Fletcher: A Great Place to Teach—and to Learn

Dear Friends,

When Jerry Sheehan and Jim Stavridis asked me, after I had made the decision that this would be my last year of teaching, at age 75 and after 44 years at the Fletcher School, if I would speak during Reunion, I of course said “yes.” Some time later, when Kate Ryan, following up, asked me what the title of my talk would be, I thought, and the first thing that crossed my mind was something that Ruhl Bartlett said to me, when I came to the Fletcher School. He said, “It’s a great place to teach.”

I assume that what Ruhl meant was that the Fletcher School was a great place to teach at. Rather than a great place to instruct, to edify—or to try to do so. But I shall come back to that, for I would like to think that I, too, have had some influence on the Fletcher School. But what I am now equally conscious of, as I could not have been back then, was how much I would learn from teaching at the Fletcher School—from my faculty colleagues, from administrative staff, and, most of all from my students, including students who didn’t happen to be in any of my classes but who have become friends.

When, following the stroke I recently suffered, I was in the Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital, a beautiful new facility overlooking Boston harbor, and my son Christopher and daughter Katy flew in from California to be with me, Christopher asked me at one point if I felt that I had any regrets in life. I said that, no, I really didn’t, and that I felt very grateful for the experiences and career I have had. My many years of teaching at the Fletcher School, working with and getting to know students and others from so many different nations, some of whom my wife Pam and I have had a chance to visit in their homes, has opened up “the world” to me. The whole experience has been deeply meaningful. If I have, in my courses, taught students the nuts and bolts of diplomatic history, my students have taught me so much more, about places, about people, about predicaments, about philosophies, and about the manifold gift of humanity. I am very grateful.

“Fletcher: A Great Place to Teach.” To which, I would now, upon reflection, add the words, “—and to Learn.” Why is the Fletcher School such a place? I can easily give three reasons, which I shall briefly mention, and on which I will then elaborate.

First of all, for me personally, Fletcher has been, I feel, a good “fit.” Given who I am, what I know, the way I think, and what I have learned—and am still able to learn. I am interested, as many of you know, in almost everything, and in the relationships between things, and also in making precise connections between them. Fletcher has allowed me the intellectual freedom to do this, to be myself.

A second reason is the students, coming from all over the world, diverse in background, and in outlook, and determined to make the world better.
A third reason is the School itself, the institution. There is an idealism built into this place. It has a longstanding commitment to service, a newer interest in leadership, and, now too, a focus on entrepreneurship, including social entrepreneurship.

For me these three reasons work together in a kind of rationale, for being here, for teaching here, for learning here. They provide a logic—for someone such as myself as an individual faculty member, for the many students I have been privileged to teach, and for the institution that you and I, we all together, have built, and still are building.

That logic has not always been clear, or coherent. But neither is the world, the problems of which we are trying to address—to understand, to formulate, and to solve, theoretically and in the field. The tension between theory and practice—as between ideal and reality, and, indeed, even between law and diplomacy—is always there. Law, with its emphasis on principle, and diplomacy, with its emphasis on agreement, can be difficult to harmonize. But this is exactly what the faculty, students, and graduates of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy have been trying to do since the School’s founding in 1933.

For me personally, the opportunity to teach history, and to teach current issues historically, at Fletcher has been invaluable. I am not narrow, or segmented, in my thinking or professional preparation. Neither is history—actual history, itself. The subject of history does entail the careful examination of documents and the interweaving of bits of evidence. It also requires intellectual scope and imagination. History is all-inclusive. It doesn’t exclude any factors that might be relevant in a situation. The historian’s outlook, I like to think, is akin to that of a doctor, a diagnostician.

Many years ago, when I read Boris Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago, I noted particularly Pasternak’s emphasis on the physician Yuri Zhivago’s gift of diagnostic insight. I sensed that what the central character Zhivago (and Pasternak himself) was really doing was diagnosing the whole of Russian society that was undergoing a revolution. I have often told my students at Fletcher of what Henry Kissinger is said to have said: “History is the only policy science.”

I now come to the second, and main, reason for having found the Fletcher School “a great place to teach,” and therein learn. Fletcher students, and Fletcher graduates. When I joined the Faculty in the Fall of 1971 the United States was mired in war in Indochina. There were Vietnam War veterans who were here in those days, and some Foreign Service Officers who had served there too. The School was viewed as being, generally, supportive of the war. One Sunday morning, the office of Dean Edmund Gullion was incinerated by a firebomb thrown through a large glass window facing the tennis courts. It was not an easy time for any of us, whatever our thoughts. What I learned from that time was respect for the views of others, whether based on hard, real experiences or on deep moral convictions. I learned not to be judgmental.
I have also learned to respect fearlessness, and those who take decisive action. Many of our graduates, women as well as men, have intrepidly gone out into the field, where they have worked with refugees and others in dire need. I marvel at the self-confidence and bravery they have demonstrated. One graduate who immediately comes to mind is Maria J. Kristensen, who headed the Darfur office of the Danish Refugee Council during the 2006 Danish cartoon controversy. The Janjaweed attacked her encampment, and she had quickly to arrange an evacuation. I asked her later, “Weren’t you afraid?” “I’m a farm girl,” she said. In recognition of this and other “selfless efforts in the world’s hotspots” on her part, Maria Kristensen received the Ole Lippmann Memorial Award, given every five years in honor of the Danish World War II Resistance leader. From Maria’s example, and also the stories of other Fletcher graduates, including professional diplomats and development experts who have served in difficult places, I have learned to notice and to honor personal courage.

Our students have made significant contributions at the Fletcher School itself as well. One contribution that I would particularly like to mention is the founding of The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs. For years at Fletcher there was an unresolved question as to whether the Fletcher School should have its own journal or should encourage Fletcher people, faculty and students, to publish in already established journals elsewhere. Several students, perhaps just fed up with this endless discussion, took the initiative, and with a little help from the School, created The Fletcher Forum. They were: Jeffrey Sheehan, who went on to become the dean for international affairs at the Wharton School; the late Frederick Smith who served as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs in the U.S. Department of Defense; and Shashi Tharoor, a distinguished novelist and currently a parliamentarian in India, who became the Under Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information of the United Nations. Those three, and many other students in their own ways, have taught me the value of “fresh eyes” and impatience, as well as of energy and initiative—and ambition.

Fletcher students are very diverse. They are also famously collaborative, maintaining from year to year the living tradition of Fletcher Community. From a teacher’s perspective, the diversity of our student body is a pedagogical challenge. This is partly because our students come from so many different backgrounds, and have such different expectations and objectives. I marvel at the linguistic attainment of so many of our students, some of whom speak not only two or three, but even four or five languages. Others, to be sure, struggle.

I shall never forget something that General Jack Galvin as our Dean said in speaking to a group of new foreign students at Fletcher. He said that Americans tend to think of those who speak a lot of languages as having a “knack” for it. It takes work, he emphasized, and he gave full marks to those students from elsewhere, non-native English speakers, who had made the effort necessary to learn English at the level required to be admitted to the Fletcher School. Congratulations to them. You inspire me.
This brings me to my third and final reason why Fletcher is “a great place” at which to teach, and at which to learn: the School itself. To me, as my faculty colleagues have heard me say more than once, the Fletcher School is an institution of the higher learning. It is a place of and for scholarship—researched, crafted, serious, original, maybe novel, and potentially significant academic work. Thus I naturally am a defender of the “traditional thesis.” All of the capstones I have just read and evaluated were traditional theses, and they were excellent, doing their authors proud. From these students’ work, and from all the other research papers I have read over the years, I have learned more than I, otherwise, would have known about the subjects they addressed.

I was delighted to see the message that our Fletcher Librarian, Cynthia Rubino, has just sent to our students that the Ginn Library is facilitating the submission of Fletcher capstones for inclusion in the Fletcher Digital Library. “This service is intended,” Cyndi wrote, “to capture the significant intellectual capital represented in your capstone,” and to make it available to “your friends, family and potential employers.” Her use of the term “intellectual capital” particularly caught my eye.

“Intellectual capital” is a term that I myself often have used in talking with students about the value of historical knowledge. As I have emphasized, most recently in History 201 early this Spring term, the facts of history are real, events actually happened, the record of them is solid, and permanent. They are worth remembering. Knowledge of history is like money in the bank. It can be drawn upon, and augmented—by further study, of course, but also through experience. Henry Kissinger, when he went to Washington, said that, while serving in government, he was going to have to live off intellectual capital. He had a lot of it, and he thrived.

I hope that The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy will never lose its interest in the teaching of history. History is the central intelligence of statecraft. Diplomatic history, which has been my principal subject, is also about Diplomacy itself. When I came to Fletcher in 1971 a prevailing assumption was that the whole School understood what diplomacy is, and, in fact, “spoke” it. There never actually had been a course taught at Fletcher, to the best of my knowledge, on Diplomacy as such. Today it does have one. Diplomacy 200: Diplomacy: History, Theory, and Practice. As well as, now, a formal Certificate in Diplomatic Studies. There had earlier been a course, taught by Dean Gullion himself together with General Indar Jit Rikhye, on United Nations peacekeeping.

In truth, most of the emphasis of the Fletcher School’s curriculum during the Cold War and Vietnam War period was on conflict. The theme was “the rule of law and the role of force,” as Dean Gullion used to say. That focus was understandable. The strategic rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union was everyone’s paramount concern. It was existential. And at times, as during the Cuban Missile Crisis, it was frightening. The world that we studied and taught about was bipolar, deeply split between East and West and, relatedly, between North and South.
I soon began to realize that the American multilateral tradition—the “Wilsonian” tradition, which I had studied as a purely historical subject—was being lost. I therefore began to read and to learn, as I could only have done at the Fletcher School—from the work and wisdom of Fletcher colleagues including Leo Gross, Bob Meagher, and Field Haviland—something about International Organization. I am very grateful to the Fletcher School for that legacy and that resource.

With the approach of the Fletcher School’s Fiftieth Anniversary in 1983-1984, when Ambassador Theodore Eliot was Dean, I saw that there was an opportunity to do something. During that academic year, I organized and led the Negotiating World Order Project, a series of lectures by, and informed discussions with, some of the world’s leading diplomats, economists, lawyers, and others who had been engaged in negotiating solutions to major international problems.

A result of our Fletcher Project was the book, *Negotiating World Order: The Artisanship and Architecture of Global Diplomacy*. In commenting on it, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright wrote, “*Negotiating World Order* is a timely reminder that only negotiation and conciliation among the nations can save the world from disaster. Survival of a decent life requires cooperation and diplomacy, not more nuclear weapons."

The Fletcher School’s curriculum has undergone a vast expansion in recent years, with courses on many more subjects. Many of these are quite specialized, even technical in nature. And many of them are skills-oriented. Perhaps the biggest curriculum change has been the addition of the Master of International Business (MIB) degree. I recall with some amusement, after the MIB degree was decided upon, participating in a meeting with a group of Fletcher alumni. The meeting was chaired by Dean Stephen Bosworth, a man of powerful intellect and diplomatic skill who had shepherded that curricular innovation through. I was the only Fletcher faculty member present. One of the recent graduates asked me, rather mischievously, I thought, what my own view was of the new Business degree. In response, I said that, as a historian, whose subject is Time, I knew the probability of, and therefore was open to, Change. “Yes,” Dean Bosworth commented drily, “*after* it happens.” I should have seen that coming! We all had a good laugh.

I would like to think that as a teacher of diplomatic history at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy I have had foresight as well as hindsight. I know that my students are looking at the future. I hope that such intellectual capital as I have been able to give them, on the basis of my knowledge and understanding of the ideas and events of the past, will serve them well. And that this will be an intellectual reservoir from which they can draw in their professional work and their personal lives.

The Fletcher School has been, for me, a great place to teach—and to learn.
Thank you for learning, along with me. And thank you, most sincerely, for listening to me this afternoon.

Alan Henrikson

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