

An Interview with Dr. Laura McEnaney
Keynote Speaker for 2009 Urban Studies Programs' Forum
Dr. McEnaney Talks about Research, Teaching and Writing

Interviewed by Dan Murphy, Doctoral Student, Urban Studies Programs,
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Dr. Laura McEnaney served as the keynote speaker for the Urban Studies Programs' 14th Annual Student Forum on April 4, 2009. She earned her Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and currently teaches history at Whittier College in Whittier, California. She is the author of Civil Defense Begins at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life in the Fifties and specializes in historical studies related to post-World War II urban life. She currently is working on her second book-length work, tentatively titled World War II's "Postwar": A Social and Policy History of Peace, 1944–1953. Dan Murphy, doctoral student in the Urban Studies Programs, interviewed Dr. McEnaney on April 3, 2009 and discussed her perspectives on urban studies, research, and teaching.

Dan Murphy (Q):

What first interested you in urban studies, and what prompted your urban interests?

Laura McEnaney (A):

Well, I come to urban studies from two different disciplines. One is the history of the postwar [post World War II] United States, which was one of my specialties in graduate school. The other is a specialty in the history of women—twentieth century. So I was not trained as an urbanist, but city development—urbanization—is always part of the constellation of question you're asking as a twentieth-century U.S. historian, particularly if you're studying the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

So when I started to think about dissertation topics, I was not thinking about cities, but the dissertation sort of drew me back to cities. My work focused on civil defense programs—the various array of nuclear-defense programs in the 1950s sponsored by federal, state, and local governments. So I sort of found my way there through that question about how the government tried to inculcate national security values and mindsets in Americans. And since so many Americans were living in cities, the puzzle about how you get city people to survive this became an urban question for me. So it was really via studying national security and Cold War questions that I found my way to the post-war city.

Q: Interesting. So as a historian from the beginning, how do you balance history and urban studies?

A: Well, now my questions in this new project... my questions are more interdisciplinary because urban studies is interdisciplinary. So I have benefited from reaching into other literatures and talking with colleagues and trying to understand my questions in this new project in a broader way and understanding that I'm going to necessarily be more interdisciplinary in that quest—reading economics, urban planning, architecture, all of those disciplines that have something to say about postwar cities that I haven't really dipped into before. So it's been a good experience for me coming from a formal training in United States history to dip into these other literatures.

Q: What do you think the goal of urban history is?

A: That's an interesting question. I think the way that I'm understanding the goal of urban history and the way that I'm using urban history is to look at two layers of the urban experience. One is the policy layer: understanding how federal, state, and local policymakers envisioned the city after World War II, how they fought over what it should look like, who should govern it, who should receive the resources, and how

people should live together. And that policy piece is really important because of the emerging Cold War, and cities become part of the conversation about the Cold War in the sense of understanding what they mean for national security. And as I said, that was a question that I dealt with in my first project.

The second purpose, I think, of urban history is the other layer, which is the social history layer: how did people live in cities; understanding that postwar experience at a sort of granular level; really looking at front stoops, sidewalks, streets, parks. How were people using cities in this period of suburbanization? How did people experience these changes in urban areas in the postwar period as the excitement about the suburbs was looming? And there were a lot of people who wanted to stay in the cities. So what did they envision for their city, and how did they fight to preserve their own vision of what “neighborhood” should be? And as we know, those fights were around race, use of the streets, housing policy, the built environment. All of those questions were in circulation among ordinary people, not just policymakers. So, for me, I really am interested in policy and social history of postwar cities because I think that’s where you start to see those two worlds interact, collide, and cooperate.

Q: OK. So would you say you like to combine the top-down [and] bottom-up approaches?

A: Yes. Very much. Yeah. People and policy.

Q: You mentioned earlier that you have been embracing a wider array of disciplines in your research as it has become more urban. So how can different fields like sociology, political science, geography, and urban history find common grounds to work together to improve knowledge about the urban environment?

A: What I think is that all of these disciplines can ask a similar question—roughly a similar question—but I think their methods will be different, and people in all of those

disciplines sort of cross-pollinate. But I think, for me, the benefit of the historian for the sociologist and the political scientist and the economist is giving what they're trying to understand in this current moment some historical depth. You know, I'm trained in my discipline. I think through my discipline. I read outside my discipline, but ultimately I think historical perspective can both broaden and deepen the perspectives of the other social sciences in really important ways.

Q: I like that.

A: Well, I'm sort of a partisan. I'm team-teaching a class right now, "Comparative Social Movements," and we're looking at social movements in the United States and Latin America. And I've noticed that sociologists are quite bold in their assertions without a lot of historical grounding. And we have history students and sociology students in there and I've noticed the tension between them because sociology students will say big things about social movements across regions and across time periods. And in a way, I appreciate that bravery because they are trying to advance a thesis statement after they've read some material. The historians are much more timid, and they always say, "Well, it depends. What was the context?" So, you know, I do think the social sciences—as I said—can benefit from some of the qualification and carefulness of the historian, but I think the historian can borrow from the boldness of the other social sciences in their theoretical proclamations.

Q: Where do you get your research ideas? Do they just hit you, or is it more of a slow, deliberative process where you development the kernel of an idea into something bigger?

A: For me, it's always been [that] a question emerges from another set of questions. It's always something that is slow and deliberative, and it always happens when I'm thinking about something else and something I can't answer leads me to a different set of

questions. But I have to say, too, that a lot of my research questions come from my own seeking and sifting.

My research questions come from teaching as well because I teach at a small liberal arts college, and I have to teach the U.S. history survey [class]. When you have to put together a synthesis of the twentieth century, you sort of have to think synthetically and thematically, and when you're forced to do that—in other words, when you step away from the chronology, World War I, then the '20s, then World War II—when you're forced to think synthetically and thematically it raises new questions, at least for me. I benefit from teaching in those ways, too. Teaching is informing my questions, partly because my students are asking me questions but partly because I'm always trying to synthesize and find connection, and those are the attempts that lead me to different kinds of questions. So besides my own seeking for my own research, my work in the classroom raises new questions for me, and I like that synergy between the two.

Q: How do you approach research? Where do you begin? Once you've developed a set of questions and you want to look for answers, where do you begin, and do you have any tips for other researchers?

A: Well, I always keep a journal [from] when I start. The most exciting step, I think, is the purchasing of new supplies in any research project, and my first purchase is always a research journal because when you get an idea, or get that question, there's a kind of manic phase. For me, the way I can make sense of that is just by writing down my questions. All of them without censoring them at all, and I keep them in a kind of research diary. And then I go back to those questions, and I decide which question can actually lead me to a paper trail—if there's a paper trail for this question. Is it a good question? I can sort of edit, revise, and then see what questions might match up with an actual source base.

Once I'm in that stage, I do a lot of early reconnaissance. I do a lot of sort of pre-research reconnaissance. Where are the collections? What are the dimensions of the

collections? When I was writing my dissertation, this was not as easy as it is to do now because so many collections—or at least the indexes are—are digitized. So now I use a lot of the material on the Web to do the kind of reconnaissance I used to have to do by getting myself to Washington, D.C.

My other favorite part—besides the purchasing of supplies—is actually finally sitting down with the documents. I love that. I still love it. I did it this January, and I still absolutely love it! The part that I find the most difficult is coming back after the trip and staring at the pile of paper and figuring out, “When do I start to write?” The thing that I was told in graduate school and that I tell my historical-method students now and that I have to keep telling myself, “You have to write before you think you’re ready.” Every cell in your body is telling you, “Collect more. Sort more. Organize more.” Sometimes that’s true, but most often you need to start writing before you think you’re ready because new questions will come about your work and it’s only through writing that you can discover the gaps in your research. So my advice to graduate students would be to write before you think you’re ready. And, in fact, if you’re not ready, you will find that out too. There’s no harm in this exercise of writing on the earlier side.

Q: That’s very good advice.

A: Well, it’s hard. It’s so hard to take it. Writing is thinking. Forcing yourself to write brings discipline to what’s in your head, and the only way you can find that discipline and sort of center those questions is through writing. Otherwise, it’s a lot of voices in your head, and you’ll just carry them around.

Q: What is your most memorable research moment?

A: I think it was when I was researching my master’s thesis. I was looking at this right-wing social movement, and I had discovered a set of newsletters that no one had really looked at in the Wisconsin State Historical Society. I could see from the circulation

record that it hadn't been checked out in a long time, and I think what excited me about that was that—something very mundane—that I could actually touch something that someone in the past had produced. And I had that feeling again when I was researching my dissertation when I came across a letter that Eleanor Roosevelt had actually signed or Mary McLeod Bethune [a U.S. educator who specialized in educating African-American women in the early twentieth century] had actually touched. There's something really intoxicating for a historian to be able to touch the documents because we're always trying to talk to dead people, and that's a one-way conversation usually. So when you actually get to touch the stuff... I just remember this feeling of exhilaration. And I still have that. It's just really still very enjoyable to be in the documents because history is not in abstractions. Real people touched these documents, and now I'm connected to them through my immersion in [the documents]. So it's not one moment. It's really the research moment over and over and over again.

Q: Just being able to engage with those documents?

A: Yeah, to engage with them. There is something very tactile about being a historian. We want to look at our documents. We want to touch our documents. I was at a conference at the [Harry S.] Truman Library with many other historians from around the world, and one of the things they thought would entertain us was taking us into the sort of innards of the archive and showing us some of the documents that Truman had produced in the very early stages of the Cold War. And what I noticed was that every [document]: NSC-68, a draft of the Truman Doctrine... What almost all historians wanted to do was put their hands on it. And I thought, "Yeah. Right. We would want to touch it. We would want to interact with it." And I think for a lot of historians the memorable moments are when you can get that close to your topic because, as I said, it's no longer an abstraction. Now you're part of it.

Q: I want to switch gears just a little bit and talk more about writing. We talked a little bit about it. I read [your] “Nightmares on Elm Street: Demobilizing in Chicago, 1945–1953” last semester, and I noticed that you have a very engaging writing style. Where does that come from? How do you sift through your research and craft the material to make it interesting?

A: Well, thank you. That was an interesting article to write. It came from a chapter that I had written originally, and I remember thinking that I wanted very consciously to try to relax finally as a writer. For a long time in graduate school, you learn to write in a very formulaic way, and I think that’s appropriate because my advisers were very tough writing instructors and taskmasters. And they taught us the historical method, and part of the historical method is a way of writing about documents and a way of writing arguments, and that writing style sort of hung over me when I was writing my first book.

So when I started a new project I started to think, “Let me just see what I write like if I relax, if I try to break some of the conventions that I’d learned, some of the conventions of historical writing, if I could just take a deep breath and think about, ‘How would I want to tell this story? How do I want to structure this narrative?’ and then really make sure the way I’m telling it is honoring the method and the rigor of document analysis and argumentation.” And I thought if I could make those two things go together—lively narrative and still the rigor of the method—then I would be happy with the outcome. So that’s what I tried to do: relax into a writing voice that I felt comfortable with while still staying true to the method. But it was hard, you know. It was very hard because those voices in your head of your graduate advisers stay with you.

Q: Oh, absolutely. Echo on in your mind forever... [both laugh] One thing that stood out to me the most about “Nightmares...” was [that] it felt you effectively blended the stories of individuals and sort of made them feel like characters, even though they’re

not characters—they're real people. How do you sort of balance telling the stories of individual people and then bring that into your overall theme?

A: I think it comes from my interest in merging social history and policy history. My overall goal was to merge those two literatures in my telling of this story of the history of rent control in postwar Chicago. I wanted to be attentive to the daily grind of demobilization but [also to] the larger policy debate about the way it should unfold, and I struggled—as all historians do and will—because writing characters in history is very difficult because the paper trail begins and then it stops. You find one amazing person, and you can't find out what happened to them. You rarely find outcomes. Sometimes you do, and sometimes you can trace a story and find—literally, for one person—a beginning, a middle, and an end. That was very rare, so I sometimes had to blend characters' beginnings with other characters' middles and other characters' ends to sort of create a composite character who could stand for the other kinds of evidence that I had seen. So that's how I dealt with it.

Sometimes I had the benefit of wonderful, rich records and I could follow a character—or a building became a character, like the two buildings on Elm Street—and sometimes the paper trail stopped, and I had to create a composite. But I always felt that it was important to keep my focus on the people and the policy at the same time because you don't want to lose the "So what?" question. So here are all these people suffering. So what? What do we make of this? How does their story fit into something larger that we're trying to struggle with as historians? How does it help us answer a bigger question about postwar policy? So that was always my goal: to always have the "So what?" in my head.

Q: In "Nightmares..." when you assembled the information about the characters—or the people in the narrative—and then you would discuss the events at the rent control offices in Chicago... How did you approach research for that? Did you find information in completely different places?

A: I found a lot of it in those rent control records in the Chicago branch of the National Archives. That record group was a treasure trove. It was first just a reconnaissance mission. It was one of my reconnaissance trips, and I began to talk to the archivist and he said, "We have boxes and boxes and boxes." And I said, "OK. Let me order a sampling of these boxes." It was very difficult to sift through at first, but what I figured out was each case had some element of a beginning, middle, and an end. Not every case had all three. Sometimes they had a beginning and an end, and I don't what happened in the middle. And sometimes they had a beginning and no end, but I found a lot of that in the case records. But, the case records introduced... Documents rarely answer questions. They introduce more questions. They rarely offer clear answers to questions but rather they introduce new questions that lead you to new sources, and that's what keeps the hunt going.

So I had to go into court records sometimes to try to find out an outcome. What was the end of the story? They said it went to court. Can I find it? I went to [U.S.] Census records because some of the stories were of single women in the city, and I had to try to figure out what they were doing there. How many were there? I wanted to use records of settlement houses [and] the Travelers Aid Society, because these women were moving from the train station to the rooming house to the apartment. So I found organizations that would have had some contact with these kinds of women and these veterans. So it was really piecing together places where they might have gone and seeing if there were organizations that might have—through their eyes—recorded what they saw. And if I could blend the recordings of others with the real voices of these folks in the rent records, I thought maybe I could construct a narrative. And sometimes I was lucky, and sometimes I was just unlucky.

There were a lot of stories that I just couldn't piece together, and that was really frustrating. And the court cases, too... Sometimes they would say, "This went to court." ... Cook County... it's terrible. I tried to find the end of many court cases, and they were not helpful. This was really incredible to me. I showed up with my list of questions, my

cases, my dates, and they just said, “Well, some of the cases... some of the dockets are alphabetized, some of them are not.” And I just hit some real dead ends in county records, and, you know, that’s again part of the method. What do you do when you hit the dead end?

Q: So when you hit a dead end, you just continued to try to piece together things by going to different places?

A: I did. Yeah, I did. And, again, sometimes I was lucky, and sometimes I just said, “Alright, the quest ends here. I have to decide. This isn’t worth pursuing anymore.”

Q: So, you won the Binkley-Stephenson Award for this article [“Nightmares on Elm Street Demobilizing in Chicago, 1945–1953” for best scholarly article in the *Journal of American History*] in 2006? Well, you published it in 2006, but you won in 2007. Correct?

A: Yeah.

Q: What was that like? I mean, did it feel good to be recognized?

A: It was a thrill! I have to say it was a thrill, and I’ll tell you why for two reasons. Nothing feels better than having peers you respect tell you that they respect your work. And the second piece that was a thrill was because, as I had mentioned earlier, I tried to really relax my writing style and find something that felt more authentic to me and the way I want to tell stories rather than the conventions of academic writing. So, to have tried that and then to still have that rewarded and respected was an absolute thrill for me and a confirmation that the project was moving in the right direction.

Q: Well, I know that you're working on a book. This ["Nightmares..."] is a chapter from a larger work. And is this all going to be related to Chicago rent control [after World War II]?

A: Yes. The story I'm telling about the demobilization from World War II uses Chicago as the case-study city, but I've recently been talking to other historians about a chapter that can only be based on secondary sources but that will still be comparative, looking at other postwar moments in other postwar societies, because I think what "postwar" means is an interesting question. And I think it means different things, obviously, in different wars and different countries. And so Chicago will be my case-study city, but I will always try to be informing what I say about Chicago with larger themes that come from other cities in the United States but also other cities in other parts of the world. I was invited to a conference last year by the University of Maryland, the University of North Carolina, and the German Historical Institute. At the German Historical Institute there was about twenty of us, and it was a comparative conference on the two postwar Germanys and the postwar United States. It was really interesting to sit in a room with people who were both U.S. citizens studying postwar Germany and postwar Germans themselves puzzling over their own history. So Chicago will be the case-study city, but that conference led me to think about in broader ways, and I'm going to be doing some reading on international postwar themes and questions when I start my sabbatical this year.

Q: So, most of the book will deal with Chicago, but then you're going to have a chapter that deals with different cities?

A: I might. I haven't decided. It's still something that I'm toying with. Probably, it would be something of an afterward or an epilogue where I try to sort of take the questions I think have been raised by my own case study and look at how those questions have played out in other post-conflict societies. In political science, there is a fairly extensive

literature on post-conflict societies. And, again, I haven't dipped into it yet, but that's something I intend to do on sabbatical. I've gotten a lot of support to do that from scholars who are looking at other countries. So that's been encouraging.

Q: Yes, I think that would help out, where it [your research] could be applied to other places.

A: Yeah. Yeah. Because historians do this all the time, right? You look at postwar Milwaukee or wartime Milwaukee or San Diego during World War II. This is sort of the way we work. We build case studies. We do deep case studies that have a lot of depth, but our questions have to have breadth. When we finish the case study, we have to sort of ask again the "So what?" question and see if the "So what?" question connects with other experiences across the country. And I like that, actually, about our discipline that you get to really dive deeply into something and give it respect, but then you have to pull yourself out of that and start to make connections. Because I don't like superficial studies of things that I think need our respect. And that means focus.

Q: Do you have a name planned for the book?

A: I do. This is my working title, and it may change. It's called *World War II's "Postwar": A Social and Policy History of Peace, 1944–1953*. But I'm sure an editor is going to say, "Not sexy."

Q: I wanted to talk a little bit about teaching, but before we get into that I wanted to ask you how you balance researching, writing, and teaching? Which of the three do you prefer, if any?

A: Oh, OK. Insert, "big sigh." [big sigh; laughter] That is the challenge of this career. If you love teaching and you love scholarship, they're going to fight with each other for

the duration of your career. But if you love both of them, you're not going to want to give them up, and I love both of them. So, there's sibling rivalry all the time between teaching and research.

I teach at a small liberal-arts college, and we call ourselves teacher-scholars. And I like that because I think it honors what is important about what we do at Whittier College, but I think the scholarly component has to be there. I think that I have to model the curious mind for my students, that I am still seeking knowledge. I am still seeking to consume it and to produce it. I also see a responsibility to share it with others, and that is the teaching component. So those two things are very important to me. I wouldn't want to give either one up, but trying to find that balance is really difficult and it has been in an ongoing way.

I think, too, that you have to adjust the clock of your scholarly productivity if you're working as a full-time teacher. I have to—like a lot of graduate students—stop for a while. You know, I just did a research trip in January, and I still have the pile of papers sitting on my desk because I was on three committees, I was starting school, we were doing the search for a dean. You know, there were many, many things that I had to do. So, I've had to stop and start, and that is not easy. You have to be tenacious. You have to be tenacious about it.

Q: What's your philosophy behind teaching? Do you have different approaches with undergraduate and graduate students? Or how do you feel about teaching, and what is your approach?

A: Well, I don't work with graduate students at Whittier because we're an undergraduate college. I've only worked with graduate students in sort of an ad-hoc way—e-mail, correspondence, advising—which is delightful actually. The way I think about teaching is that I'm not doing harm to society. It's a job that, hopefully, is helping. I think of it as a job that serves a larger good, a greater good. And that was very important to me when I was trying to think about what I wanted to do with my life. I

wanted to... not do harm. I wanted to do good, and I wanted to serve in some way. And teaching really allowed me to make a living but be a good citizen and contribute something. That was essential for me to be able to live with myself.

Then the way that I think about teaching... I think about it as a sort of contact sport [laughs]. The educational setting at a small liberal-arts college is small in scale—very, very different than a large university—and different kinds of things can happen because of the smaller setting, which I quite enjoy. I don't lecture a whole lot. I actually do sort of mini-lectures, and then we do a lot of document analysis and then group discussion. And a lot of the questions percolate up from the students to me. A lot of the collaborative discussion we're doing comes from putting a document in front of them and saying, "What do you make of this? What kind of narrative comes out of this? What questions does the document answer, and what kinds of questions does it not answer? And now where do we need to go to answer those questions?" So, it's very interactive. My teaching doesn't go along the old formula of lecture and note-taking. I don't think students learn well that way, and it's just not the way you can do it at a small liberal-arts college.

And the other thing I just don't do is I don't use a textbook, and I don't use chronologies necessarily in the way that students are taught sometimes in high school. There's a lot of new research on teaching in the sort of psychology of education. There's actually sort of a science of how students learn history. You know, they've studied how do students learn math, how do students learn science, and now there is that developing literature for history. And so I've been inspired by that to not play memory games but to ask questions that are relevant to students' lives and try to seek the answers with them. And that's really the approach I take.

Q: That phrase—something about how students can apply it to their lives—how do you make that work with something that may be 200 years old, 100 years old?

A: Well, it's sort of picking your case studies carefully. For example, in the Progressive Era there were a lot of young people. Jane Addams says this in her essay on the settlement: "How many young people are wasting their lives looking to be useful? They want to be useful, and they're casting about, and they're useless" —I think she says— "hangs about them like a heavy cloak." So just a few weeks ago I was doing the Progressive Era, and after we puzzled over what she [Addams] was saying, I make some time to pause and say, "How are you understanding this in the context of your own life? How do you make the connection?" So it's not so much how I make the connection. It's that I ask them to make it, and then if it's there organically, they'll run with it. In fact, they won't stop talking about the connections—partly because that's where college students are. They're in their own headspace. And if it's not there, then we move on, but I try to be suggestive but then let them define if it's a connection that resonates. And if it doesn't, we move on, but if it does, we really sort of mine it for good sort of nuggets. I can see a connection in everything. Sometimes I'm frustrated as a teacher because... "Don't you see the connection?" But what I have learned is when an older person says, "Don't you see the connection?" it's an immediate... It doesn't work for them.

Q: So you sort of push them in the right direction and hope they make their own connection?

A: I try. Again, I try to let the connection emerge organically. I try to signal that I see one, and if it's one that they want to pursue, I let them pursue it. But sometimes, you know, they use connections to sort of avoid talking about the rest of the reading. [laughs] And, having said that, I think connections are absolutely essential. Connections are what made me become a historian. I became a historian because I started to see my life as connected to a much larger humanity. And that's my goal as a teacher, but also—in trying to help them make the connections—I think you have to help them avoid presentism. There's a way in which they can get very judgmental about people in the

past. We were just—in my social movements class—we were studying right-wing fundamentalists in the 1960s, and they were sort of tsk-tsking them and saying, “Why would they say that? That’s so backwards!” and sort of almost pathologizing them because they [the students] have—for whatever reason—their own political history, their family history. They think these people are nuts, and the thing I say to them is that you have to see them in their moment. You have to understand why they would find integration scary. Why would they find integration scary? What’s at stake for them? So connections are great, but it can sometimes lead to a kind of presentism that really doesn’t allow them to think in complicated ways. They move to judgment before they have analyzed anything.

Q: Well, it seems that your methods are paying off because the Whittier College Web site calls you a “perennial favorite of students.” How does that make you feel?

A: Really?

Q: Yeah. That’s what it says. Well, it actually said that on the link that brings you to the page with your information, but it’s not on that [your] page. It’s on the link. It’s a description on the link.

A: The history department Web site is really out of date. We’re actually revising it this year, so I don’t even know what’s on the Web about me, actually. [laughs]

Q: Well, it’s been said before. At some point they said that.

A: That’s nice. Well, that’s very gratifying. You know teaching is one of those jobs where you have no idea what the outcome will be, and you shouldn’t because they [the students] are becoming something. And I play a very small role in who or what they become, but they are works in progress. So I don’t know all that often if what I’ve

contributed to their lives is meaningful to them and if it even has changed something about them. The only data that I have are notes that I get from alums, you know. And, again, at a small liberal arts college you get to know your students and you get fairly close to them. So—as we all are in the [Whittier College] history department—we’re all gratified when we hear from our alums because it’s anecdotal evidence—but it’s still evidence—that something’s going right. They’ve become librarians, public health advocates, historians themselves, some of them, lawyers for good causes. You know, when I think about why I became a historian and a teacher, it was to do good. I always like reports from alums that show them contributing something and not doing more taking than giving. Then I would feel I was a failure [if they were doing more taking than giving].

Q: Just a couple more questions. What is your most memorable teaching moment or experience? Continued experiences, maybe?

A: Oh, wow. Well, it’s never one moment. It’s always a series of moments, but it’s usually in historical methods [class] when I have been hammering at them for many, many, many weeks about how to research and how to write, and they do it. You actually see the product of their sustained work, and it’s a moment of relief and a moment of exhilaration to see them produce something that they have authored and to see their sense of ownership. And then, the other exhilarating moment in teaching is graduation for me. And it’s actually not when I’m in the classroom, but it’s when I see them that day, fully formed adults in their cap and gown. And I meet their parents, and I have this moment with their parents and I say, “Look at what you did. Look at what she did. I hope I contributed to this but... Look at this person!” And I feel a real sense of pride when a good student walks across the stage. That is always memorable to me, and graduation is part of a teaching moment to me because it’s finally there where you see the result.

Q: I read that you were a consultant for “The American Experience: The Race for the Super Bomb” for PBS.

A: Yes.

Q: Was that local or national?

A: It was a national show, “The American Experience.” It was a national program, and I was part of the documentary that explained nuclear preparedness as a sort of civilian activity, but there were scientists and policymakers and other people.

Q: So, did you discuss the duck-and-cover method and all that?

[both laugh]

A: Yes. Yes, I did. And, in fact, one of the things I do with my students is I make them do the maneuver.

Q: Really?

A: We talk about how the United States, in that moment, is trying to become a superpower and is a superpower, and then I tell them to assume the [duck-and-cover] positions, which is a position of submission, really. We actually have this discussion on the floor to sort of puzzle over what it means to duck and cover and to also project this incredible power out to the rest of the world, and we try to explore that contradiction—while sitting on the floor.

[both laugh]

Q: So, did you enjoy working in television, and would you like to do it again in the future? And, I guess even more generally, how do you think academics can make better use of visual media like that?

A: Here's where I will give the schizophrenic answer because I hated it. [laughs] I don't like being on camera. I don't like talking on camera. You have to have a kind of voice modulation. You can't use your hands very much. You can't walk around, and as a teacher, in a way I'm always...

Q: You can't duck and cover?

A: I can't duck and cover. I can't do any of the physical moves that I always do when I'm teaching. So I find it limiting and also just terrifying because there's a camera staring at you. You can barely see the interviewer because there are lights shining. You're just sort of talking into some dark space. [laughs] I hated it.

However, having said that, I think it's absolutely essential for historians who do research to think about the relevance of their research for our current predicaments. Again, I define it as part of the usefulness of the historian to contemporary society. What we do is valuable, and it's useful, and we should be consulted more than we are as people try to puzzle over, "How did we get into the current mess we're puzzling over?" So, I'm very much a partisan for the role of the historian in public life. I think I'd rather have someone else behind the camera [laughs], but I think it's essential for historians to play a role in defining problems and solving those problems. In fact, one of my colleagues... I was at a conference last week, [and] one of my colleagues was going to testify before [the U.S.] Congress on the connections between what's going on today [recession] and the Great Depression, which I loved.

Q: I don't know if you can answer this question, but my wrap-up question is, "Where do you see yourself in ten years? Or just in the future?" I just arbitrarily picked a decade.

A: Interesting. Well, I see myself continuing to do what I do because I like it that much, and I think it will interest me and entertain me for that long. And after that, when I think about retirement, then you start to think about the fantasy careers.

Q: Right.

A: [to interviewer] You know, if you weren't going to get a Ph.D. because—according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*—a Ph.D. takes about nine years. And then, to get tenure is six years, right? So, fifteen years just to get to a point in your career. It's a long process.

Q: I thought we were talking about you...

[both laugh]

A: It's a long, hard journey, so partly because of the commitment I made. But, as I said, it continues to interest me and entertain me. And I really do need to have fun with what I'm doing, I think. I think it's not just about my interests, but I need to be excited and stimulated by what I'm doing. And when I retire, my fantasy career is to be a radio talk show hostess. [laughs]

Q: But you don't like TV?

A: No. I want to be on the radio, where I get to interview all kinds of people, people who've made history. I sort of want to be the Studs Terkel of radio. He was on the radio for a long, long time. He just died. [October 31, 2008] [He was] a great oral historian from Chicago. He wrote some of the most important collections—not wrote—but recorded and then printed volumes of oral histories about different elements of the

American experience. So, my post-retirement fantasy would be that I could become Studs Terkel and just put a microphone in front of people and talk to them.