



GENERAL HISTORY: H.R. McMASTER (ON WRITING)

By H.R. McMaster and Michael Neiberg May 4, 2021

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Michael Neiberg: Welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. I'm **Michael Neiberg**, Chair of War Studies at the United States Army War College, and today we're delighted to welcome **H.R. McMaster**, Retired Lieutenant General, former National Security Adviser and author of two important books, "Dereliction of Duty," and his latest book "Battlegrounds." Sir, welcome.

H.R. McMaster: Hey Mike, it's great to be with you. Thanks for having me.

MN: It's great to have you. I wanted to start by asking you, when an officer like you in the combat arms with obviously a decorated and promising career in the combat arms decided that you wanted to write books?

HRM: Well, I was always interested in history and I studied international relations at West Point, but I took as many history electives as I could as part of that and then after you have these formative experiences in our Army, for me as a cavalry troop commander, I was anxious to get back to school to learn more. I think it's a great aspect of a military career is that you get to have these challenging assignments and then you get a chance to reflect on them and prepare for the next level and being able to study history full time, the Army gave me that gift. The ability to do that at UNC Chapel Hill was a great experience. And fortunately I picked the topic that I got interested in and I couldn't not write that book because I felt almost like a duty to tell that story about how and why Vietnam became an American war and what the role that the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the president's other senior civilian and military advisers played in the decisions that led to an American war in Vietnam.

MN: So did you go to North Carolina thinking that was the book you wanted to write or is that something that emerged as you went through your graduate education there?

HRM: It really emerged as I went through my graduate education there. Of course, one of the most important things you do is pick the topic that you're going to research and write about. So I called back to the history department at West Point and I talked to Colonel Casey Brower, who was the acting head of the department that year. Colonel Bob Doughty was on sabbatical writing a book at the time. And I said, hey, what do you think I should write about? And he said, what are you interested in? I said, well, I'm really interested in a topic at the nexus of strategy

development and policy development and the role of senior military officers and providing best military advice and he said, hey, you should write about how and why Vietnam became an American war, because the timing is right. He said the documents are now becoming automatically declassified, and by the way, you still have access to people you can do interviews with them and you can get the context that will help you understand how that documentary record fits together and you can tell an important story. And he said, there's a lot of literature out there on it but that literature is not based on the wide body of evidence that's now available. So that was great advice, and he said, don't maybe just pick a topic because nobody else has done it, there might be a reason for that, why nobody has done the topic. So if you're interested in the topic, there's always room for a good history of the topic you're interested in.

MN: Yeah, that's what I tell people all the time. It has to be a topic you're passionate about. It has to be something that will have you awake at three in the morning. It has to be something that'll keep your brain going, or else it's no use and there's no other reason to write a book.

HRM: Absolutely.

MN: You had at North Carolina one of my mentors, Professor Dick Kohn who was just incredibly influential to me as an informal kind of advisor, someone I would call for advice, talk to at conferences, once in a while go down to Chapel Hill to see him. What did you learn through the writing process and then your professors at UNC? And what did that process teach you?

HRM: Well, they were just great professors at UNC, Dick Kohn and of course foremost among them my advisor and others, Don Higginbotham, Michael Hunt, both of whom have passed, which I'm sad about, they were just tremendous professors for me. Alex Roland at Duke, Tami Biddle, who's work at the War College was tremendous as well. These were the members of my committee. I had a great committee. Mark Clodfelter who's a wonderful historian and a wonderful person. And they I think that Dick Kohn understood what I needed coming into academia from the field, I needed to orient myself. So he put me and another army officer through kind of an academic boot camp in the summer. We had to read a book a week and write I think a two-page review on each book, which really teaches you how to write succinctly and concisely and analytically and that was a great experience to get just back into academia and to be prepared for the academic year. And then we took a number of courses with various professors, but one of them was with Dick Kohn and with Alex Roland and I'll tell you, that was a great course. It was a seminar on military history, and we read some the great books on military history and wrote reviews and we were critiqued by Dick Kohn and Alex Roland in every paper we wrote and it just made us better. I just think the overall graduate school experience was wonderful. Don Higginbotham was so funny after I took my written exams, he said, congratulations HR, you now know more history than you will ever know. But it was just a very supportive environment. They were supportive of me writing the book. I think your thesis for

your masters is supposed to be maybe 40 pages, mine was 248 pages because it was a jump start on the dissertation and they were tolerant and supportive of doing that. It was just a great environment there at UNC Chapel Hill as it is today with great professors. Our friend Wayne Lee, who's running an amazing program there, Joe Glatthaar, it's a neat place to study history and military history in particular.

MN: Yeah. John Higginbotham was another good friend of mine. He was at the Air Force Academy a lot as a visitor when I was there. To have mentors like that that you can sit down and talk to is really something special. I wanted to ask you, "Dereliction of Duty," unusually, I think for a first book or dissertation, did not come out with the University Press. It came out with the Trade Press. Did you have that sense as you were writing that you wanted to speak to an audience beyond just Vietnam War historians, or even just beyond your fellow officers? Did you have a sense even as you were doing the book that this is something that general readers are going to be interested in? Did you have that in mind as you were writing?

HRM: You know, I did. I thought it was a story that the American people would want to know. And it was the right time. Vietnam, of course, evokes tremendous emotion across our nation. And now 30 years after the war, I think people were ready to come to grips with the war in a way that they maybe they weren't ready to do earlier. And so I wanted to write it for a general audience. I finished the manuscript about the time of the American Historical Association Convention in Chicago at that moment. So I went to Kinkos, as you did back then, I got a bunch of copies of the manuscript and I handed them out at various University Presses there, to those who would take it from me at the American Historical Association Convention. And I got two calls in my hotel room because this was before cell phones, with offers from University Presses, so I was encouraged that, hey, it's going to get published. I was excited about that.

MN: At the conference this happened? You submitted the thing and before you left the conference? I've never heard of that happening before.

HRM: Because they have tables set up with their latest books and so forth. And I just foisted my manuscript on a couple of the editors who were there, there were a lot of them. I gave out, maybe 10 copies of the manuscript but I had two offers by the end of the conference.

MN: That's remarkable, I've never heard of that happening before.

HRM: It was encouraging. I was very fortunate too. I guess one of the good things that Robert McNamara did, is that he wrote that memoir that was, I think, kind of a cynical attempt to manipulate history around the time I finished, and I think a lot of people were saying, well, I wish we knew what the real story was in terms of McNamara's role, and I just finished a manuscript that in large measure detailed his role in those decisions that led to an American war

in Vietnam and then I came back to the history department and I told my mentor Cole Kingseed who was my first professor of history at West Point when I was a freshman, a plebe undergraduate, and then he was my sponsor there while he taught there. The sponsors are the faculty member whose house you go over to on the weekends and he was a great mentor and friend of mine and he returned to the history department as a permanent professor there. And he read the manuscript and he said, do you mind if I send this to Carlo D'Este because Carlo D'Este is interested in this topic and he publishes with HarperCollins and he might be able to advise you on a commercial press. So he sent it to Carlo D'Este. Carlo D'Este contacted me, who is, of course a wonderful person and a very accomplished military historian, wrote the definitive biography of Patton and wrote about so many important campaigns in World War II in such an incisive way, including a great book on Anzio, for example. It was a thrill for me to get a call from Carlo D'Este. He said, hey, do you mind if I send this to my editor who was a guy named Buzz Wyeth at HarperCollins, a real gentleman and a very accomplished editor who'd been editing books since 1946 and had edited, I think some of the real seminal works in military history. So he called me two days later I think, very quickly, with an offer from HarperCollins, which was thrilling for me because I knew I'd be able to maybe reach a wider readership with the book and so forth. I was just very fortunate. I didn't really have an agent, a family friend represented me for the contract negotiations. I think he sent it out to Random House who made a matching offer and then HarperCollins made the final offer, which I always wanted to go with them anyways because Buzz Wyeth made the drive up from New York and met me for lunch at the Thayer Hotel, and we hit it off and I just thought what a privilege it will be to work with such an accomplished editor and a real gentleman.

MN: Yeah, I think that's what you need. You need the quality of the project. You need someone who believes in it and you need someone who will sort of represent for you and advise you through that process. Dennis Showalter did that for me to get my first book published or it never would have happened if it hadn't been for Dennis.

HRM: Mike, what a fine person he was too.

MN: Yeah.

HRM: And a character, a hoot. The guy was just so fun to be around, and he had the best sayings. He would sum up really the most important historical insights into a single phrase. Talking about Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in World War II in Operation Barbarossa, he would say, it was like David and Goliath, but David missed. Just great sayings.

MN: He had one about attrition in World War I. He said that attrition cannot mean that two Frenchmen attacked one German and the last guy alive drinks prune juice as a toast. That can't be the way you define attrition. Yeah, you have to have people who believe in what you're doing,

but you have to give them something to believe in which you obviously did with this project. Were you surprised at just how successful this book became? This became something that was on every reading list. When I was advising graduate students and MA and PhD students, it was always on every list that we looked at. Were you surprised at just how popular it became?

HRM: I don't think I was that surprised because I was so drawn to the story myself. Obviously because I dove into the research and I think my wife Katie thought I was crazy because I would come home for dinner with our daughters and then go back in until I just couldn't write anymore. I was really obsessed with telling this story because I thought it was an important story to tell and I was excited by what I was finding out with these archival collections that nobody had access to previously. I'm really indebted to the Marine Corps Historical Association and another great historian, General Ed Simmons, who ran the Marine Corps Historical Association for so many years. He got me into the Commandants' Papers, Wallace Greens' papers, and I was in all these other collections, and I would read... Wallace Green kept everything. He kept notes on all this. He would come back from meetings and dictate the minutes of the meeting to his assistant and then he would annotate those notes. And put "nb", nota bene, next to the important passages, and I thought, well, I've got to get into this collection. Nobody had gotten into them before and then General Simmons got me into General Green's papers, and it had the minutes of meetings in the tank with the Joint Chiefs of Staff that didn't exist anywhere else. Howard K. Johnson took notes on 5x8 cards, and I was going through all those 5x8 cards and a researcher might not really make sense of that because those 5x8 cards had a certain date on it, it had certain notes on it, but when you placed it in context of the other documents from the National Archives, or from Wheeler's papers, from Curtis LeMay's papers, then it fit together and you could piece this puzzle together and tell the story. And then of course the tapes of telephone conversations came out from the Johnson Library and that provided another layer of insight and also it allowed me to tell stories within the book that I think kept readers interested. I don't think it was any great... the book is not a great literary achievement for sure but at least I think there was enough color and personality in it so that the reader would enjoy learning the history I think of how and why Vietnam became an American war. But I was lucky, Mike, I got onto the right story at the right time with the right access to materials to be able to tell the story.

MN: And then, remarkably, this book is doing what it's doing. It's becoming popular. It's becoming influential. Correct me if I'm wrong. Just as you are kind of moving from operational level assignments to the kind of strategic level assignments that you talked about in the book. Did that experience of having written the book change the way you thought about strategy and the way that you thought about the way that these discussions and decisions had to take place? It must have.

HRM: Absolutely. I think it's the best educational strategy I could have had is to really... Sir Michael Howard said, the way that you need to study history, military history in particular, but

really I think all history is in width, depth and in context. And this was an opportunity to study decision making and policy making at the national level in tremendous depth and I think that understanding really served me well in later assignments, especially as national security advisor and I write in the concluding chapter of the most recent book, “Battlegrounds,” really what I had learned from writing “Dereliction of Duty,” and then what I did as national security adviser to at least try to not make the same mistakes. And I think it was just an invaluable experience to be able to write the book and then also to have assignments in the Middle East, in Iraq, in Afghanistan that I think allowed me to draw on that knowledge base and in a way that I think helped me do a better job serving the commands that I was in and doing a better job serving the country.

MN: So I want to switch to “Battlegrounds” now. I want to make sure that we do talk about that book before we run out of time here. “Battlegrounds” is a very different kind of book, wherein “Dereliction of Duty” you're able to focus on one sort of limited in space and time event. In “Battlegrounds” you really are moving back and forth in time. You're moving across virtually the entire globe. How do you even begin to organize a book of that large a scope? How do you figure out what it's going to look like, what you're going to include and what you're necessarily going to have to exclude? How much of the process of writing was taken up by those fundamental questions?

HRM: Well quite a bit of it. And of course, when I started to write it, I thought what the heck did I get myself into with a book of this scope? But I really felt a sense of duty that I needed to try to explain, make accessible to general readers, the greatest challenges that we faced and what we should do about them as a way to maybe help reverse the polarization in our society and help us really understand better how we can work together to build a better future for generations to come. That was the purpose of the book. So I felt driven to do it and now the question that you're asking is, okay, well, how the heck do you do that? Well, I brought with me I think a certain amount of knowledge about these challenges from my career, from the privilege that I had serving in various jobs and especially as National Security Adviser. So I had a general base of knowledge. But really, writing this book was I think the best way to guide my self-education about each of these challenges. Now I could not have written this book anywhere I think but at the Hoover Institution at Stanford and I write about this in the last several paragraphs of “Battlegrounds,” about how fortunate I was to be able to write this book at Stanford and at the Hoover Institution because I worked with amazing students, student research assistants and what I did is I made a generic outline for each of these chapters. I'm a historian so predictably, I thought each of these challenges that I wrote about, whether it's the challenge of Putin's Russia or the Chinese Communist Party, or the hostile states of Iran and North Korea or the jihadist terrorist problem set centered on South Asia or the greater Middle East or emerging battlegrounds and contested spaces in cyberspace and space and associated with global issues like climate change or health security. So it was a huge scope, but I came up with a kind of

generic outline for each chapter. Tell the story of how that challenge developed, understanding how the recent past produced the present I think is the first step in making a projection into the future. Then try to understand the nature of this particular challenge on its own terms. This is by borrowing of the term strategic empathy from Zachary Short. In particular, try to understand the emotions, the ideology, the aspirations that drive and constrain the other as part of the story. Then explain to the readers, so what? Why do they care? Why should they care about this? What's at stake in this challenge? And then finally, of course, what are the options? What are the options that we can employ? What are the actions we can take? The efforts we can make to overcome these challenges, take advantage of opportunities and build a better future? So that's kind of the standard outline. And then what I did is I had conversations with my research assistants who were assigned to each chapter and asked them to develop what I called evidence sheets that paralleled that particular outline and the research that they did really was on one sheet of paper typically that provided the evidence, the statistics, the analysis from secondary literature or primary source materials that were relevant to that outline, and then I matched that to the outline and did my own reading and I would have maybe 15 books out on that particular topic across a big table in the Hoover Tower, the literal ivory tower in the middle of Stanford's campus on the 11th floor with a great view, with these cathedral windows and the floor to ceiling bookcases and the ladder, the whole scene. And I would lay out the evidence sheets, refine the outline, have the books out and just start writing. And for me, writing is rewriting, and so I would write maybe four times more than the chapter could bear, and then I would start to neck it down and I would have within these documents, conversations with my research assistants: can you find this statistic? What's the contrary point of view to this point that I'm making? Can I anticipate counterarguments? We worked on this together with about 15 research assistants, and I'm telling you it was a blast. It was like a graduate seminar with them. And I had readers testing it out who were giving me feedback and that was the audience I wanted to reach by the way anyways. I wanted to reach the younger generation as well and then of course, I imposed chapters on all my friends who are experts much more than I am in these areas and sent them early drafts, which they suffered through and provided me great feedback and helped me improve the book immeasurably. So that was sort of the process was this interaction with research assistants across really almost a two-year period, the development of these evidence sheets, the writing, the rewriting and re-editing and sending it out for criticisms and suggestions and refining it. And then of course, a friend of mine who's a sculptor, he's a really very accomplished sculptor, he's done a lot of popular stuff like the Jurassic Park sculptures that were used as the basis for the animation and everything. And I was talking to him about the book and how I really wanted to do a good job with it and I don't know if I'm going to be able to finish it and he said, hey, projects like that are never finished, they're abandoned. That's what he told me. He said, at some point you have to abandon it.

MN: At some point, you have to just let it go onto the nest, is the way I always think about it and just see if it hits the ground or if it flies away. There's nothing else you can do well. I have a lot

more things I'd like to talk about with you, but I know your time is limited and I know that I can see the clock starting to wind down. So I want to ask you really just two final questions. The last question is one I ask everybody but the next to last question I want to ask is a controversial figure like Robert McNamara, living in his mind for as long as you did, did it lead you to a kind of greater empathy for him, a greater dislike for him? How did spending so much time in his world affect the way that you thought about him? Or any other individual if you'd rather talk about someone else?

HRM: Yeah. I think McNamara is a good example. I think what it convinced me of is that somebody can be brilliant. Nobody can accuse Robert McNamara of being anything but a formidable intellect, but flaws of character and compromise of principle for expediency, it can lead to disaster. In a leader is it more important to have someone who's brilliant or someone who is strong in character and I think it always comes down on the character side. Because if somebody is strong in character, and particularly if they're secure in themselves, they're well motivated, they're there because of their sense of duty to the country, and in the military obviously to their fellow servicemen and women, that base motivation combined with strength of character and humility... You can convene a whole lot of smart people around an issue. But what I think McNamara's example is an example of how important character is in a senior leader.

MN: The last question that we have time for, and it's one that I ask everybody that I talk to on the podcast. What are you reading right now?

HRM: Okay, so I usually have about three or four different books going. Right now, I'm reading this really interesting book by Jorge Castaneda: "America Through Foreign Eyes." It's how others around the world view America. I'm going to interview him for a series that I do called "Battlegrounds," which is a series of long format interviews with world leaders. I'm finishing "Black Wave," which is a Kim Ghattas book on the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It's an extremely well-done book and right behind me here, I'm rereading this edited volume on the Imperial Moment by Kim Kagan because I got in an argument with Niall Ferguson about whether America was an empire. I say it's not an empire and so I'm reading up on that so I can go toe to toe with Niall, which is no small task. And then I'm reading a wide range of books on presidents and presidential character, rereading a lot of them because I'm writing another book mainly about my time as National Security Adviser and I want it to be a substantive book, so I am rereading Fred Greenstein and Alexander George and James David Barber and I've got a whole bunch of memoirs stacked up as well as books on presidential leadership and national security. I've got Peter Robbins' book, "Presidential Command," and so I'm just kind of dabbling in those and there are bunch of other books here that I've started and am in the middle of "Syrian Requiem" which is a great book on the Syrian Civil War, I think the best one out there right now. So a bunch of different books. I am always going and then feel guilty about not finishing a lot of them but moving on to the next one.

MN: Spoken like a true historian. My wife jokes that my Myers Briggs type must be ISBN because there's always books stacked everywhere.

HRM: Oh well let me tell you, Don Higginbotham who I mentioned before, I once asked him, I said hey, have you read... because you're a grad student now, you want to strike up a conversation with your professor on it, I asked, maybe it was Gordon Woods' latest book or something, "Radicalization of the American Revolution" or something and he stopped, he said, HR, historians do not read books, they use them.

MN: Yeah, there's some truth in that. Well, Sir, I want to thank you. I know how busy you are. I want to thank you for taking the time. It's been a pleasure talking to you. I wish we had more time and hopefully we'll get to continue the conversation at some point down the road.

HRM: Thanks Mike, I appreciate it. Thank you so much.

MN: Thank you.