

In Memoriam: George C. Herring

George C. Herring, historian of the Vietnam War and US foreign relations, died on November 30, 2022, in Lexington, Kentucky. He was 86.

He served as Alumni Professor of History at the University of Kentucky, where he taught from 1969 until his retirement in 2005. Before coming to Kentucky, he taught at Ohio University beginning in 1965, the year that President Lyndon Johnson sent the first US combat forces to Vietnam.

Born in southwestern Virginia in 1936, he admitted to being a “poster boy” for the “Silent Generation,” being “apolitical, devoid of ambition and sense of purpose, floating with an uncertain tide.” After graduating from Roanoke College in 1957, he pondered careers in law and journalism but found his way into history after a two-year stint in the U.S. Navy.

While in graduate school at the University of Virginia, he gravitated toward military/diplomatic history despite the department having no specialist. He wrote his dissertation on Lend-Lease, largely sparked by a fellowship where he organized the papers of Edward Stettinius, the former director of the program. He later admitted that the final product “lacked a strong thesis and placement in the literature.” Herring finished his PhD in 1965.

Herring published the first of his eight books in 1972, *Aid to Russia, 1941-1946: Strategy, Diplomacy, the Origins of the Cold War*. It received good reviews and contributed significantly to the emerging post-revisionist literature on the origins of the Cold War.

He noted his next project “was a product of the events themselves” which centered around the divisive Vietnam War. His long-standing interest in Southeast Asia led him to teach a course on the war in 1973 that ensured the “more I learned, the more I wanted to know.” He subsequently published *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (1979).

Since its publication, *America’s Longest War* (now in its 6th edition, 2019), has remained a standard for understanding U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Herring shaped the field alongside others including Marilyn Young and Lloyd Gardner. Harvard historian Fred Logevall stressed “it’s a fair guess that it has taught more Americans about the war than any other book.” Herring ultimately added more to the scholarly debate on the war in Vietnam with an edited version of the negotiating volumes of the Pentagon papers and his book, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (1994).

Herring’s last major work was the magisterial *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776*. In a thousand pages, he challenged many preconceptions of the long durée of U.S. foreign policy by showing extensive engagement with the world since the American revolution. It was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and received very strong reviews including one that noted his “Herculean power of synthesis” that “recaptures a

quarter-millennium of American foreign policy with fluidity and felicity.” It will unlikely be surpassed by any other similar work for many years, educating scholars and the public about the U.S. role in the world since its founding. The book also received the 2008 Robert Ferrell Award given by the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) for the best book in the field.

Herring served as editor of SHAFR’s journal, *Diplomatic History*, as well as SHAFR’s president. He won fellowships from the National Endowment of the Humanities, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation. He was also granted membership in the Society of American History, an honorary organization created to recognize literary distinction in the writing of history.

Herring was also a gifted teacher. The University of Kentucky recognized him with its Alumni Association Great Teaching Award and the Sturgill Award for Excellence in Graduate Education. In 2014, he was named to the University of Kentucky’s College of Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame.

But it is perhaps as a mentor that Herring will be most remembered and missed. His patience, kindness, and good humor served generations of graduate students. In Herring, they found a skilled editor and master of the narrative for future books on the press and religious groups and the Vietnam War and command and leadership in the early 20th Century. They also gained a good friend and countless stories underscoring his significance. One student recalled receiving wonderful advice from Herring as he worked on his dissertation: “Just remember, I’ve been doing this for twenty-five more years than you.” Such instruction was invaluable, especially when presented in daily interactions, and continued well beyond graduation for many who relied on him until his last moments.

It went beyond the classroom and halls of the 17th floor of Patterson Office Tower. He and his wonderful wife Dottie hosted holiday feasts and dinner parties for graduate students and faculty, creating a warm and hospitable atmosphere. He even proved a very good first baseman on the department’s softball team, one day showing on-lookers how to effortlessly catch a screaming line. He strutted off the field as if he had done it a thousand times. These memories and many more remind his students and colleagues of why he mattered so much to all of them and so many in the profession. He certainly will be missed.

Robert K. Brigham, Shirley Ecker Boskey Professor of History and International Relations, Vassar College

Kyle Longley, Henry Salvatori Professor of American Values and Traditions, Chapman University

Editor's note: *George Herring's influence on not only the field of U.S. foreign relations but also on generations of historians of U.S. foreign relations is nearly incalculable...but the tributes that follow are representative of his legacy. AJ*

If you are lucky, you will find a second mentor early in your career. Not someone to replace your Ph.D. adviser, who for most of us—at least the fortunate ones—remains indispensable: for professional advice, calm encouragement, critical feedback on our writing and teaching, and so much more. A second mentor, someone not from your Ph.D. granting institution or your new workplace, can provide an invaluable fresh perspective on your work and career. As a freshly minted Ph.D., about to enter the often-bewildering world of academe with its lack of clear roadmaps, I found such a mentor in George Herring. He generously and selflessly assumed that role for me—whether he himself recognized he was doing so or not—and I am eternally in his debt.

I soon learned what a couple of generations of his grad students came to know: that George was, simply put, a uniquely caring, thoughtful, and generous human being. Although already a senior scholar of considerable renown and accomplishment, George was instinctively modest and refreshingly down-to-earth. Unfailingly gracious and helpful to a fault, he possessed a marvelous sense of humor, sharp wit, balanced temperament, and a keen appreciation for the ironic and the ridiculous. He became not just my second mentor, but a role model, a colleague, and a friend.

When I submitted my revised dissertation to Cornell University Press, I received two diametrically opposed assessments. One reviewer enthusiastically urged publication; the other offered a more negative appraisal, suggesting that what I had produced might make for a decent journal article, but not much more. The press, to my great good fortune, asked George if he would offer a third, independent appraisal, serving in part as a referee of those conflicting reports. Accepting the assignment, he came down decisively in support of publication while also offering some astute advice about how to strengthen the manuscript. Not for the last time, I followed his wise counsel.

We then began communicating, mostly by letter in that pre-email era. As editor of *Diplomatic History*, he began calling on me to review essay submissions—the first time a journal editor had asked me to do so. He thus introduced me to the other side of the publication process: how one goes about critically reading and offering a balanced and fair-minded assessment of an unpublished work of scholarship. Shortly thereafter, as chair of the SHAFR program committee, he flattered me by asking me to join that committee. The assignment gave me a unique opportunity to see what kind of work people in our field were doing. George encouraged me to make suggestions for sessions we could try to organize as a committee and to offer recommendations regarding who might be called upon to serve as chairs or commentators to fill out some proposed sessions. It is difficult to exaggerate how much I learned from working so closely with such an adept organizer. George then proposed that I replace him as chair for the following year's committee. My work leading up to the 1987 annual meeting at the College of William & Mary proved to be the hardest and most rewarding professional responsibility I had yet taken on beyond the realms of teaching and research. I have him to thank for that wonderful opportunity.

Our shared intellectual interest in the history of U.S.-Southeast Asian relations and the Vietnam War brought George and I together at numerous conferences over the years, along with the annual get-together at SHAFR, a meeting he (and I) hated to miss. It was always a delight to see him. I came to treasure our informal chats over coffee, a meal, a beer, or his beloved bourbon. And even as our relationship evolved from one of mentorship to one of deep friendship, George never ceased to be someone I could, and often did, turn to for critical comments on my writing, insights about the state of our field, and so much more.

Others will write about George's scholarship, about his role as Ph.D. adviser, and about his vital contributions to SHAFR, each of great moment. But from my personal experience, one of his enduring and perhaps least recognized roles was that of second mentor—to me and, I can only assume, many others.

Robert J. McMahon, Ohio State University (Emeritus)



The first word that comes to my mind when I think of George Herring is “gentleman.” In an age when at least some American men lament suffering through (yet another) crisis of masculinity, George was, to me, the epitome of a good man—always kind, ever caring, eternally selfless. He nurtured his students, if not the entire field of scholars working on the American war in Vietnam. He shared his insights and research freely, without ever a thought of recompense. He promoted the works of others always before his own and rarely spoke of the peerless impact he had on generations of historians wrestling with one of the most important events of the Cold War era. He was, in short, an inspiring role model. And he still is.

I had the good fortune to participate in a *Passport* roundtable on Vietnam in the summer of 2022. One question posed to us read, “Which scholars do you see as having laid the groundwork for the study of the history of the Vietnam War?” My first sentence answering was pretty direct. “My strong sense is that nearly all scholars of the American war in Vietnam would name George C. Herring as one of the principal architects of our field.” George emailed me not long after the issue came out to thank me for my “kind comments.” “They mean a lot to me,” he shared. It said everything you needed to know about him and what a true gentleman George was to all us in the field.

Gregory A. Daddis, San Diego State University



Unlike so many of my colleagues, I didn't know George Herring well—certainly not as well as I would have liked. But he was unfailingly gracious, kind, and generous on the many occasions when we crossed paths and shared ideas. I recall his hospitality during a particularly memorable conference that he hosted in Lexington in 2007, probably the most rewarding academic gathering of the three decades during which I've attended such events. And I remember a lively lunch in Washington in 2012 or so, an opportunity to compare notes with the author of the unrivaled *America's Longest War* shortly after publication of my own narrative of the Vietnam War. George struck me as the best sort of scholar—a humble man of towering achievements who showed genuine dedication to the advancement of younger generations.

I'm struck as well by the enormous debt that I owe to George for pioneering the study of the Vietnam War and laying down so many of the interpretive signposts that still drive scholarly inquiry. Although I occasionally cull my bookshelves to make room for new additions, I have proudly kept each edition of *America's Longest War*, books that both drove and reflected the evolution of the field in the 1970s. I've long called George the “dean” of Vietnam War studies, and it remains a privilege to work in an arena where such a fair-minded, meticulous, and eloquent historian looms so large. He brought the same traits, of course, to the broader study of American foreign relations, producing a stream of books and articles that entitle him to a place on the Mount Rushmore of diplomatic history. He is truly a model and inspiration.

Mark Atwood Lawrence, University of Texas, Austin & Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library



Like so many of us, I was fortunate to enjoy George and Dottie's legendary hospitality as they welcomed to their home in Lexington the participants in a working conference at the University of Kentucky. Hang Nguyen helped Marilyn Young and I to organize for our edited OUP volume on new histories of the Vietnam War. That George played a part in the creation of the volume was a wonderful turn for me. As a young doctoral student, I grew up on his *America's Longest War* and deeply admired how George was able to make a powerful argument about the failures of containment in Vietnam in ways that engaged even those who saw the war quite differently. He always did so, whether in prose or in person, with civility, grace and respect. George's approach to his scholarship, his colleagues, and his students offers an enduring model for all of us as we make our way forward in these perilous political times.

Mark Philip Bradley, University of Chicago



I do not remember when I first met George Herring. It was in the early 1980s, and he quickly became my friend, colleague, and role model as a historian and as a teacher. I remember clearly, however, when I met him through the pages of *America's Longest War*. I read the book in the spring of 1980 shortly after its initial publication. I had taught a university course on the American War in Vietnam for the first time in the spring of 1975—yes, literally as the war was ending with the fall of Saigon. Finding core reading for students was a challenge. Scholarship and academic texts in English on Vietnam and especially on American involvement there were extremely limited. I assigned all or parts of books by George McTurnan Kahin and John W. Lewis, Frances Fitzgerald, John T. McAlister, Joseph Buttinger, and Bernard Fall. And then, along came George. His book, *America's Longest War*, quickly became the go-to text for me and scores of others teaching courses on the war. In a reasoned, nonideological, and persuasive argument, it made the basics of the controversial war, especially decision making in Washington, accessible to students. It was also a mainstay for scholars. There are multiple references to it in virtually every monograph on the American war published since it first appeared. Considering that about the only original sources available to George in the late 1970s were in the Pentagon Papers, the durability of his initial arguments through subsequent, updated editions attests to his skill as a researcher and historian. He was well-aware of his lack of access to confidential U.S. sources and closed Vietnamese archives. Be that as it may, *America's Longest War* was and remains in many ways, THE book on how the costly American military intervention in Vietnam came about and lasted so terribly long. Historians, students, and policy makers are deeply in George Herring's debt for advancing our understanding of one of America's worst public policy mistakes.

David L. Anderson, California State University, Monterey Bay



I was deeply saddened by George's passing. I didn't know him well, personally, but his scholarship and example had long been guiding stars. His *America's Longest War*, through its many editions, remains the foundational text for my survey course on the United States and Vietnam, and George was the first person I approached when putting together a conference at UVA on “The Politics of Troop Withdrawal.” His presence was crucial in helping convince others to participate, and it was through that experience that I came to know his generosity and grace. Perhaps we bonded over shared connections to both Ohio University and the University of Virginia, but it was really just because George was George. Seeing him at SHAFR was always a treat—just having a couple of minutes with him would be a highlight of the conference.

Years later, George had asked for help in locating conversations from Lyndon Johnson's White House tapes for a paper he was delivering (at Ohio, no less) on LBJ's decisions for war. I was more than happy—honored, really—to provide support. George then agreed to transform the lecture into a digital short for a Miller Center series with UVA Press, and his e-pub—

The War Bells Have Rung—stands as a master class on how to integrate the tapes into a scholarly essay. Indeed, it revealed yet again why George was a master of the craft and the dean of American historians on the Vietnam War. He was both a giant in our field and an unfailingly gracious man, and will be greatly missed.

Marc Selverstone, University of Virginia



George Herring was an exceptional historian and mentor and an even better friend. Ironically, my first interaction with George was in March 1980 when I wrote to compliment his “In Memoriam” essay for Edward E. Younger in the *American Historical Review*. Professor Younger had directed both of our dissertations at the University of Virginia, albeit a decade apart. Dr. Younger was a wonderful adviser, but he had largely moved from U.S. foreign relations to Virginia history by the time I began doctoral work in September 1969. Because of his change of emphasis and untimely death in mid-1979, I had assumed my duties at UNLV with no acquaintances in the foreign relations subfield. Moreover, I was not attending professional meetings and lacked self-confidence in the scholarly realm.

After our exchange of correspondence, George graciously came to UNLV (for a meager honorarium) in October 1980 to deliver the keynote address for a three-session program that one of my former students and I had organized for Vietnam Veterans in our community. During that visit (the first of four that George would make to UNLV), George and I spent an afternoon becoming acquainted and discussing a broad range of professional matters.

In retrospect, that afternoon was truly a pivotal moment for me—personally and professionally. Over the ensuing several years, George provided sage advice and critical professional reinforcement. For example, when a press solicited potential readers for my first book manuscript, I turned to George with a list of possibilities. His response: “Do you know any of these historians?” That I had not thought of this was testimony to how badly I needed guidance. Shortly after that book was published, he invited me to contribute to a collection of essays he was co-editing—the first time I had been invited to submit a manuscript to a collection or journal. When George later invited me to serve on the editorial board of *Diplomatic History*, I felt like I was truly gaining traction and credibility as a scholar. Hence began a forty-plus-year friendship. Later, when I moved from researching the nineteenth century to examining the American South and the Vietnam War, George generously and, of course, most perceptively read all my work. Finally, I must emphasize that the value of this friendship extended far beyond the professional. It has also included the great joy my wife Sandy and I have had spending time with George and his lovely wife Dottie.

Joseph A. (Andy) Fry, University of Nevada, Las Vegas



Over the years and many, many meetings with George Herring I learned two lessons most of all. First, George was an open-hearted man who was always gracious even with those he disagreed with about historical interpretation. And second, perseverance is rewarded. The last time we spent much time together was at Lubbock, Texas, for a conference in 2019 at Texas Tech University on the Vietnam War. George and I were called upon to discuss how we started courses on the war. At one point during the session, George leaned over to me and with a big smile he said, “You know, I had to convince Bob Divine to publish *America’s Longest War* in the series he edited. He didn’t want to do it at first.” And that marked a turning point in George’s long career, and how we have all benefitted from that career.

Lloyd Gardner, Rutgers University

