

## A Tale of Two Departments: Success and Failure in Higher Education Leadership in American Geography at Mid-Century

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**Abstract**—In 1948, Harvard’s president, James Conant declared “geography is not a university subject,” and the institution’s geography program folded. Only a few years before, in a parenthesis in a cow pasture in the middle of Pennsylvania, a newly hired young geographer walked into the office of the Dean and stated that he “wanted to make geography at Penn State the best in the world.” A bold statement, to be sure, for the institution had not yet awarded a single degree in the field; but within two decades, the program placed 11th in the U.S., and in 1995, the National Research Council ranked the department in State College as first among its peers.

The demise of geography at Harvard had little, if anything, to do with the nature of the discipline, but everything to do with the *laissez faire* leadership of the program director, Derwent Whittlesey. In contrast, Penn State’s success is a fortunate outcome of the vision, inspiration, and transformational leadership of E.W. Miller, who administered the development of the geography program in the 1940s and 1950s. This work relates accounts of these contrasting episodes in the history of the geographic discipline in reference to higher education leadership, with the intention to lend critical insight to chairpersons of contemporary academic departments in their efforts to lead their colleagues in the 21st century.

**Keywords** – higher education leadership; history of geography; academic departments; Harvard; Penn State

### I. INTRODUCTION

In 1948, the Soviets blockaded Berlin to bring the Cold War in full swing as the geography of the continent was being disputed between the tyranny of communism and the power of democracy [1]. The world was in crisis, and for the better part of a year, American forces, with a dogged persistence, airlifted more than two million tons of food, coal, and other supplies in order to insure the security of the German city [2].

Meanwhile across the Atlantic, “academic war” had broken out in Cambridge, as the discipline of geography came under fire at Harvard. What has often been considered “a terrible blow ... to American geography” and one from which “it has never completely recovered” [3] was Harvard President James Conant’s declaration that “geography is not a university subject” [4]. Some students have speculated that

geographical scholarship then was driven by methodologies, “which became devalued in broader mid-century academic discourse” and marked the signal “that elite research universities did not require geography departments” [5].

On the contrary, it has been argued that it was not the content or nature of the discipline that determined the vitality of geography, but its leadership, and perhaps its most significant leaders, for better or worse, have been the chairs of its graduate programs [6]. Students of the discipline have not adequately explored this part of the field’s history, and though a complete history of American geography vis-à-vis its leadership is far beyond the scope of this work, study of contrasting leadership behaviors at Harvard and Penn State during the post World War Two period illustrates the importance of leadership assessment and makes the history of geographic thought germane in a current context.

### II. TRANSFORMATIONAL, TRANSACTIONAL, AND LAISSEZ FAIRE LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS

James MacGregor Burns’s provocative work on leadership remains salient more than three decades after its publication. In contrast to power wielding, Burns argues that leadership requires the leader to “act for certain goals that represent the values and motivations---the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations---of *both* leaders and followers.” As such, he identifies two different types of leadership: *transactional* and *transformational*. The former occurs when one party initiates dialogue with another party in order to exchange something of value (e.g., a candidate for political office and voters). The latter occurs when “one or more persons *engage* with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” [7].

Bass (1985) has elaborated on Burns’s concepts of leadership, and he remarks that the transformational leader is “one who motivates us to do more than we originally expected to do” [8], often embracing an intellectual stimulation that fosters strategic thinking and long-term planning. Arguing that *laissez faire* leadership, which revolves around delegation of tasks and responsibilities without input, checks, or rewards, is “a prescription for mediocrity” [9], Bass endorses transformational leadership

as the superior leadership behavior, which achieves the greatest results.

### III. GEOGRAPHY IN THE UNITED STATES AT MID-CENTURY

Before the onset of the Second World War, geography programs flourished in normal schools devoted to the training of teachers, selected private institutions, and a limited number of public universities. Under the leadership of William Morris Davis, Harvard was the hearth of the discipline in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; but shortly after his retirement in 1912 [10], Midwestern institutions had clearly taken the lead. The University of Chicago had established the first doctoral program under Rollin Salisbury in 1903, and it continued to produce highly regarded scholars in the field that found employment in government, industry, and academe, as the chairmanship passed on to his student [11], Harlan Barrows, and then to Charles Colby. This continuity in stellar leadership certainly enhanced the program's viability, for well before Harvard President Conant delivered his edict condemning geography, the department at Chicago had achieved international recognition [12].

Granted, the Graduate School of Geography established at Clark University in 1921, with geographer Wallace Atwood as the university president, awarded many doctorates; but despite the devotion of the faculty to their students, graduate instruction was often considered of variable quality. Prunty commented on his experience as a graduate student, "In retrospect, I fault Clark considerably for its limited emphasis on research training generally, particularly through problem-oriented seminars for doctoral candidates" [13].

Similarly, graduate studies on the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin also were marked by unevenness in quality. As he reflected on the leadership of the geography program under R.H. Whitbeck and Vernor Finch, Glenn Trewartha stated, "By present standards, the quality of the graduate training in geography at Wisconsin as of the early 1920's left something to be desired" [14].

At the University of Michigan, Carl Sauer, a recent Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, and one whose mentor recommended with reservations, was hired in 1915 and charged with geography instruction. Sauer remained on the faculty in Ann Arbor for eight years, captivating students with field studies, teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and conducting research before moving on to chair the department at Berkeley [15]. Preston James, a new Clark Ph.D., replaced him in 1923, and K.C. McMurry, who had completed the doctorate at Chicago, joined the department as well, taking over the chairmanship as it became autonomous from geology [16]. Many doctorates were awarded on the Ann Arbor campus, also seemingly of variable quality.

In contrast, Sauer's department at Berkeley ranked fifth in overall Ph.D. production by the end of the Second World War [17], and here dissertations were stellar contributions in geographical scholarship. Time and space do not permit adequate discussion of Sauer, and to say that his impact has been pervasive is an understatement; Martin wrote that

"since his passing perhaps more sustained attention has been given to this luminary than any other in our history" [18]. Arguably, Carl Sauer was the most significant transformational leader in the history of American geography.

In any event, these five institutions were the principal training grounds for academic geographers, as they produced two thirds of all doctorates awarded in the discipline by 1946. Though it continued to generate solid scholarship, Harvard had fallen from its peak, and other Ivy graduate programs, such as Columbia and Penn, appeared to follow suit; however, elsewhere programs began to take shape. Such was the case at Nebraska, Ohio State, and Johns Hopkins by the end of the War.

Certainly, if war had not broken out in Europe and in the Pacific, no interruption in doctoral work would have occurred, for many of those teaching and studying in geography programs were compelled to contribute to the war effort by service in the armed forces, federal agencies, or humanitarian relief organizations; for example, a large number engaged in intelligence analysis for the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) [19]. Yet, in the aftermath of war, higher education institutions swelled with students, and as the demand for qualified faculty burgeoned, recently awarded Ph.D.s in geography found colleges, universities, and government agencies in dire need of their expertise and services.

Throughout the United States a number of doctoral programs emerged, and some, such as the University of Minnesota [20], were fortunate to see long-lasting *laissez faire* leaders replaced by transformational leaders [21]. Elsewhere, such as the University of Wisconsin, changes in staff took place, which solidified the leadership and the program quality [22]. In Cambridge, the department at Harvard crumbled.

### IV. GEOGRAPHY'S DEMISE AT HARVARD

Much has been written, debated, and speculated about the termination of the geography program at Harvard [23]. Allegations of homophobia [24], the role of geographer (and Johns Hopkins University President) Isaiah Bowman [25], the push from geology faculty to eliminate a competitor for university funds [26], and the poor image of the discipline generated by Hamilton Rice (whose wealthy wife bought his professorship at the Cambridge institution) have been cited as reasons for the program's collapse, as well as the weakness of scholarship in academic geography at the time [27]. These arguments have some merit; but the nature of Derwent Whittlesey's leadership as director of the geography program needs to be addressed closely.

Whittlesey had contributed much to political geography, to be sure, and "His role of friend and adviser to students paralleled that of teacher" [28]. When he accepted appointment as an assistant professor on the Harvard faculty in 1928, he was already an accomplished scholar at the University of Chicago, and shortly after his arrival in Cambridge, he became editor of the flagship journal of the Association of American Geographers.

He also was successful in seeing that his companion, Harold Kemp, was appointed to the Harvard faculty as a

geography instructor, and this appeared to be his undoing. He had previously failed in an effort to gain approval for Kemp to join the faculty at Chicago, and presumably, Whittlesey had been smitten with his love for Kemp for more than a decade, writing to his family in 1916, "Nobody but Harold knows how much I like him and how hard a pull it will be if we have to separate" [29]. Unfortunately for Harvard, as well as for geography, Kemp was mediocre in both scholarship and teaching, and he created significant embarrassment for the geographers at Harvard, as recalled by former students:

"[H]arold Kemp, through a pattern of behavior ... contributed very significantly to the problems encountered by Whittlesey and by geography at Harvard in the later 1940s. Kemp weakened Whittlesey, and ultimately and indirectly the cause of geography at Harvard by his deviant *public* (verbal abuse) behavior throughout an extended period in the 1930s and 1940s. In essence Kemp's personal statements in public, in countless one-on-one situations that went beyond just members of the university community, could only be described as execrable. His ongoing patent mental problems resulted in some of the most vitriolic outbursts directed personally at individuals we have heard in our lives. Not only did this behavior by an instructor in geography antagonize many, it also had become wide knowledge in the university even in the 1930s. For many in that community, Kemp figured prominently in their collective image of geography at the university ...." [30].

Whittlesey appeared to be blinded by his devotion to Kemp and sought to have him promoted, claiming: "His teaching is superb.... If there are any brilliant geographers, Kemp is one of them" [31]. No evidence supports these contentions; on the contrary, "Kemp's introductory human geography course was known as ... 'a gentleman's C' course. It was anecdotal, gave little sense of what an academic discipline was all about, and did not convey the scholarly traditions of the field" [32]. It is unfortunate that a promising geographer was not hired instead of Whittlesey's companion, for had this been done, disaster may have been averted.

Even before President Conant pronounced the death knell for geography, Whittlesey had removed himself from active participation in university affairs. "[H]e seemed to have withdrawn not only physically but also in spirit from the university's faculty and administration long before the crisis developed. Further compounding this attribute of Whittlesey's role was of course his poor administrative ability and his virtual collapse after the crisis came...." [33]. Moreover, "Whittlesey was too far removed from the harsh realities of university political life to build and protect a department. His was the world of withdrawn scholarship.... Geography at Harvard in the post World War Two years therefore lacked the leadership and the organizational

strategy for assuming a lead role in the directions that American geography was about to take" [34]. Essentially, though other factors perhaps contributed to the elimination of geography at Harvard, it was Whittlesey's poor judgment with regard to his support of an incompetent companion and his laissez faire style of leadership, which must be burdened with the lion's share of the blame. This is particularly disconcerting, for elsewhere in American academe after the Second World War, geography grew by leaps and bounds.

## V. GEOGRAPHY EMERGES AT THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

In marked contrast to the elite halls of ivy, at mid-century, the Pennsylvania State University was little more than a parenthesis in a pasture devoted largely to undergraduate studies. When E.W. Miller arrived in State College in 1945, the geography program that had been established by Ray Murphy in 1931 reflected that undergraduate mission. Tasked as Murphy's replacement at 29 years of age, with a new Ph.D. from Ohio State University and wartime experience with the OSS, Miller walked into the Dean's office and said that he "wanted to make geography at Penn State the best in the world" [35]. Geography had just achieved some autonomy as a division in the Earth Sciences Department, and for the first time was authorized to offer graduate degrees. The demand for geographers was burgeoning in the federal government and other agencies, as well for faculty in public schools, colleges, and universities, so Miller developed a program that met their needs while also recognizing that service courses in the discipline were essential to provide students with an education that facilitated their ability in becoming knowledgeable public citizens during the Cold War. He wrote: "We need to spend more time in giving the average citizen sufficient information to discuss present-day world problems intelligently. So let us be assured of this, that the Russian question, the natural resources question, the South African race question, will never be solved until *all* people know a lot more about such basic matters" [36].

Within six years, Miller had convinced the administration to provide support for five faculty in geography that would serve as the foundation for the program for many years. Success in serving both undergraduates and graduate students was rewarded with the appointment of two additional faculty members by the end of the 1950s. Shortly thereafter, the Penn State geography program was ranked 11<sup>th</sup> place nationally, a significant accomplishment for a department that had not existed less than two decades before [37].

Miller worked tirelessly behind the scenes of academic geography and accomplished much. "There is no doubt that in the 1940s, Will was one of the young geographers who shook the existing disciplinary establishment to its core, to the short-and long-term benefit of all. He was wryly fond of noting that Preston James had once accused him of 'wrecking the discipline'" [38]. Though not filled with philosophical discourse or diatribes, his scholarship was respectable and characterized by a solid simplicity that captured the essence of geographical field studies and

research; however, it was his drive, passion, and example that captivated and inspired those around him to excel in the craft of geography.

“Will set the tone, style, and timetable for life and work in the department....Graduate students saw him as they might see a Captain of a ship; someone who’s responsibilities are great, a distinguished gentleman, and one at the pinnacle of the hierarchy Will ensured that students graduating from Penn State were as good as they could be. Both the workload and expectations were high. No wonder that, when the time came to advance the department toward the world of “big time” academics, Miller’s high standards and strong work ethic provided an academic culture for the world-renowned program that emerged at Penn State” [39].

Thus, E.W. Miller, as one of the most successful transformational leaders in American geography, established the foundation for Penn State to be ranked as one of the leading departments in the world. In 1995, the National Research Council placed the geography department in State College as first among all graduate programs surveyed in the United States [40].

## VI. CONCLUSION

When Berlin was threatened in 1948, no response would have resulted in Soviet acquisition of the German city; the transformational leadership of President Truman played a key role, as his decision to mount an airlift averted war and assured Berliners their freedom. To embrace a laissez faire behavior and do nothing would have resulted in a disaster of global proportions. Instead, a psychological victory resulted as American popularity surged in Germany, for the U.S. came to the aid of its former enemy, now under siege, while Soviets, in their efforts to starve the Germans, dwelled in infamy [41].

When academic geography was threatened that same year, passive avoidant behaviors led to its downfall. Despite his significant contributions to the discipline in scholarship and service, when geography at Harvard came under attack, Whittlesey, characterized by laissez faire attributes in leadership, refused to respond, and the ramifications were to have a perpetual impact on geography in America, as the discipline’s image took a blow from which it has struggled to recover.

This matter of the Harvard demise, as well as other aspects of the discipline’s heritage, are often discussed by members of its community because, “Unlike practitioners in other academic fields, when it comes to the intellectual history of our own discipline, geographers love to dabble” [42]. Explorations in the philosophical underpinnings of the discipline, as well as biographies of luminaries make up the bulk of research in this field, and specialists in the history of geographic thought (e.g., M.W. Dow, M.S. Kenzer, G.J. Martin) have made outstanding contributions that have withstood the test of time; however, the nature of leadership

in the evolution of the discipline has not been adequately addressed. Moreover, the contention that the content and methodology of the geographic discipline rendered it a subject not valid for university study and subsequently led to its downfall in American academe is not necessarily true. Instead, it appears that the discipline met its demise in programs characterized by questionable leadership, and it thrived in departments marked by transformational leaders.

Though other examples of laissez faire leadership appear in the history of American geography, the episode in Cambridge may be its saddest chapter. Since the program at Harvard was terminated, geography departments at Yale, Columbia, Chicago, Northwestern, Michigan, and Pittsburgh folded. Likewise, transformational leaders appeared at the helm of successful emerging graduate programs at Syracuse, Minnesota, Ohio State, and Santa Barbara, to name a few.

The point is that effective transformational leadership is an imperative in the chairmanship of academic departments, and though this behavior is often innate, it also can be learned with effective results [43]. Given that, if leadership training devoted to enhancing transformational leadership attributes among geography department chairs is not incorporated by higher education institutions and professional societies, the likely placement of unsuitable faculty in leadership positions becomes increasingly real. In lieu of such training, universities should consider it a priority to employ individuals that characterize these behaviors, and some screening to assess optimal leadership traits may be warranted [44].

Regardless, in the case of academic geography, it is time for assessment of the history of the discipline within the context of leadership. With this type of study, an understanding of the past lends critical insight to contemporary geography departments as efforts are made to achieve desired goals, and here the history of geography may become relevant to all leaders in the discipline.

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