

# From the Chancery: More Things I Think

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At the SHAFR conference in Arlington last June, a few people asked why I had not answered the SHAFR Spotlight questions myself. Frankly, it had never occurred to me to do so. But then I figured, why not? So here is a little about your humble *Passport* editor, along with more things that I think I think (again, with apologies to Peter King).

And while it should go without saying, none of what follows should be interpreted, construed, or read as official SHAFR policy or as representing anything except my opinions....

1. I think that we, as individuals and as an organization, need to be keenly aware of the existing and emerging problems with the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the presidential library system (while it lasts), the obstructionist declassification regime, the impending loss of specialized archival knowledge, and the restriction of document access (damn algorithms!). These problems collectively qualify as an imminent crisis already, and if the federal government's plans are any indication, things are only going to get worse....and will imperil our ability to conduct research on the history of U.S. foreign relations. We should not only be ready to go to the mattresses to fight against and strenuously object to these changes, but we need to do everything we can to support people like Richard Immerman and the U.S. Department of State's Historical Advisory Committee, SHAFR's Historical Documentation Committee, the AHA's new NARA Review Committee, and others who are on the front lines of this struggle. This is worth your time and effort.

2. How did I get interested in history? Well, I was born on the day Richard Nixon was elected president—my parents always said at least something good happened that day (although they voted for Nixon, so I'm not really sure what they meant by that)—while my father was deployed with the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group in Vietnam...so I think that had something to do with it. My path to academia was not a straight one, however. I spent a semester in law school before going to grad school at U.C., Santa Barbara (loved law school, hated the idea of being an attorney), and then spent five years on the academic job market. During that time, I spent six months commuting from LA to D.C. while working at the Department of State, three months doing 14-hour days delivering packages across SoCal, and another six months commuting from LA to Spokane. At one point, I was three hours away from leaving the profession and going to work with friends in Hollywood. But I finally landed in my current job at Brigham Young University in 2004. My research focuses primarily on U.S. foreign relations and the nexus of domestic politics and foreign policy, and I am desperately trying to finish a book on Hubert Humphrey and the Vietnam War that is just slightly (15 years) overdue.

3. I think that imposter syndrome is real. I am awed and intimidated every year at SHAFR at just how many intelligent, thoughtful, committed, and insightful people there are in our organization. Meanwhile, I sit in the bar at

the Renaissance, humming Gotye's "Smoke and Mirrors," feeling like an illiterate fraud who should be delivering pizza or cleaning gutters instead of trying to pretend that I somehow belong in such impressive company.

4. Most anxiety-inducing professional moment? There are so many to choose from....but I distinctly remember my first SHAFR panel as a grad student in Boulder in 1996. I looked out at the audience and saw, among others, George Herring, Norman Graebner, Bradford Perkins, David Anderson, Bob Schulzinger, and Bob McMahon. I nearly walked out of the room....not to mention that I nearly lost my lunch. Showing up to my oral exams with my eyes looking like Arnold Schwarzenegger's in *Total Recall* when he was outside the dome on Mars runs a close second.

5. I think that it is an absolute tragedy that the Summer Institute program has been suspended indefinitely by SHAFR. Having participated in the first SI in 2008 and having co-directed the program in 2015, I have a deep appreciation of what it has done for me and others who have been involved. While I objectively understand the financial reasons for the recommendation by the Ways and Means Committee given the projected fiscal crunch SHAFR could face, the rationale for doing so remains puzzling. The SI experience is invaluable to those who participate, and it creates relationships that pay dividends for the SI cohorts and for SHAFR for years to come. To be sure, the SI only engages 12-15 people each year—which may seem like a small number—but it does provide more opportunities than does a single dissertation fellowship at a comparable price....and that does not take into account the intangible benefits that accrue to the organization. SHAFR's leadership should do everything that it can to figure out a way to restore the SI as quickly as possible—perhaps through a targeted campaign to create an SI endowment.

6. Favorite movies/TV shows: on any given day, this list could be completely different, but *John Wick*, *Animal House*, *The Hangover*, *Grosse Pointe Blank*, and *The Godfather* could play on a loop and I would be perfectly happy. And *The League*, *The West Wing*, *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Americans*, *Seinfeld*, and *Band of Brothers* are among the shows that are definitely worth binge-watching.

7. I think that Kyle Longley has handled the outrageous "Hindenburg-crashes-into-the-Titanic-and-unleashes-Chernobyl situation" (to borrow a phrase from Jonah Goldberg) with the LBJ Library, the LBJ Foundation, and NARA with his typical grace and professionalism. If there is a better person in SHAFR, I do not know who it is. I hope that Kyle knows how much support he has within the organization (and beyond), and that we wish him all the best as he returns to the academic world.

8. If I won \$500 million, I would take \$25 million off the top and create a non-profit to support education and therapy for families with children with autism (my youngest son benefitted from the cutting-edge programs from the world-

renowned Center for Autism and Related Disorders in Los Angeles, and others should have that opportunity). I would donate \$5 million to SHAFR for a permanent Summer Institute program, a book prize in honor of my parents, and an endowment for *Passport*...and then would give \$10,000 to each of the 350+ graduate student members of the organization. I would pay off my parents' home and send them on an around-the-world cruise for six months, and I would probably spend quite a lot of money on my wife, my kids, and my granddaughter. I would finally be able to afford HBO (since I'm told that *Game of Thrones* and *The Wire* were pretty good). And I would definitely play in the World Series of Poker main event every year for the rest of my life.

9. I think that the best present I got for Father's Day this year was a sign that reads, "I don't hold grudges. I remember facts." It looks good next to my other favorite sign that quotes Barry Goldwater's sage advice: "*illegitimi non carborundum*."

10. Music festival lineup: again, subject to change depending on my mood, but it would definitely include Foo Fighters, Mötley Crüe, Queen, Oingo Boingo, Sum 41, the Rolling Stones, Bowling for Soup, Def Leppard, Billy Squier, Violent Femmes, Kiss, AC/DC, Eminem, Nerf Herder, The Clash, The Police, Rush, INXS, and Van Halen (Dave and Sammy, but definitely not Gary).

11. Dinner with John Quincy Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Richard Nixon would be amazing. Few people in U.S. history saw or were involved with more key events that occurred in their lifetimes. Plus, listening to JQA scold Nixon would be entertaining as hell.

12. I think that Kelly McFarland, Kimber Quinney, Mitch Lerner, Marc Selverstone, and the rest of the organizers of the public engagement workshop at Georgetown University this year (which built on the ideas of a similar workshop at the Miller Center in 2017) should be commended for all of their efforts to help SHAFR and its members become more actively involved in advocacy, public outreach, and education efforts that highlight the expertise our organization collectively possesses. Given the misuse and misunderstanding of history—not just relating to U.S. foreign relations but throughout the public sphere—it is heartening to see so many of our members getting involved in these kinds of activities.

13. BUT....I think that we need to be careful in those efforts not to appear condescending, dismissive, and overly critical of the individuals and audiences that we engage or those with whom we disagree. To be sure, some people are clowns who are just begging to be treated that way. Yet I would suggest that going too far in those directions undermines what we are trying to do and makes it too easy for people to brush aside our opinions and expertise as the product of "academics in the ivory tower who think they are better than us." There is nothing wrong with a little civility even in the course of making a passionate (or even a partisan) argument....

14. I think that the decision to go to New Orleans for the 2020 SHAFR conference is inspired. As much as we all love the Renaissance, it will be nice to have one or two different restaurant options....and live music....and some gaming options next year. *Laissez les bons temps rouler*.

15. Bucket list: finishing in the money in the aforementioned World Series of Poker main event; taking a cruise through the Panama Canal; finally traveling to Europe (I think I may be the only member of SHAFR to have never done so); getting another college degree....to break the tie with my father (we may be slightly competitive); and living long enough to see the U.S. men's national soccer team actually be competitive in the World Cup (probably the least realistic item on the list).

16. I think that I have said this before, but it bears repeating: even as SHAFR continues to expand its tent by appealing to different audiences and embracing new approaches and ideas, it cannot (and should not) turn its back either on traditional methodologies or on people who have contributed so much to the organization over the years. It is disheartening and unfortunate that so many long-time members of SHAFR have disengaged—whether by not attending the conference or not renewing their memberships—because they feel that there is no longer a place for them in our organization.

17. I think that I do not understand the appeal of social media (and get off of my lawn!). While it may be a convenient way to stay current on the news and to keep up with friends, much of it—especially on Twitter, but not exclusively so—has morphed into a dystopian hellscape filled with endless and nauseating self-promotion (increasingly from academics), echo chambers of siloed opinions, and keyboard warriors who cannot contemplate that their opinions might be wrong. It has become ground-zero for snap judgments, perpetual grievance, out-of-control outrage mobs, and uninformed, sanctimonious, and virtue-signaling commentary from grifters, humorless scolds, and ultracrepidarians. And all of this spills over into actual human interaction, making it nearly impossible to have a civil conversation with those who do not share one's very specific worldview. Moreover, it contributes significantly to the rising tide of anxiety and depression—not just with youth, but across demographic categories (yes, including our colleagues in academia). Unplugging, even temporarily, is not the worst idea.

18. I think that I will die on this hill: the Oxford comma, two spaces after a period, and WordPerfect is superior to Word.

19. If I were not a historian, I would probably be a sports agent, a political operative, or a professional poker player/degenerate gambler. All three almost happened; frankly, all three could still happen....

20. I think that I could run my column on gratitude from January 2019 in every issue from now until the end of time and still not be able to adequately express my thanks to my friends in SHAFR for their support, examples, and advice.... especially the past few weeks.

Finally, let me publicly recognize and thank Professor Neil York—my mentor, colleague, and friend for the past three decades—who retired this year after 42 years as a professor in my department. Neil studied with SHAFR founding father Alex DeConde at the University of California, Santa Barbara in the 1970s, and he is almost entirely responsible for inspiring me to pursuing a career as a historian (now you know who to blame). I owe him more than I can say, and I wish him all the best as he moves on to the next chapter in his life....whatever that may be.