Interview – James Graham Wilson

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James Graham Wilson is a Supervisory Historian at the U.S. Department of State, specializing in Cold War history. Since 2011, he has worked in the Department's Office of the Historian, where he has compiled ten volumes in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) series—four of which have been declassified and published as of April 2025. In addition to his editorial work, he has served on temporary assignments within the Department and has supported both active and retired policymakers in various capacities. Wilson earned his Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in 2011 and holds a B.A. from Vassar College (2003). The full FRUS series is available at history.state.gov.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I think the most exciting research in the field of diplomatic history is using archival evidence to tackle specific moments of contingency throughout time and space. I am drawn to Francis Gavin's idea of developing a historical sensibility as a discipline, and his encouragement of policymakers to think historically. Especially in the age of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), we've all got a universe of evidence at our fingertips, and the emphasis is going to be on questions and follow-up questions. That is a scaled-up version of what has always interested me. Whether it is diplomatic history or international relations, it is exciting to me to think of how everyone can engage with the past in a way that improves their professional and personal lives.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Since 2011, I have had the tremendous opportunity to work on the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series. This means I spent my days going through still-classified U.S. government documents thirty years and older. This has certainly changed my understanding of the world. I appreciate the magnitude and sheer number of difficult problems that policymakers encounter.

If I had to narrow it down to a person or thing, I would say that going through an unredacted folder covering the life of the United States national security advisor is a lot different than what I was doing in graduate school. There I was typically looking for one thing. For instance: what was that person reading about the Soviet Union? And there may be a paper or a briefing for one day, and that paper has been declassified. And then that paper or briefing is something I can draw on to try and develop a point about a change over time. However, from the perspective of the person who had the job — say, Brent Scowcroft, since I have been working on the George H.W. Bush administration these past few weeks — each day was dealing with a series of problems, nearly all of which were scary, and probably none of which were solvable.

Your book traces Paul Nitze's influence on U.S. national security policy across several decades. What drew you to Nitze as a subject, and what is his legacy in Cold War historiography?

I was drawn to Nitze because of his longevity in influencing U.S. national security policies. I can trace the exact moment back to ten years ago, when I attended a seminar at the Wilson Center in Washington D.C. where Frank Costigliola was discussing the diaries of George Kennan, who continues to generate tremendous attention for his role in shaping U.S. policies during the Cold War. And at various moments when Costigliola was describing what Kennan

thought and wrote about U.S. policies at the height of Vietnam – or, say the Euromissiles debates in the late 1970s and early 1980s – I thought to myself: yes, but Paul Nitze was actually in the government working to support the president on these matters. It did not mean that he, Nitze, got everything right. But he was in the arena working the issues. That is harder to do than what Kennan did, which from 1950 onward was basically to criticize – however elegantly – those figures in power. How did Nitze achieve this? How did he stay relevant for so long? These are some of the questions I wanted to address.

How did Nitze's strategic thinking evolve over time, and in what ways did he remain consistent in his approach to national security?

Central to his strategy thinking was the notion that the United States had to preserve overwhelming strength — a "preponderance of power," as he called it. He came to this view while drafting the Pacific War Report for the Strategic Bombing Survey after Imperial Japan surrendered in 1945. He concluded that Japan had attacked the United States in December 1941 because its leaders determined that the United States was weak. It had let its forces atrophy in the late 1930s, and that weakness was provocative. Subsequent years reinforced this view. It was U.S. nuclear and conventional superiority — at least, according to Nitze — that compelled the Soviet Union to back down in the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. From Nitze's perspective, again, the world became a more dangerous place once that superiority evaporated.

The evolution in Nitze's strategic thinking, I would say, came in the form of the possibility of a grand bargain with the Soviets on nuclear matters. Here is where I argue in the book that in 1985, the "strategic concept" he put forth to Ronald Reagan played a significant role in integrating strategic offensive forces and strategic defenses over three five-year periods. This serves as the basis for the Reagan and Gorbachev interactions at Reykjavik in October 1986. All this was an evolution in Nitze's own thinking — at least from my perspective — because early on in the Cold War, I do not think he regarded a deal with the Soviets as possible.

How did Nitze's ability to navigate different bureaucratic cultures shape the policies he helped craft, and what does this tell us about the role of individuals in shaping U.S. national security institutions?

I think that Nitze benefitted from his experiences on Wall Street during the 1930s. It certainly helped that he made some money — just as important was that he grew to be comfortable around hard-charging personalities. He had no problem arguing his case in front of them. Moreover, he learned to be resilient after business deals collapsed — and this is something that happened with the head of his investment bank, Clarence Dillon, who was by all accounts a difficult person. So, during Nitze's experiences working in a variety of government roles during World War II, he was able both to stand up for himself and also move on when he made his case and lost. He was also a generalist who knew a bit about economics, defense matters, and foreign policy. All of this helped him carve out a career in national security and build out the government institutions that emerged with the Cold War. In terms of specific individuals, there was great opportunity to be entrepreneurial, especially because the National Security Act of 1947 did not create a cadre of national security professionals who could move across government agencies to do the sorts of things that Washington needed. In recent years, it has become commonplace for folks to move between government and thinktanks and roughly trace the steps of their mentors. When Paul Nitze was setting out in the mid-1940s, that trajectory did not yet exist.

Nitze was central to key documents like NSC-68, and was later involved in arms control negotiations. How did he reconcile his support for military strength with his participation in arms reduction efforts?

One of the arguments I make in the book is that Nitze embraced this concept of "tension between opposites." There was harmony in this tension — harmony that produced music. That is a metaphor, of course — yet it is a guiding one. What an individual can aspire to do is hold two conflicting ideas in one's head and not be paralyzed by inaction. For Nitze, once the United States lost its strategic superiority over the Soviet Union during the 1960s, he devoted much of the 1970s and 1980s to redressing that situation. Certainly, he wanted to restore U.S. strength, and he exhorted everyone to recognize the Soviet nuclear buildup. At the same time, he also wrote about how strategic stability could take the form of mobile ICBMs where neither Washington nor Moscow would have an incentive to launch a first

strike. That was not the same thing as U.S. preponderance, nor was the strategic concept that he put forward to Ronald Reagan in 1985 that I think paid off with Mikhail Gorbachev.

Your book draws on newly declassified documents and extensive archival research. Were there any findings that challenged your initial assumptions about Nitze?

I was surprised about his role in the Dwight Eisenhower administration. Here, I am still not even sure how to characterize it. I had not previously known that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles offered him the job of Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (the job he would later hold under President John F. Kennedy) – and that Nitze had already set up shop at the Pentagon when Dulles withdrew the offer. In the eight years that followed, Nitze criticized the Eisenhower administration, and his criticisms sometimes led the administration to (moderately) change course. More than that, however, Nitze kept his security clearances and frequently advised Dulles, who did not have many other people on whom he could call. As Director of Policy Planning, Nitze had gone through plans for using atomic weapons during the Korean War. He could talk through grave matters of that sort with Dulles; few others could. And Nitze participated in all sorts of military and intelligence commissions throughout the Eisenhower era; he also worked on studies that Congress commissioned from him. In sum, I guess my assumption at the start of the book was that Nitze was an "in-and-outer." Yet, as the 1950s especially illuminate, he was never really "out" of government.

In what ways did Nitze's views clash or align with contemporaries like George Kennan? What do those dynamics reveal about U.S. strategic debates during the Cold War?

As I write in the book, there's a wonderful moment in 1946 where Nitze tries to impress upon then Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson how the Harry Truman administration needs to take seriously increasing signs of Soviet ambitions. And Acheson tells Nitze he is overthinking the situation. Shortly after that, Kennan writes his Long Telegram, and Nitze's former mentor (no less), James Forrestal, tells everyone in Washington to read it. Kennan was a better writer than Nitze. There and elsewhere, it paid off.

Yet, Kennan left DC in 1950 and never really commanded White House attention again. Scholars paid attention to him. This is partly because he wrote wonderful history books. Yet, he was also contrite about how his views had been distorted by subsequent U.S. policymakers. That was not really an apology on his part — it was more that he regretted that his successors got him wrong. Still, there was a broader acknowledgment on Kennan's part that the country had gone in the wrong direction in waging the Cold War. I suppose Nitze would have also said that the country went in the wrong direction when leaders did not listen to him. A key difference between him and Kennan, in terms of strategic debates, is that Nitze always thought the U.S. should wage a global Cold War, even when Kennan was advocating for concentrating on a few key strategic regions. Especially after the Cold War heated up in the so-called Third World in the 1950s and 1960s, I think the gap widened between (1) where to keep litigating what the U.S. could have done differently in the late 1940s; and (2) how to practically prevent communism from spreading into the 1970s. Nitze and Kennan remained friends — yet I think it's clear which one was on which side of that debate.

What about Nitze's alignment with former secretary of state Henry Kissinger? Do you have any insights into their dynamic?

When it comes to Nitze and Kissinger, I am just glad that the term "frenemy" has gained enough respectability that I can use it in the book. I think it really captures their dynamic. As with Kennan, Kissinger was a better writer than Nitze. Undeniably, he possessed a facility for using humor to diffuse situations. Unlike Nitze, Kissinger was also willing to employ flattery. You will never find Nitze talking to a president the way that Kissinger spoke to Nixon. Lyndon Johnson tried to see if Nitze would, and he was not interested. (It is worth noting here that while Nitze once turned down the job of national security advisor, he never got a cabinet position. While he was a natural contender to be secretary of defense under Jimmy Carter, an unpleasant interaction between Nitze and Carter — whom Nitze supported for president — in the summer of 1976 made sure that would not happen.)

With respect to Nitze, Kissinger, and broader strategic debates, I think that from 1969 onwards Kissinger (and

Richard Nixon) regarded their initiatives with the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China as strategies for getting out of Vietnam and decelerating the nuclear arms race. This was different from Nitze's approach, which I think was to try to solve problems on their own terms. For instance, hammering out a nuclear arms agreement required patient diplomacy and technical acumen; adhering to a political timeline risked negating any potential gains. When it came to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks with the Soviets, Kissinger famously ran his backchannel negotiations with Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin. The actual U.S. negotiating team — which included Paul Nitze — was kept in the dark. The imperative was to get a deal to bolster President Nixon's reelection campaign in 1972. And from Nitze's perspective, this helped ensure that SALT I turned out to be a bad deal. Which a lot of other folks in the U.S. national security community also believed.

To what extent did Nitze share the views of other key Cold War figures in the Pentagon, such as Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger?

With respect to Nitze and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, I think that both men believed strongly that U.S. weakness would provoke Soviet aggression. They both wanted to rebuild U.S. strength. While they were also cordial with each other — notwithstanding a fraught relationship between Weinberger and Nitze's boss, Secretary of State George Shultz —I think that they were on different sides on two policy debates.

The first had to do with NATO's 1979 decision to deploy intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe by 1983, while in advance of that year seeking negotiations to offset Soviet SS-20s, which Moscow had already deployed. Here I think Nitze was very concerned that Weinberger's tough stance — in support of a "zero option" — could lead to the fall of allied governments and with it the collapse of NATO. Nitze was more about trans-Atlantic relations, I would say. That is part of what motivated him to take his famous — or infamous — "Walk in the Woods" out in Geneva, with his Soviet negotiator, in the summer of 1982. While they failed to come up with a diplomatic breakthrough, I contend in the book that Nitze does nudge President Reagan to demonstrate some flexibility. Ultimately, the Soviets did not budge.

During the second Reagan administration, Nitze wanted to leverage Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative to get a grand bargain with the Soviets on strategic offensive arms. Here, I think that Weinberger wanted to build a shield against nuclear weapons, and he regarded that as the good in and of itself. Nitze was skeptical about the feasibility of that. Also, since he had played a lead role in crafting and negotiating the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, he was understandably more committed to preserving it than Weinberger.

Looking at current U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the context of renewed great power competition, do you see echoes of Nitze's thinking? What lessons, if any, should today's policymakers draw from his career?

The echoes of Nitze's thinking are differently present in efforts to craft an NSC-68 for our time — whether to deal with the People's Republic of China, or the implications of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), or some combination thereof. I think it is important to keep in mind that Nitze and the rest of his team working on NSC-68 had in mind what national security ought to look like in the world of the hydrogen bomb — which, in January 1950, when they were commissioned to write it, did not yet exist. So, I think that it is important to look forward to talking about a world where Beijing possesses the world's largest economy, or one where "General Artificial Intelligence" (however defined) exists. And then, strategists need to think carefully about how to integrate foundational ideas of what exactly we aspire to protect. That is at least what Nitze et. al. aspired to do with NSC-68.

From Nitze's career, I think the lessons to draw are quite clear: you've got to keep at it. And you've got to pay attention to your physical and mental health. Nitze had tremendous stamina, and this led to a line that got stuck to him: "my body does what I tell it do." Nitze himself thought that was ridiculous, and he complained to Strobe Talbott for writing it in a profile about him in *Time Magazine*. What I find in the archival papers is that Nitze entered the hospital for exhaustion, during the 1960s; and at various points throughout his career, he sought refuge in the woods in Colorado or on his farm in Maryland. He had the financial means to take these breaks. Yet it is part of the mythology that these folks from a previous era were superhuman. They were not. He was also absent as a dad — as

probably was every Cold War figure.

What is the most important advice you could give young International Relations scholars?

Always tell a story. I recognize that there is a traditional model for writing books that include a theory chapter and subsequent chapters with case studies. Do whatever you need to do to finish your dissertation, get a job, and get tenure. Figure out as well how to tell a story—or else it will be very difficult for people outside your field to engage with your ideas. And that engagement will sustain you wherever you choose to go.