

Peter H. Smith

Recipient of the Kalman Silvert Award for 2013

Autobiographical Statement

My academic career has followed a serendipitous path. It has been marked by abundant opportunity, generous encouragement, unstinting intellectual support—and exceedingly good luck.

The journey began many years ago when I yearned to take a summer trip to Europe, as many of my college classmates did at the time. The problem was a lack of funds, so I set out on a less expensive venture: a bus ride from New York City to Mexico City. I knew no Spanish, no Mexican history, no Latin American politics, nothing. Talk about a *tabula rasa!*

That trip changed my life. Mexico was vivacious, energetic, exuberant, still in its postrevolutionary phase. I was utterly captivated. I witnessed student protests, listened to expositions about all sorts of political values, and heard discussions (and diatribes) about Fidel Castro and U.S. imperialism. Most of all, I observed silent dignity in the face of social injustice. Ashamed of my own ignorance, I became troubled by the historic roles of the United States. I cast my lot with *los de abajo*. My self-appointed mission would be to ferret out the truth.

Fortunately I enrolled for graduate study in history at Columbia University in 1961, just in time for the inauguration of its renowned Institute of Latin American Studies. I was able to study with such luminaries as Albert O. Hirschman, Juan J. Linz, Frank Tannenbaum, and the indefatigable Lewis Hanke. My student cohort was itself remarkable—knowledgeable, accomplished, intelligent, and unceasingly supportive.

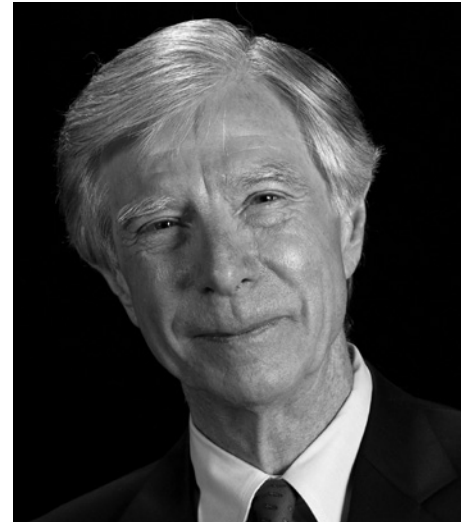
In subsequent years I embarked upon a program of self-education in political

science, initially by auditing courses at the University of California, Berkeley. With the encouragement of Kalman Silvert, I determined to acquire a working command of quantitative methodology. This linkage of history and political science would define a core concern of my scholarly efforts: to analyze long-term patterns of political change in Latin America through the judicious application of cutting-edge methods in political science.

This bifocal approach to history and political science had its occasional downsides. Sometimes I felt that I fit into neither discipline, somewhere on an empty borderland with no one else in sight. Said one friend about this dilemma: “Isn’t that exactly where you want to be?”

My first corpus of research focused on Argentina and resulted in two books: *Politics and Beef in Argentina* (1969), which examined political struggles over a key sector of the national economy from the 1880s to the 1940s, and *Argentina and the Failure of Democracy* (1974), based on a statistical analysis of roll-call votes in the Chamber of Deputies from 1904 through 1955. The latter book suffered from methodological asphyxiation at the time, but it seems to have caught a second wind in light of recent interest in legislative behavior in a democratizing Latin America. These efforts also resulted in a book chapter on the breakdown of Argentine democracy in 1930.

I then turned to Mexico and sought to unravel the political logic of its authoritarian regime. After some deliberation I decided to examine the structure and transformation of the nation’s political elite from 1900 through the 1970s. I gathered and computerized data on the political biographies of more than 6,000 officeholders—not a task for an



old man, I can assure you!—and produced a book entitled *Labyrinths of Power* (1979). One significant by-product of this effort was a roll-call analysis of voting patterns in Mexico’s constitutional convention of 1917.

In the mid-1980s I received an invitation from the Ford Foundation to serve as co-staff director (along with Rosario Green) of a major project on U.S.-Mexican relations. Headed by a blue-ribbon bilateral commission, the program was intended to improve understanding, design practical initiatives, and rejuvenate a relationship that was under considerable pressure at the time. This brought me face-to-face with two additional dimensions of analysis: international relations and public policy. The project produced a book-length study titled *The Challenge of Interdependence* (1988), led to encounters with presidents and dignitaries in both countries, and resulted in the publication of five volumes of background papers. We think the project did some good; at the very least, it did no harm. (One spin-off for me was a subsequent volume on drug trafficking in the Americas.)

Scholarly work since the 1990s has consisted primarily of synthesis. Wary of the triumphalist tone of American commentary after the end of the Cold War (and inspired by a quote from Mark Twain), I could not resist the temptation to write *Talons of the Eagle: Latin America, the United States, and the World* (1996), now in its fourth edition. Also unhappy with bland and blasé assessments of

patterns of democratization around the world, I managed to compose a book entitled *Democracy in Latin America: Political Change in Comparative Perspective* (2005), now in its second edition. The goal of this volume was to combine historical, institutional, and behavioral elements of political conduct into a holistic and coherent interpretation of democratic transformation. This from someone who had devoted so much effort to the study of authoritarian regimes!

In the meantime my colleague Thomas Skidmore and I worked on the textbook entitled *Modern Latin America*, first published in 1984 with numerous subsequent editions (including an eighth edition, now in press, with the collaboration of James N. Green). This has posed serious challenges. It is not just a chronological recounting of events and personalities: we tried from the start to construct a conceptual framework, apply it with consistency, and tell meaningful human stories.

Over the years I have edited or coedited more than a dozen anthologies on subjects ranging from historiography and methodology to regional economic integration, Mexican politics, U.S.-Mexican relations, drug trafficking, Latin America–East Asia relations, and women’s roles in Asia and Latin America. These projects have continually expanded my intellectual horizons, brought me into close contact with a large number of colleagues, and allowed me to support the work of promising young scholars around the world. I have benefited greatly from these collaborations.

Teaching has been one of my great pleasures. I learn from every class I give. I take every session as an opportunity to convince students about the importance of the subject matter—its moral significance, not just its analytical relevance—and to demonstrate my commitment to the endeavor. Not surprisingly, this focus has strengthened my resolve to help make *Modern Latin America* the best book that it can be. There is ego in this activity. In addition, I have drawn special satisfaction from teaching students in other countries—Argentina, Brazil, China, Ecuador, Mexico, Spain, and elsewhere. These young people do not have to be convinced to care. Often laboring under subpar conditions, they strive to do the best—and learn the most—that they can. I have treasured them.

All this work has allowed me to do an unexpected variety of things. I have traveled to most parts of the world; exchanged thoughts and ideas with public figures, prominent colleagues, and ordinary citizens; been the moderator for a monthly TV show; and expressed my opinions through op-eds and columns in national and international newspapers. I have even served as president of LASA.

This career has been a privilege. It has been a responsibility as well. My profession has been my passion (and vice versa). I have relished the challenges, accepted the setbacks, and savored the satisfactions. To borrow a phrase from Maya Angelou, “wouldn’t take nothing for my journey now.” ■