

Interview with David Grantham

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One of the most significant challenges facing would-be scholars of Middle East–Latin American exchange is the lack of formal programs of study. Those that enter this field sometimes are equipped with a unique personal background that allows them to bridge this gap, but others have been exceptionally creative to find ways to work from within more traditional programs. Both of these are the case of David Grantham, a recent PhD graduate of Texas Christian University’s program in history. This interview illustrates the challenges of this kind of work and offers some personal insights into strategies for success.

Stites Mor: Could you tell us a bit about your background, David?

Grantham: I grew up in Tampa, Florida, my mother is from the Caribbean and my father is from Florida, so I had something of a multicultural upbringing. I had extended family from outside Florida, as well, so had a bit of regional diversity, different perspectives. I went to a small Christian school my entire life. My mother was a Spanish teacher at the school. It was very small, on the outskirts of downtown Tampa, my graduating class was about 35 students, a handful of whom had been there since their first days in preschool. I felt like part of the furniture there by the time I graduated. It was a fantastic school, though, very family oriented, and it felt like classmates were part of a big family. It was economically and ethnically diverse, sometimes offered financial assistance to families that weren’t well off, so I had friends from all walks of life. I am still very thankful to have gone there, because it wasn’t a typical Florida regional-district school experience, it was driven by different motives.

Stites Mor: How did you become interested in Latin America?

Grantham: I grew up on Cuban food, my grandfather was from Cuba and my grandmother was from the states, but they were both missionaries in the Dominican Republic, where my mother was raised. We joke with my mother that she was Cuban-American, but grew up in the DR and culturally was very Dominican. She never really felt at home in the U.S. when she first moved there for college, always missed home. She had lived through the civil war in the DR, my grandfather had refused to leave, and had many memories of interacting with American soldiers. Growing up hearing about the politics of the DR and Trujillo, I took an interest in the region. We were a very politically minded family, we always discussed politics at the dinner table, and that’s where I became familiar with these topics. My grandfather’s and my mother’s stories really fueled my curiosity about the larger histories of the region, not only to understand my own background, but also to understand what was happening there.

Stites Mor: After you were done with school, you joined the service. Did that influence your thinking, as well?

Grantham: I commissioned from the Air Force ROTC out of the University of South Florida in 2004, and when I graduated and got commissioned, I was stationed in South Dakota. I had seen snow once in my life, and when I got there, all I had was a windbreaker. Within my first week there, my boss literally had to show me how to zip up a snow coat. When I was graduating from high school, I thought that I wanted to grow personally and challenge myself to work toward something greater than myself. My parents had both done

something with a bigger purpose, a teacher and a minister, and I thought I should do something like that myself. I also played sports and wanted to do something where I could be physical and stay active. I also really wanted to travel and see the world, experience new cultures, and South Dakota was certainly that. I wanted to challenge my assumptions and my thoughts. After September 11th, it was more complicated, you have these ideas about what you want to see and do, but after that point you had a good idea where you would end up. Or at least you knew you would be spending some time in the Middle East. I signed up for Reserve Officer Training Corps, which means I’d come out a second lieutenant and receive better professional instruction. After I served in South Dakota, I deployed twice, to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kuwait in 2006, and in 2008 I served in Baghdad. In 2007, I moved to Texas, where the AFOSI [Air Force Office of Special Investigations] gave me a special assignment to work on technology protection in support of Department of Defense contractors in the Dallas area. My specialty was international issues and intelligence, so they sent me to protect our critical technology from being compromised. But at the end of my required term, I got an email about the post-9/11 GI Bill. It is different from the earlier GI Bill, and it seemed almost too good to be true. It provided more extensively for servicemen that have served after 9/11 and included such things as a living stipend if you are in school full time. It was state-based, so it is tied in a way to the state where you reside, but in Texas that meant it also would pay majority of your public school tuition and a set amount for private school, and cover your textbooks. In particular, the Yellow Ribbon program, which said that if your costs go over a certain amount, the government would match any amount that the school would pay over that base amount. This was

a huge incentive to attend school locally, and Texas Christian University was a Yellow Ribbon participant, so it seemed like a great option. When I decided to go back to school, I ended up not having to pay a dime to study.

Stites Mor: What did you study at TCU?

Grantham: I had a master's in international relations, and I had thought about going back into that kind of work. I wanted something that complemented my master's, so I choose TCU because they had a wide selection of modern history courses. When I first started it was a bit more exploratory and broad. TCU didn't have a primary field for the Middle East, but they did have one in Latin America. Peter Szok, who is their modern Latin Americanist, was very generous in his ability to work with me in conjunction with the Middle East professor, and the board at TCU approved me to have a field in Latin America and a minor in Middle East. I was the first student to be able to do this. When I went in, I was ambitious and wanted to do many things, and was lucky that I was able to pull together a committee that was willing to follow me down this path, even though it wasn't in anyone's specific area. I was able to be a bit more creative, for example taking specialized directed reading classes that allowed me to connect these disparate fields. By the time I got to the stage of my dissertation, I'd already been able to elaborate a fairly robust bibliography on the topic.

Stites Mor: How did you come to begin your work on Latin America–Middle East exchange?

Grantham: I wanted to study Middle Eastern history because of my experience in

the military, and I wanted to study Latin American history because of my family background, and I thought that perhaps there was a way in which they interacted that could allow me to pursue both. I found that American Cold War history sometimes was too focused just on U.S. foreign policy, so I was inspired to try to push the boundaries, to think about what Latin American and Middle Eastern countries experienced during the Cold War. All of those ideas intersected, and I decided to ask how these countries interacted outside of U.S. influence. I was particularly interested in the Arab world, and I didn't know what I'd find, it was more of a blind leap. My first stop was Cuba, and it turned out there was plenty of connection to be found, but my access to documents was really very limited in Havana. So I explored further into Central America and finally looked into Argentina, because there was quite a bit of material and a fairly important and rich history of Arab interactions there, particularly under Juan Perón. Once I found that, I realized I wasn't just up a blind alley, I knew I was onto something.

Stites Mor: How would you describe your PhD research?

Grantham: So, I wrote on the Cold War, looking beyond the Soviet-U.S. binary, or in more basic terms, the Cold War through the eyes of Latin America and Middle East interaction, the experience outside of the competition between superpowers. I started by finding out that Argentina had a relationship with the Middle East through international organizations like the UN and the Non-Aligned Movement, but then as I moved forward I realized that there was a much deeper connection, particularly between Argentina and the Levant. I came to argue that Argentina was the "Latin

American Front" in the Israel-Palestine conflict. I uncovered that Juan Perón had significant and complicated relations with Saudi Arabia, Syria, and other countries in the region. I also realized that there is a huge influence of Arabs on Argentina's labor history, among other things. There is quite a bit of cultural history still left to be uncovered. The recent assassination of Alberto Nisman, a prosecutor that was set to testify that Iran was involved in the bombings of the Israeli Embassy and a Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires in the early 1990s, is a good example of just how important the Arab-Israeli conflict was experienced in Argentina.

Stites Mor: What skills or special training did your research require to conduct your research?

Grantham: History as a discipline requires a really in-depth and intimate understanding of its subjects. Despite the fact that we study the past, history is rarely ever settled. The challenge of conducting research across two regions of the world is that you need to be able to get to a point of being able to understand controversial matters in multiple languages and sites. There are big gaps and misunderstandings that need to be addressed. I was able to take an Arabic course at the University of Texas at Austin, and there is a large Arabic repository of newspapers at the UT Austin library. I trained in order to access government and Arab League documents but I found the availability to be limited. In fact, I had a contact in Egypt that visited the Arab League archives on my behalf. He was told that he could review documents but could not write anything down, could not make copies, and could not photograph any papers. So short of him trying to recall what he read after leaving the archives, there was no way to properly review the

documents. I can now read Arabic, though I do rely on dictionaries and sometimes translators. I found, though, that having a base-level understanding of the language was really fundamental to knowing how to use those supports effectively.

Stites Mor: What challenges did you face working on this subject?

Grantham: One thing that I faced was that there were so many levels of the topic I had chosen, that I had to significantly reduce the scope to a much more specific topic. I also got really hammered by my early readers because I was trying to draw conclusions without being as well versed in each of the two areas as were experts in those fields. That is one reason why I focused on just Argentina within Latin America and the Levant, Israel, and Egypt in the Middle East, because it allowed me to find a more workable level of familiarity. Another big challenge is the cost of traveling to more than one research site, particularly across more than one region. Many external funding programs demand that you stay in residence in the field for long periods of time, which was also a challenge to manage with a family and related expenses. I also found that a lot of programs were fairly restrictive in terms of topics that were eligible. Many required that you follow a very specific kind of topic, such as American foreign policy during the Cold War, so it was more difficult to fit my topic to those programs. Funding at TCU was excellent for graduate students, so I really lived on those internal grants. I also found that in publishing my findings, sometimes it was more difficult, simply because readers and editors didn't know quite what to do with this kind of research.

Stites Mor: Did your background influence how you approached your sources?

Grantham: People are always curious about my background in the armed forces or going to school at a Christian institution. I have interacted with a lot of officials during my time in the military, so I was able to bring a certain kind of skepticism to the documents than I might not have had otherwise. I was able to be more critical of my sources from that perspective. Having been in intelligence, I often spoke to people after they made their public announcements, so I would always have a different interpretation than that which would appear in printed sources. It allowed me to know what kind of things to look at that went beyond public statements, such as patterns of behavior and the treatment of Arab immigrants to Argentina. I'm proud to have served, but am not blind to the tendency to pick winners and losers or to view things as good versus bad; I recognize that these issues are far more complex. I realized that my objective wasn't just to criticize a foreign government's policy or a particular U.S. administration, but rather to uncover the enormous complexity these past events. Veterans sometimes come home a bit disillusioned, because they lose that sense, they experience how much more complicated the world is, how much more intellectually and emotionally rigorous it is to understand conflict than they thought it would be. I'd say my military background was a really important influence on how I dealt with my sources.

Stites Mor: And your religious upbringing?

Grantham: While the military offered me a sense of skepticism, my religious upbringing allowed me to maintain an optimism, a sense of forgiveness and

unwarranted compassion. So, I was able to read things differently, such as a document I found about a Palestinian that had been quite hostile to Israel, but I found that by thinking about how that Palestinian had been informed, what constituted his knowledge, I could be more sympathetic and at least understand on a certain level what determined his perspective. The same was true for stories I read about European Jews escaping persecution to what would become Israel and their participation in the forming the country. I developed a sense of compassion for how peoples' experience informed them, how they saw their lives and events, rather than simply judging them based on my own understandings. It also helped me to understand what things being documented were really true. Biblical scripture teaches themes that many times run counter to our instincts, that ask you to engage in behavior that is counter to your impulses. With that in mind, in those moments when I might have been distancing myself from something or cutting myself off from understanding another perspective, I was able to put my instincts aside to explore further. I think that encouraged me to think more deeply and understand or debate more rigorously.

Stites Mor: What have you done since completion of your PhD?

Grantham: I am currently a Senior Fellow at the National Center for Policy Analysis in Dallas, which is a think tank that looks at primarily free market approaches to economic challenges. I was brought on based on my background in history and my national security and economics background. I primarily work on research that offers policy recommendations on how a free market can improve economic relations and how it can support democratic processes. We look at how the

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U.S. reacts to new security developments throughout the world, such as the Middle East. I would not have been able to do this job without having been in graduate school. At TCU, I learned how to write, and more than that, how to write effectively, how to use sources. These skills are essential to what I do now, and I would not have gained those skills without having done my PhD.

Stites Mor: Do you have any advice for scholars entering this area of study?

Grantham: The most important thing I learned was to be creative. Don't feel limited by the field. Maybe because I came from a professional background where I was able to be more comfortable taking risks, I felt more confident about stepping out of the bounds, experimenting. I was afraid that I might not find mentorship, since I wasn't working within one of the traditional areas, but on the contrary, I found that my professors and mentors were uniformly excited to encourage me to blaze my own trail. So, I would say, don't be fearful in that situation. But also, be realistic; find a question that can allow you to really explore a topic in depth. Specificity helps create useful boundaries to make a manageable project.

Note

David Grantham's National Center for Policy Analysis (NCPA) website: <http://www.ncpa.org/about/david-a-grantham#sthash.V7ml3Poh.dpuf>.

LASA's 50th anniversary Congress promises to be the biggest in the association's history. As compared to recent Congresses, the number of submissions has increased considerably. For example, while last year's Congress had 1,732 panels and 917 individual papers submitted, there were 2,307 panels and 1,341 individual papers submitted for LASA2016. Increased participation led to the decision to extend the Congress to four days.

Track chairs, who volunteer their time and expertise to evaluate submissions to each thematic track into which the Congress is divided, assumed their role with a wonderful sense of responsibility and professionalism, working hard to rank numerous submissions. The average number of sessions that each set of track chairs had to evaluate was 94. Track chairs carried out their work in the context of both this higher than usual number of submissions and the limited space in the New York City venue. To evaluate the submissions, they applied such criteria as significance and appeal for the field, coherence, and clarity. The LASA Secretariat, for its part, calculated the percentage of submissions that could be accepted to the Congress based on the number of available slots, and then established the cut-off for each track based on a common acceptance rate. Anyone has access to the full list of selection criteria that track chairs were advised to apply, and a detailed description of the several steps of the selection process and criteria, which is available here: <http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/eng/congress/selectionpaper.asp>.

A quick look at the nature of the submissions reveals their diversity and some current trends in the interests of LASA's membership. Consider, for instance, the five thematic tracks that received the largest number of submissions (including

individual submissions and papers that are part of panels): Genders, Feminisms and Sexualities; Literary Studies; Contemporary; Migration, Borders and Diasporas; Political Institutions and Processes; and Mass Media and Popular Culture. The appeal of these themes suggests that LASA continues to be a highly diverse association in terms of disciplinary interests and one that responds to contemporary issues and emerging fields of inquiry even while it continues to honor classical fields of study. The social sciences and humanities are equally represented in the research interests of members. It is also clear that LASA's membership is deeply and meaningfully engaged in interdisciplinary work. In this regard, the Program Committee is particularly pleased with the way in which this Congress is shaping up.

It is also gratifying to see that more than 60 percent of all proposals for LASA2016 came from Latin America and other non-U.S. regions. Roughly the same percentage of accepted papers, a little over 60 percent, are from outside the United States. This reaffirms the trend that LASA is a truly international organization with a strong presence throughout Latin America.

LASA Sections have done a terrific job of organizing first-rate panels and workshops. Track chairs took to heart the task to propose special panels that bring to light the most interesting and cutting-edge thinking in their subarea of study. Particularly interesting has been the excitement about the "LASA at 50" theme. We expect a wide range of conversations highlighting some of the most important trends, debates, and controversies that have marked Latin American studies in the last five decades. The proposed sessions not only take account of the past but also reflect upon the future of our field of study.