

In Memoriam: Gaddis Smith

On December 2, 2022, Gaddis Smith died in New Haven, CT, at the age of 89. Smith was an acclaimed historian of U.S. foreign relations and a ubiquitous and legendary figure at Yale University, an institution to which he devoted most of his life. He shaped generations of historians and lectured to countless Yale undergraduates, a group that included some future national leaders. To my own incalculable benefit, he was my graduate mentor.



George Gaddis Smith was born in Newark, NJ, on December 9, 1932, and raised in Summit, NJ. He attended college at Yale University, majoring in English and serving as chairman (the equivalent of editor) of the *Yale Daily News*. He stayed on at Yale to pursue doctoral study in history, under the mentorship of the influential diplomatic historian Samuel Flagg Bemis. Smith taught briefly at Duke University and joined the Yale faculty in 1961, the year in which he earned his Ph.D. He taught at Yale until his retirement in 2000.

Smith's scholarship extended widely over a range of historical topics, from Canadian diplomacy, to British submarine warfare, to Yale's place in the world, to key features of U.S. foreign relations. He made his most enduring mark in that last field, producing ambitious monographs on U.S. diplomacy during World War II, on the role of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, on the foreign policies of President Jimmy Carter, and on the place of the Monroe Doctrine in postwar U.S. diplomacy.

When it came to U.S. Cold War history, Smith was not tethered to any particular school of interpretation. His early work showed some inclination toward "orthodox" outlooks. In his 1965 book *American Diplomacy During the Second World War*, Smith suggested that the paranoia and truculence of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin were the main cause of the Cold War and that President Franklin D. Roosevelt had been slow to grasp the incompatibility between U.S. and Soviet world views. But Smith later grew more open to "revisionist" interpretations. In a 1973 interview with the *New York Times*, he observed of the vigorous Cold War measures Washington pursued soon after the war: "no one can say that [President Harry S.] Truman was necessarily wrong, but my position is that there were possibilities in the situation that he didn't explore."¹

In subsequent decades, Smith ventured sharper criticisms of Washington's penchant for Cold War hawkishness. To some extent, this reflected a continuing attentiveness to revisionist arguments. But it also stemmed from the fact that Smith's focus shifted to later episodes of American foreign relations during which, in his view, U.S. behavior grew less admirable overall. In *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine* (1994), Smith wrote that President James Monroe's policy, as first articulated in 1823, "had contrasted American principles of candor, self-government, and respect for national independence with the devious, autocratic, imperial ways of Europe.... The abandonment after 1945 of its original ideals made the last years of the Monroe Doctrine a history of moral degradation," as

U.S. administrations, in the name of anticommunism, resorted to subversion and lies to undermine left-leaning governments in Latin America and the Caribbean.²

Smith was especially critical of President Ronald Reagan's anticommunist policies, whose subversive impact, he argued, was not confined to disfavored hemispheric regimes but threatened the integrity of Washington's original Cold

War vision. As Smith archly noted in *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine*, "The Truman Doctrine had said it should be the policy of the United States to help free people under attack from armed minorities. The Reagan Doctrine said it should be the policy of the United States to assist armed minorities in their attacks on Communist governments." Smith lamented that Reagan was "[s]o obsessed...with this objective that he permitted policy to be set by people ignorant or contemptuous of the Constitution and law, people without judgment or accountability."³

As the passages quoted above suggest, Smith wrote with precision and grace, conveying intricate arguments in succinct and powerful prose. The historian John Lewis Gaddis, who became Smith's Yale colleague in 1997 (thus compounding the confusion caused by the similarity in their names), remembers Smith as "a great synthesizer of history. My favorite book of his is the diplomatic history of World War II, which I read as a graduate student. I was just blown away by the complete clarity of it, but also the concision of it, that he compressed so much into so short a space."⁴ The opening paragraph of chapter eight of *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (1986) showcases the lucidity and sweep—and freshness—of Smith's historical vision:

Three times between 1949 and 1979, major revolutions on the Asian landmass derailed American foreign policy and within the United States contributed to the discrediting and loss of power of American Presidents. The victory of the Chinese communists over the American-supported Nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek damaged the Truman Presidency and helped the Republicans to victory in 1952. The victory of the Vietnamese communists over the United States and its client government in South Vietnam led Lyndon Johnson to virtual abdication in 1968 and was an indirect cause of Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974 in the face of impending impeachment. Well might Jimmy Carter have prayed in 1977 to be protected from similar domestic consequences of a revolution in a distant country, a revolution beyond the power of the United States to stop or control and yet an event from which it would prove impossible to escape.⁵

Instead, of course, upheaval in Iran in 1978 and 1979 set in motion a chain of events that contributed to Carter's own political demise.

At Yale, Smith gained renown as a mesmerizing orator. Especially popular was his large lecture course on post-1945 U.S. foreign relations, in which I twice served as a graduate teaching assistant. Both times, the waiting list for enrolling in the course went on for pages; the only unpleasant part about being Smith's TA was having to dash the hopes of undergraduates by telling them there were no spaces left. Without PowerPoint, film clips, or other frills, Smith held the students rapt with his crisp, cogent, and often suspenseful renditions of episodes in U.S. foreign policy. The Harvard historian Fredrik Logevall, whom Smith also mentored, recalls "the many instances when the auditorium would go absolutely quiet, as he held forth on the Pearl Harbor attack, or the Bay of Pigs invasion, or the Iran Hostage Crisis, the undergrads hanging on every word."⁶ I remember that Smith would add texture to his lectures by relating how world events had intruded on the Yale campus—by telling us which athletic field was converted into a military barracks during World War II, or which buildings were occupied by antiwar protesters in the Vietnam era.

On rare but memorable occasions, Smith's lectures were uproariously funny. Once, he regaled the undergraduates with a salty joke that had made the rounds after President Dwight D. Eisenhower's heart attack in 1955: Vice President Richard Nixon is visiting his boss in the hospital. The enfeebled Ike is trying say something, but his voice is too faint. He keeps having to repeat himself, and Nixon keeps having to lean closer and closer in. Finally, when Nixon is just inches away, the president belts out, "Get your fucking foot off of my oxygen tube!" Never was the expression "brought the house down" more apt.

Those of us lucky enough to receive Smith's individual instructorship knew a wise, level-headed, supportive, and incisive mentor. For all his dynamism as a public speaker, Smith could be shy when meeting one-on-one or in small groups. For that reason, and because of my own affliction with imposter syndrome during my early months as a Yale graduate student, my initial meetings with "Professor Smith" were somewhat strained. Everything changed when I brought in a research discovery: an uncensored version of a key government document, available only in redacted form when consulted in official archives, that had found its way into the private papers of a long-retired political scientist. His eyes lighting up, Smith plunged into a spirited comparison of the redacted and unredacted versions of the document, quizzing me on some details and offering wry commentaries on government declassification procedures. Our mutual awkwardness had magically evaporated. (It was almost a parody of the cliché that males bond most easily over a shared activity.) From then on, Smith's enthusiasm for my research endeavors was never in doubt.

The qualities that made Smith an extraordinary writer also made him a superb editor and marker of papers. "Never use three words, he preached, when two will do," Logevall recalls.⁷ This was my experience, too. In writing these very lines, I can hear Smith's admonitions to avoid wordiness, repetition, obscurity, and floridness. Another Smithian lesson that has stuck with me over the years: When setting a whole paragraph in the past perfect tense ("I had gone..."), you don't need to keep repeating "had." The first usage or two of the word will establish the time frame, and then you can revert to the simple past tense.

Through his decades of service to Yale University and his manifest devotion to the school, Smith became, in himself, a Yale institution. But he also was a vital agent of change. The son and grandson of Yale alumni, he matriculated at the university in 1950, when the student body was all-male, included no African Americans, and contained only a handful of Jews. In the 1960s and 1970s, Smith strongly supported Yale's transformation, under the leadership of

President Kingman Brewster, into a co-ed university with a more racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse enrollment. From 1972 to 1981, Smith served as master (the term was retired in 2016) of Pierson, one of Yale's residential colleges. At Pierson he was a key intermediary between alumni perturbed by the rapid rate of change and advocates of further openness and inclusion, though his sympathies clearly lay with the latter camp.⁸

In the 1990s, Smith directed the Yale Center for International and Area Studies (now the Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale). In that role, he oversaw the establishment of an interdisciplinary undergraduate major in International Studies and, with the construction of Henry R. Luce Hall, the geographical consolidation of the Center's activities, which had previously been dispersed in several locations on campus. These and other initiatives significantly raised YCIAS's profile within the university, as well as expanding the Center's national and global reach.⁹

On an individual level, too, Smith's influence extended well beyond Yale's confines. Among the thousands of undergraduates he taught were movers and shakers of later decades. Samantha Power, who went on to serve as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, wrote her senior thesis under Smith's supervision. Power remembers her adviser as "a compelling and lively teacher" from whom "[g]enerations of practitioners, teachers and critics of U.S. foreign policy learned how to question received wisdom and old habits in pursuit of a more impactful and humane course."¹⁰ During the 2004 presidential campaign, news outlets reported that both of the major-party candidates, President George W. Bush and Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, had at different times in the 1960s taken Smith's signature lecture course at Yale. Smith disclosed little in response to reporters' queries, though he did remember Kerry as civic-minded and ambitious, whereas "George Bush had no political visibility whatsoever. He was more like a student from the decade before, the mid-'50s, people who enjoyed their fraternity life."¹¹

Smith won several awards and honors from Yale University, including the William Clyde DeVane Medal for outstanding scholarship and undergraduate teaching and the Harwood F. Byrnes/Richard B. Sewall Prize for Teaching Excellence. Each year, the Macmillan Center gives out the Gaddis Smith International Book Prize for the best first book by a Yale faculty member.

In retirement, Smith worked on a history of Yale University and its relations with the wider world. But health issues and the ambitiousness of the project prevented him from completing it. Yale University Press plans to publish a shorter version of the book, *Yale and the External World: The Shaping of the University in the 20th Century*, later this year.¹²

Those who knew Smith well dot their remembrances with words like "dignity," "kindness," "empathy," and "fundamental decency." The historian and political analyst Geoffrey Kabaservice, who earned his Ph.D. from Yale in 1999 (and who has written his own history of the institution), observes that Smith "was perhaps the last of what had been a long line of Yale History professors with deep Yale connections, and I considered him among the best. He combined a sympathetic view of tradition with a clear-eyed understanding of the changes required by modernity." The University of Texas historian Jeremi Suri, who joined Yale's history doctoral program in 1996, was pleasantly surprised to be offered an ice cream bar during his first meeting with Smith. "Gaddis always brought joy and meaning to academic settings—seminars, conferences, even difficult meetings," Suri recalls. "His encouragement of my work meant the world," says Logevall. "He made clear to his advisees that he believed in us, believed in what we were doing. This continued long after we left [the] program."¹³

Except for the part about the ice cream bar (alas, I never got one), all of these fond recollections resonate powerfully with my own.

Smith was predeceased by his wife, Barclay Manierre Smith, and their son, Tarrant Smith. He is survived by another son, Edgar Smith, and by two daughters-in-law and two grandchildren. A memorial service was held on the Yale campus in May 2023.

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Notes:

1. *New York Times*, January 2, 1973, 25.
2. Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine, 1945–1993* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 7.
3. Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine*, 164, 187.
4. *New York Times*, December 9, 2022, B11.
5. Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986) 180.
6. "In Memoriam: Gaddis Smith, Expert on U.S. Foreign Relations and 'Spellbinding Orator,'" *YaleNews*, December 5, 2022, <https://news.yale.edu/2022/12/05/gaddis-smith-expert-us-foreign-relations-and-spellbinding-orator> (accessed June 16, 2023).
7. Fredrik Logevall, email to the author, June 5, 2023.
8. *New York Times*, December 9, 2022, B11.
9. "History of International and Area Studies at Yale," *Bulletin of Yale University*, <https://bulletin.yale.edu/bulletins/macmillan/history-international-and-area-studies-yale> (accessed June 17, 2023).
10. *New York Times*, December 9, 2022, B11.
11. *Tennessean* (Nashville), May 30, 2004, 23A; *Washington Post*, October 16, 2004, A8.
12. "In Memoriam: Gaddis Smith."
13. Geoffrey Kabaservice, email to the author, June 12, 2023; Jeremi Suri, email to the author, June 16, 2023; Logevall, email to the author, June 5, 2023.