appeared in 1986, might be the book most often assigned in courses on history and public policy. The book functions as a how-to guide to policy, filled with lots of cases and examples, rather than as a historical narrative. It demonstrates the authors' impressive ability to synthesize complex problems and produce pithy solutions, captured by simple slogans.

Neustadt and May argue that, when faced with a situation, policymakers should determine what is known, unknown, and presumed about it. They propose that any analogies that might arise—the swine flu episode during the Ford administration as similar to the great flu outbreak at the time of World War I, for example—should be carefully examined for the likenesses and differences in the things being compared. Next they suggest that policy practitioners do an issue history and only then should they identify policy options. Once these options have been identified, policymakers should analyze the presumptions behind the pros and cons and then ask what the odds of success for a suggested policy option are and finally ask what would it take for policymakers to change their minds. In addition, the authors offer an array of ways for policymakers to place strangers whom they might encounter in their government service and ways for analysts to place whole bureaucracies, rather than single individuals, into an appropriate context. They manage to make the application of history to public policy look simple.[13]

The book's subtitle—the uses of history for decision makers—indicated Neustadt and May's desire not to waste their time on small fry but rather to direct their advice to the people who mattered. Although they sought a general audience for their book, they wanted to reach people at the highest levels of government making key decisions. It was very much a view of public policy from Harvard and the Kennedy School that did little to comprehend the working routines of a mid-level bureaucrat engaged in a repetitive task. Some of the characters who appeared in the book, such as Reagan aide Richard Darman, and Carter official Hale Champion, were actually Kennedy School colleagues of Neustadt and May. When they wrote about the Vietnam War, for example, they could identify a McGeorge Bundy memo as "bearing his

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hallmark: lean bold prose."[14] May recognized this hallmark since he had received many memos from Bundy when Bundy was dean of the faculty at Harvard.

At its worst, then, the book suffered from a claustrophobic view of public policy that elevated Harvard men and denigrated others. Hence, the members of the executive committee during the Cuban missile crisis "had a high average of mind" and a well-deserved reputation as the best and the brightest, whereas Jimmy Carter, a mere Naval Academy man and a peanut farmer, lacked curiosity and had an awareness of history that was "limited."[15] Neustadt and May did not pause to ask whether structural factors related to the economy and other concerns of the 1970s, rather than a cast of mind that viewed policies as self-executing blueprints, doomed Carter. In general, the authors focused on strategic decisions of the Cuban missile crisis or Mayaguez incident sort, rather than on more complex policy questions that unfolded over longer periods of time, such as the appropriate design of a national health insurance program.

Nor did Neustadt and May always get the details of their case studies right. Wanting to include a domestic policy counterweight to the Cuban missile crisis "success" story, one that was more recent in time and involved a Republican rather than a Democratic president, they seized on the 1983 Social Security "rescue" law that saved the program from short-term bankruptcy. Writing so close to the events, they misunderstood what happened on the Greenspan Commission that preceded the law. They transformed what was patently a failure into a success because they were not privy to the ways that the commission broke down and failed to reach agreement. The details of the last-minute deal between Tip O'Neill and Ronald Reagan that produced the legislation were obscure to them. Furthermore, the authors, not conversant with the inner world of Social Security policy, missed the long history of using advisory councils to bring about policy change in that field. Of course, they could not see how the 1983 law, like the 1964 presidential election, proved to be a springboard for conservative alternatives to Social Security that came into play during the 1990s. In this case, then, the history advocates lacked historical and institutional perspective.[16]

Indeed, much of the book now has a dated quality. The discussion about the placing strangers, for example, seems self-evident to a generation of historians sensitized to considerations of race, class, and gender. We know, without really needing Neustadt and May to point it out to us, that Martin Luther King Jr. was not just a middle-class professional but also a black middle-class professional with a special sensitivity to racial matters. An updated version of

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the book would be helpful. Unfortunately, neither of the authors is around to undertake the work. Richard Neustadt died in 2003 and Ernest May followed in 2009.

Then again, the authors sought not to change the world but only to bring about marginal improvement in the conduct of public policy. If, for example, they failed to understand how structural factors presented Jimmy Carter with terrible policy choices, they would insist that it still behooved him to make the best choice. The Neustadt and May methods might have helped Carter or anyone else in the White House during the 1970s.

After May published *Thinking in Time,* he incorporated its basic insights into his subsequent work in diplomatic history. At the beginning of the new millennium, he produced a long account of the fall of France during World War II that, in a characteristic manner, used French, German, and English sources to inform the narrative. The book recognized that Germany's 1940 victory over France was neither preordained nor self-evident. Although the French enjoyed superior manpower and resources, they made bad use of history. "France was handicapped by having been the victor in the Great War," writes May. "[L]ike an extremely profitable corporation in the 1980's such as General Motors or IBM, France had an almost religious faith in the principles that it believed to have been keys to its past success." In general, the English and the French could simply not believe that Hitler "might actually want another Great War."[17]

A major breakdown in the American intelligence system that led to the tragedy of 9/11 gave May one final chance to put his historical insights to use. His friend and collaborator Philip Zelikow became the executive director of the presidential commission established to investigate the tragedy. As an adviser to the commission, May joined Zelikow in urging that it produce a "professional-quality narrative history." In other words, the commission, following the line of reasoning in *Thinking in Time,* should not just make recommendations but instead should strive to tell the full story of what happened on 9/11. The recommendations would then follow from the lessons that the history revealed. The effort proved a spectacular success, leading to a report that sold in the millions and earned praise from John Updike (another Harvard man) for the felicity of its prose. It marked a triumph of what May called "the principles of historiography allied to the resources of government."[18] It also served as a fitting memorial to Ernest May and his innovative work in a field that he helped to create.

George Washington University

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NOTES

1. Alexander F. Remington, "Harvard Historian Advised 9/11 Panel," *Washington Post*, 11 June 2009.

2. Samuel Flagg Bemis, "Maneuvers for Peace Before the Yanks Went Over There," *New York Times*, 25 January 1959, p. BR3.

3. "Authority on Diplomatic History Named Harvard College's Dean," *New York Times*, 24 August 1969, 71.

4. *The Ultimate Decision: The President as Commander in Chief*, edited and with an introduction by Ernest R. May (New York, 1959); May, *American Imperialism: A Speculative Essay* (Boston, 1968). Interestingly enough, May's book on the president appeared at the same time as Richard Neustadt's *Presidential Power* (New York, 1960).

5. Aviel Roshwald, Professor of History, Georgetown University, in "Ernest R. May 1929–2009: An Appreciation." on the National Security Archive Web site, *http://www.gwu.edu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSEBB277/index.htm*. (Accessed 1 March 2010).

6. May, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 115.

7. Charles Poore, "Books of the Times," *New York Times*, 8 December 1960, 33.

8. May, *Making of the Monroe Doctrine*, 257.

9. May, *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1973), 7.

10. Ibid., 30.

11. Ibid., 51.

12. Ibid., 121.

13. Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York, 1986).

14. Ibid., 80.

15. Ibid., 16, 113.

16. I am not a completely disinterested party here, since I have written on this topic. See Edward D. Berkowitz, *Robert Ball and the Politics of Social Security* (Madison, 2003).

17. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York, 2000), 449, 453.

18. May, "When Government Writes History: A Memoir of the 9/11 Commission," *The New Republic*, 23 May 2005, 30–35.

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