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Interview with Eric Edelman

Interview by Edward Kohn and Tim Roberts, April 2005

JAST: What is your educational background, in particular your Ph.D.?

Edelman: My misspent youth in academia started as an undergraduate at Cornell University, and it was a fairly tumultuous time. I matriculated in September 1968, a few months after the major events at Columbia University, but also in a global perspective, in terms of university life, the major events at the Freie University of Berlin and the student rebellions. It was a pretty interesting time. My freshman year at Cornell was also a time of particularly tense race relations on campus, and the student union building was taken over by armed members of the African-American Students Association. So the two big preoccupations of people in the university in those days, and in a very highly politicized environment, I think much more politicized than universities are today, were Vietnam and race relations. I matriculated two months after Bobby Kennedy was assassinated, and six months after Martin Luther King was assassinated. And, speaking as a historian for a second, probably 1968 was one of the most dramatic years in American history in the twentieth century.

When I arrived at school I knew I was going to be a history major, and I knew I was probably going to study American history. I happened to end up in a university that had a very strong history faculty, and also was committed to undergraduate teaching. I was very lucky to have had some truly outstanding teachers as an undergraduate. I went through a little bit of an intellectual peregrination. My undergraduate advisor at Cornell, and still close friend, was Walter LaFeber, who was an historian of American foreign relations at Cornell, a product of the so-called Wisconsin School of diplomatic history. He sometimes is mistakenly cited as a student of William Appleman Williams. He actually wasn't. Williams was there and he was a teaching assistant in Williams's course. But his own academic mentor was Fred Harvey Harrington, who was later president of the University of Wisconsin. He was also a historian and like Williams had very heavy Beardsian bent, very much looking at the economic underpinnings of American foreign policy. Walt was a great scholar, a great teacher, and a great mentor. Today, there is not a whole lot we agree on in American

foreign policy, but he still takes my phone calls and I still enjoy talking to him. Actually when I was ambassador to Finland we had him out to lecture and we hosted a lunch for him.

So that was the foreign relations side of my background. But I also had an extraordinary teacher who was a student of C. Vann Woodward, a scholar named John Barton. He was a terrific teacher, taught the history of the American South, and because of race relations in the United States, obviously rooted in the history of the South, this no doubt was another major preoccupation. When it came to actually go to graduate school, I ended up going to Yale. Yale had a reputation for being one of the best history departments in the country. And in my senior year at Cornell I had enjoyed studying the South so much that I actually began graduate school with the intention of doing work in the history of the American South, and went to Yale because, of course, C. Vann Woodward was there and at that point he was the "dean" of American historians of the South, author of one of the great books in twentieth century American historiography, *The Origins of the New South, 1877-1913,* and also a great biography, *Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel*. I actually went to study with Vann Woodward, and began studying politics in the postbellum South in the Progressive era. Then when I arrived at Yale my interests shifted, and I ended up back in diplomatic history.

At Yale I did not see eye-to-eye with all of my professors, intellectually, academically, or concerning the role of teaching. I came out of a department at Cornell with a heavy commitment to undergraduate teaching. Yale was a slightly different experience, with much less emphasis on undergraduate teaching. Actually in some quarters undergraduate teaching was sort of derided, as opposed to the "serious" work of research and publication. Because of this I ended up doing ancient Greek history with Donald Kagan, who had actually been at Cornell my freshman year, and left to go to Yale. Donald Kagan is also someone who has remained a good personal friend over the years, and a mentor. He was in the midst at that point of writing his four-volume history of the Peloponnesian War. He has now written a one-volume synoptic version, which Penguin published recently (*The Peloponnesian War*). Of the four-volume history, George Steiner, in the *New Yorker*, wrote in a review that it was one of the greatest works of history written in North America in the twentieth century. Actually I agree with that, although I am biased because I was a student of Don's. He was a great student and teacher of diplomatic and military history; basically his books are diplomatic and military histories of ancient Greece and ancient Rome. He at one point asked me to be one of the teaching assistants for a course he taught at Yale, called "Historical Studies and the Origins of War." The lecture

notes and the research behind that course are now a book also called *On the Origins of War* published by Doubleday Anchor. I was a teaching assistant in that course and it was really through Don's influence more than anything else that I returned to diplomatic history. I think I was probably too much of an intellectual coward to actually take Greek and Latin and become a classicist; I'm too lazy. So I ended up doing American diplomatic history with Professor Gaddis Smith, not to be confused with John Lewis Gaddis, who is also now at Yale. Smith was one of Samuel Flagg Bemis's last students at Yale, so there was kind of a direct line back to the great American diplomatic historians. And Gaddis Smith became my dissertation advisor, but really, intellectually, I would say Don was much more of a mentoring force.

Funny story, actually, sitting here in Turkey as ambassador, reflecting on my choice of dissertation topics. We are always supposed to be doing this Union Catalog dissertation in order to do original research, and so for diplomatic historians we were all hanging on the next publication of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* volumes and the opening of the archives so we could be the first ones to get in there and do something about it. It was suggested that I do a dissertation on the Turkish Straits Crisis, which is famous of course with President Truman sending the *USS Missouri* here to reinforce Turkey's sense of sovereignty against Soviet encroachment and sending it back with the body of the ambassador. I went as far as writing a prospectus for that dissertation, and then I had one of those great crises that graduate students have. All of a sudden there was an article in *Political Science Quarterly* on the Straits crisis, and then a major book came out on it. So I ended up doing something on Italian-American relations, 1943-1949. Actually the writing of the dissertation was completed before I entered the U.S. Foreign Service, but I still had to do the bibliographic essay, and take my oral examinations. In the meantime I came into the Foreign Service. I actually received my degree in May 1981, about a year after entering the Foreign Service.

JAST: Did your studying under Kagan spark your interest in the Foreign Service? Or did Yale encourage you to go into academics?

Edelman: Well, it was a particularly intense period of the so-called Ph.D. "job crisis"; there was still a lot of over-production of history Ph.D.s. But to tell you the truth I cannot quite reconstruct how I ended up in the Foreign Service. Part of it probably was laziness, part of it was the job crisis; it was tough to find jobs in those days. It was also a period of time when more traditional political and diplomatic history was becoming a little bit less keenly pursued by people than the fields of social and cultural history, which

were becoming much more important. I don't think it was quite yet the era of the reigning orthodoxy of gender, race and class today, but it was still tough to find a job. I actually did get offered a job at one point at St. John's University's history department in New York, but it wasn't a tenure-track position, and it wasn't in my field, it was going to be teaching Western Civilization. It just didn't seem like the right fit. I had taken the Foreign Service exam, and I had passed, and I had spent a lot of years reading diplomatic telegrams, and I thought I could probably write a few.

JAST: You have called yourself a "lapsed academic." Do you see yourself ever going back into the classroom?

Edelman: I did a little bit of teaching when I was still a graduate student. I was at various points a lecturer, instructor, or taught sections of a few courses, and I enjoyed teaching. Part of me wouldn't mind doing it again. I haven't been on a university campus in the United States for a long time, except to take my son to school. I'm not sure how I would fit into a university setting, in part because my historical training, as well as my professional training as a diplomat -- what the French call *formation*, which is your education and your training and your practical experience -- we don't have any one word that captures it quite as well -- but all of that I think might not be very congenial to the current reigning orthodoxies on campus. I am struck from afar by the fact that at American universities right now we have diversity of every sort except in the area of thought where we seem to have a much narrower range of what is acceptable opinion. So I'm not sure whether it would be a happy mix.

JAST: What are books in American history that influenced you?

Edelman: I do think that Vann Woodward's *The Origins of the New South* is one of the really great books in American historiography. His biography of Tom Watson is also a great book -- maybe too great a book. I think somewhere along the line he actually set out to write a novel, and although I thought it was a fabulous book when I read it, I think he may have romanticized Tom Watson a little bit, and rubbed some of the harsh edges off him.

Walter LaFeber's *New Empire* is also a book that influenced me a lot and still does, even though as I said I have a lot of disagreements with him, and I also don't share the view anymore of the Wisconsin school that economics is the sole driver of American foreign policy. But I think *New Empire* is a great book that still stands up pretty well more than forty years since it was published.

I mentioned Donald Kagan's four volumes on the Peloponnesian War, another book that has had a lasting influence on me. There are some books that I hated as an undergraduate and graduate student that I have come to have more respect for over time, such as Fritz Stern's *The Politics of Cultural Despair* about German politics in the late nineteenth century. As a younger person, as an undergraduate, with left wing views at the time, I hated it because it was so critical a critique of liberalism, but looking back at it over the years I find it much more compelling today as I find myself much more in sympathy with liberalism with a small "l," and liberal democracy with small "l" and small "d."

Another book that I have had a lot of reason to think about lately is Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion*. It's a book I did not find totally convincing as an undergraduate, but over the years I have come to have a great deal of respect for it. I think, for instance, anti-Americanism in a sense is what Meyers would define as a "persuasion," rather than a full-blown ideology.

JAST: What are you reading now?

Edelman: I am actually re-reading an old classic I read long ago as a graduate student called *Crisis of the House Divided* by Harry Jaffa, which is a rich and rewarding intellectual analysis of the Lincoln-Douglass Debates. I have been reading it in part as a response to something [University of Virginia] Professor James Ceasar wrote in an article in *Public Interest* last fall on the Republican Party. Jim had a throwaway line in there that really stuck with me, talking about President Bush's approach to foreign policy, having it rooted in a natural right/natural law tradition. That actually sent me scurrying back to Jaffa's book, which was written in 1959, right on the cusp of the explosion of the civil rights revolution. At the time that I first read the book it was making more of a connection of the role of the power of ideology on civil rights and race relations in the United States. Going back and reading it now with fresh eyes I think Ceasar's observation is quite correct, and reading what Lincoln said in the Douglass debates is instructive and important for understanding the intellectual roots of what President Bush has tried to do in American foreign policy

I am also reading *The First Crusade* by Thomas Asbridge, a British historian. I picked up the bad habit long ago as a student to read more than one thing at a time. I always found that one of the great joys of being an academic was being paid to read books. The other thing I just finished while I was on my trip through southeastern Turkey is a book by Jean Bethke Elshtain, a political philosopher at the Divinity School at the University of

Chicago, called *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World*. That also is sort of a natural right approach to the questions raised by the war on terror and the war in Iraq.

JAST: You talked about "liberal democracy." Do you see yourself as a neo-conservative?

Edelman: I hate the term "neo-conservative," in part because I think it is a term that has a meaning at one point in time in American intellectual history, in the 1970s and 1980s when a group of intellectuals mostly around *The Public Interest,* Irving Kristol, Pat Moynihan, and others, re-thought some of the basic postulates of New Deal liberalism. Irving Kristol supposedly said neo-conservatives were liberals who had been mugged by reality. I think in that sense the term had some meaning. In contemporary political debate in the United States and unfortunately now around the world, because everything that happens in the United States gets refracted and reflected elsewhere, it has become a cudgel with which to beat people, and it's not really a serious term anymore that has any intellectual meaning in my opinion. Unfortunately in certain hands it's actually become a code word for a certain ugly kind of anti-Semitism. So no, I don't really consider myself in those terms.

JAST: How does your background as an historian affect the way you deal with issues or your foreign counterparts?

Edelman: First of all it always provides me a little bit of humility in the sense that whatever the problem is that you are confronting, I think if you have some training in history you are a little more inclined to realize that you are not the first human being who has had to encounter this problem. These problems tend to recur. They are not always the same, but a lot of the factors are the same. There is always the danger of false analogizing, saying "Aha! This happened in 1956 and the answer is X." There is not a "book solution," that if you know history you know the solution to the problem. It's more a way of thinking about the problem.

Second I think there is always a realization that whatever point in time you happen to be looking at, it didn't just happen spontaneously, *ex nihilo*, it had antecedents. So it does remind one to look back at the antecedents. And there is a certain intellectual commonality in some of the analysis that we do as diplomats and historians. In a way being a diplomat is a form of privileged journalism, in that we write analysis of politics written in the moment, therefore without the benefit of hindsight or distance. We write on the basis of a variety of sources, both printed material -- newspapers, magazines -- but also oral history, based on meetings we have with host

government officials or other diplomats, and then trying intellectually to synthesize the material into something that is coherent as an explanation of what is going on. I think there is a lot of commonality in terms of the intellectual disciplines that historians use to what diplomats do. If you read George Kennan's "Long Telegram" you see that at work. The one big difference is that I have never been persuaded that history is a "policy science." Certainly people who are involved in policy draw on history, but to me history is one piece, and then there is what needs to be done here and now. I think what good diplomats do is not just analyze for Washington what is going on in the host country. You are not just analyzing and putting it in context, but you need also to be telling people what to do, otherwise you are just giving them a series of problems, and we're here to try and solve problems.

JAST: What is your sense of Turks' understanding of American History?

Edelman: One of the reasons why I am such a big supporter of American Studies in Turkey is because I think there is a tendency around the world for people to think they know the United States of America a little bit better than they really do. This is in part because of our global cultural reach, and the incredible impact of American films, television, popular music, and other elements of popular culture. So the value of American Studies is that it helps people get a better, more nuanced, and textured understanding of the American reality. And I think that's obviously a good thing for the United States of America, for people here to have a better understanding of what is going on. There are some Turks who spend lots of time in the U.S. and therefore know the United States very well. But my impression is that in general, until relatively recently, the United States has not been the subject of much serious inquiry here in Turkey.

JAST: What have you learned about the U.S. while in Turkey?

Edelman: Something that I have thought about Turkey in contrast to the U.S. is that I think one of America's strengths in a globalized world is precisely her diversity. This is a controversial subject. We Americans are so much a mix of other peoples who come to the United States. We are a nation of immigrants. We are a multi-cultural nation. The United States has had many streams of migration that has created the current American population. I am a product of that myself. All four of my grandparents were native-born Russian speakers who immigrated to the United States. My mother was actually born in Istanbul. American diversity has been a great strength.

Turkey, in my experience, actually is quite a diverse country, both in terms of the people who make up Turkey and geographical diversity. But

there is less willingness to draw on Turkey's diversity as a strength than I think it could be. Turks have a tendency, because of the power of the nationalist idea that gave rise to the republican experience, to view diversity as a source of weakness, not strength. In a globalized world Turks are going to come to understand that diversity is a strength.

Any American diplomat who serves overseas, particularly in Europe, can't help but be impressed by the distinction between a post-Christian Europe and the United States that is clearly the most religious of any of the OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development] countries. I think that is a difference that explains some of the difficulties we have had over the past few years between the United States and Europe. Perhaps because Turkey is a Muslim country this appears in a little bit sharper relief, except that if you look at some of the studies of national values, Turkey and the U.S. both rate very high on a scale of countries where people express belief in the existence of God or a Supreme Being.

JAST: Does America's history of exclusion limit America's ability to shape democracy elsewhere?

Edelman: That is the great criticism against the United States wielded by our critics, a variant of "Physician heal thyself," or "The mote in my neighbor's eye is bigger than my own." I think some people wield the argument in good faith, but I think for a lot of people it is not an honest argument. It is the intellectual equivalent of "So's your old man!" For my parents and others of the Depression generation, communism was very much a real force in some elements of American society, and whenever people would criticize the Soviet Union the answer would come back, "What about segregation in the South?" Those to me are not honest intellectual arguments. Did the United States get conceived as a nation with the original sin of slavery? Absolutely. Was the removal of Indians violent and racist and oppressive? Of course. Was the internment of Japanese during World War II a mistake? Yes. The thing about the United States is that because the founding principles of the United States are enshrined in the notion of natural right or natural law, what the founders called "Nature's God," the principle that all men are created equal, which today is extended to all men and women, it is an incredibly powerful force for the extension of freedom in the United States. Yes, we had slavery, but as the Jaffa book shows, Lincoln re-founded the country in essence on the basis of the natural right principle, and "All men are created equal" was extended to slaves. In later generations it was extended to all women.

I am old enough to remember growing up in Virginia and seeing water fountains marked "Whites" and "Colored." To me the greatest revolutionary movement in the twentieth century was the civil rights revolution in the United States. It is remarkable how much was accomplished relatively peacefully. Was it totally peaceful? No. Were there people killed in the civil rights movement? Yes. But if you look around the world and see what is happening in other parts of the world, when they are called upon to deal with this kind of racial desegregation, the record is much more blighted historically.

There is a wonderful line in Samuel Huntington's book that he wrote about twenty-five years ago, called *The Promise of Disharmony*. Huntington argues that the great driving force in American history is the gap between our ideals and our institutions, and that it is inevitable that the gap periodically opens up, and the gap inevitably generates a movement for reform. I would argue that in the modern world because of the velocity of information, there is a natural balancing act. If we have corporate malfeasance in the United States, as we have in recent years, we pretty soon have a law that holds members of corporate boards to much higher standards. If we have people abusing their authority over prisoners in Abu Ghraib, it gets exposed and we have multiple investigations of it, and those excesses get corrected. In my experience around the world there are very few countries where that kind of thing actually happens, including some of our allies in the West, where certain historical episodes -- for example the Vichy period -- are still shrouded in a miasma of silence and unwillingness to engage in open debate.

Huntington says that to criticize the United States because it has fallen short of its ideals is to mistake the whole nature of the society. It is because we have these ideals that we make these changes and there is the prospect for change in our society. I don't think any society has a history of as much change. One of the great things about American history is that it is a history of continuous change.

JAST: The American television show "West Wing" had a recent episode depicting Turkey as ruled by Islamic law and ordering the beheading of a woman for the crime of adultery. The network subsequently apologized to the Turkish ambassador in Washington. At the same time there is a popular Turkish novel *Metal Storm* that depicts a U.S.-Turkey war over northern Iraq. What are the origins and effects of this kind of cross-cultural stereotyping?

Edelman: Stereotyping is always potentially dangerous. That's why I said earlier that the more people actually know about other societies, the better off

we are. There is a huge asymmetry between the United States and Turkey. We loom very large in the Turkish psyche; Turkey looms a lot less large in the American psyche. I think most Americans probably go through a whole year without ever thinking about the Republic of Turkey. There is so much on the American plate, that Turkey just doesn't loom as large as we do here. On the American side a lot of what happens is born out of ignorance, or perhaps a perverse application of political correctness. I don't know how Turks came to be stereotyped in "West Wing," but we have a lot of organized lobbies in the United States that say we can't portray Arabs as terrorists. So perhaps they asked, "What other Muslims are there in the world?" It was stupid, and betrayed a real ignorance of Turkey. I'm sure it was hurtful to a lot of people here. I'm glad that Jeff Zucker [president of NBC television network] saw fit to apologize to Ambassador Loğoğlu. I think that was appropriate.

JAST: Have the authors of *Metal Storm* apologized to you?

Edelman: No, worse than that, the problem with the authors of *Metal Storm* is that they walk around saying this isn't fiction, this could be true! I have had that in my own experience here. After I once gave a lecture on U.S. politics at Selçuk University, the first question was some variant of this: "OK, you've invaded Afghanistan, you've invaded Iraq, we know you want to invade Iran and Syria. Is Turkey on your list and when will you start bombing Turkey?' And I replied, "The last thing in the mind of the American people or President Bush is attacking Turkey." So the way the local press translated this was, "Yes, the United States has a list and Turkey is at the bottom of it, so once we get done with Iran and Syria we're coming after Turkey." We can laugh at it and it is ludicrous, but it does speak of a deeper, underlying problem. It is broader in its origins than just the Iraq war. It is broader in the sense that we are in a unique period of time, probably unique in the past two millennia, with one global military, economic, and cultural superpower with no real peer competitor on the horizon. China may be a peer competitor someday but it isn't yet, and I don't see the EU as a peer competitor either. We spend more on defense than the next fourteen countries combined. The disquiet with American superpower status or whatever you want to call it -- American hegemony, American empire -- began with the collapse of the Soviet Union. But since September 11 the United States has twice gone halfway around the world and in very short order overturned political regimes: the Taliban, one of the worst examples of a radical Islamist regime, or "Islamic Fascism" as some people have described it, and then less than a year later destroying in three weeks a regime that at one time had been the most significant military power in the Arab world. That is profoundly

disquieting when there doesn't appear to be any check on that power. I don't think it translates into an American plan for world domination, nor occupying Turkey, nor any of these other things. But I think it means it behooves us to think carefully about how we act in the world and how we express ourselves. I think it is going to be with us for a long time to come.

JAST: What is your favorite spot in Turkey?

Edelman: It is hard for me to say, as there have been a lot of places we have enjoyed. We enjoyed our time in Bodrum, Antalya, and the beach resorts. We love going to Istanbul just because it is one of the great cities of the world. Turkey is such an incredibly rich place because of the confluence of different peoples who criss-crossed between Europe and Asia over the years. You can see everything from ancient Greek ruins to Ottoman imperial buildings and houses, to crusader castles and Hittite ruins. I think at some point when Turkey gets its economic house in order sufficiently, it needs to invest more in infrastructure to make some of this more accessible: better roads, hotels, etc. In terms of archaeology I think the surface has just been scratched because there is so much history here.

JAST: Will you come back to Turkey?

Edelman: I suspect that if the U.S. Senate confirms me I will be back here to brief my successor once or twice.

JAST: Which Olympic sport do you think your career as a diplomat has best prepared you for?

Edelman: Running away from questions like that!

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