

# In Memoriam: John McNay

**John T. McNay**  
1957–2023

**Historian of US Diplomacy**

**J**ohn T. McNay, professor of history, passed away on October 27, 2023.

John McNay was a child of Montana's blue skies and rocky ridges. Born in 1957, he attended the University of Montana, launching a career as a journalist addressing community wrongs. He transferred his passion for speaking truth to power to a career in education, earning his PhD at Temple University in 1997. Since 2000, he worked for UC Blue Ash, a regional open access college of the University of Cincinnati. It is not hard to say that he was the best hiring choice we ever made.

John McNay was a scholar of Cold War diplomatic history with an interest in how an individual's background contributed to diplomatic decisions. Starting with a reinterpretation of Secretary of State Dean Acheson's career, John illuminated how diplomats created policy. He ultimately authored or contributed to five books, in addition to articles, reviews, and multiple manuscripts still in development at his death. For his research on presidential decisions for peace, he was an invited speaker at the Nobel Peace Institute in Oslo, Norway.

John McNay, born of a union family, was a champion of labor and education. As president of the University of Cincinnati's AAUP chapter, he was sufficiently vocal that administrators visibly sighed when they spotted him and braced to be grilled on budgeting choices. He was four-time president of the state of Ohio's AAUP, then joined the national AAUP Governing Council. John's advocacy made him a frequent visitor at the statehouse, testifying often against anti-education legislation. He was there when the doors were barred against crowds protesting the union busting bill SB5, inspiring his book *Collective Bargaining and the Battle of Ohio: The Defeat of Senate Bill 5 and the Struggle to Defend the Middle Class*. For this and throughout his career, he used his journalist background to submit op-eds statewide in support of education. In recent years, John was a central contributor to the AHA's ongoing work promoting the integrity of history education in the Ohio state legislature.

John McNay was a professor who took pride in his students, whom he called his "young scholars." He maintained folders of prized students' past work and postgraduation publications, and he attended their graduations and weddings. He was an enthusiastic proponent of Study Abroad and would do anything to ensure his students, often new to travel, had a positive experience of the world—even once sharing clothing with a student who lost his luggage. He inspired students to



pursue a variety of careers; as one put it, "he's why I'm the teacher I am today."

John McNay was a firm believer in faculty service and never stopped giving to his university. He co-directed UC's Institute for the Advanced Study of Culture and Democracy. He was part of the planning committee for UC's Press and chaired its Faculty Advisory Board. Among his lengthy list of service, he was a department chair, a five-time faculty senator, and twice a member of committees vetting provost candidates. (As he said, with mixed regret and pride, he never lost an election.) For all of his work, the UC Board of Trustees voted to grant him the rank of professor emeritus posthumously.

John McNay was the first to invite his colleagues to "seminars" at local pubs and the first to accept similar invitations. (There are many, many stories that start, "I met John over a beer!") His office shelves incorporated the books of younger colleagues, purchased to support

their careers; on his desk was a colleague's dissertation that he was reading for the fun of it. Quietly generous, he was swift to pick up the tab for a colleague being honored.

John McNay was a person who maintained active social circles outside of academia—friends who met to discuss current affairs, fellow motorcyclists who rode together (although John hid his motorcycle from his sisters), family from whom he unsuccessfully attempted to hide his uneven housekeeping (and, yes, the motorcycle), and even a black cat who bullied his way into John's home (and stayed, of course). He was a person who found friends wherever he went, bound to others by a mutual curiosity in the world. Whether it was a person in the National Archives or a senior citizen student who became a frequent dinner companion, John was someone who did not make acquaintances, but friends. (Or, as he would refer to them, "a buddy of mine.") We were all his buddies, and he was ours.

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## John McNay—A Personal Reminiscence

**O**n October 27, 2023, we lost John McNay. I lost a friend of over 30 years. John was my first Ph.D. student at Temple. Actually, he was more than that, and for a variety of reasons. His MA advisor at the University of Montana, Michael Mayer, had been a graduate student at Princeton when I was there. A native of Montana and

one-time journalist in his home state, during his time in Missoula, John had developed an interest in the history of US foreign policy. Mike, who knew me because we both worked on the Eisenhower years and also masqueraded as basketball players, recommended that John work with me. I was at the University of Hawaii at that time, and sure enough, John flew out to speak with me (not exactly a hardship, except for the cost). That must have been 1990, perhaps 1991. I told John that I liked everything about him, but that there was a very good chance that I would be leaving Hawaii for Temple following the next year (that's another story). John came anyway.

So we spent a year together in Manoa Valley, a very good year. But sure enough, I decided to move to Temple. John had a difficult decision to make. He liked me, and he liked the coursework he had done with me. But he'd fallen in love with Hawaii, and as anyone who knew him would predict, he had made lots of friends. For these reasons, he opted to remain at least one more year in paradise to determine whether he could come up with a satisfying program under the direction of other faculty.

He couldn't, or he didn't. Therefore, he wrote me sometime in the spring of 1993 that he now wanted to join me at Temple. I had to do a bit of fast talking to get him funding. I had been promised two teaching assistantships as an inducement to leave Hawaii for Temple. That way I could bring two Ph.D. students of my choice with me. I only wanted to bring John, but the offer had expired as the department went about selecting its graduate class. But the chair and director of graduate studies were very generous and resurrected it. The upshot was that a year later after I moved to Philadelphia, so did John.

I don't recall where John lived that first year. There was little housing for grad students near campus—just a dorm building—maybe two (this despite the unconscionably large size of the graduate program, at least in history). Knowing John, he probably chose to live in a dorm. He was easy that way. And I don't think it mattered much. John almost immediately immersed himself in the department, earning the respect of faculty and the friendship of his cohort—and the one after that. In common with many Temple graduate students he moved around a lot until he ultimately found a home with a bunch of graduate students on Oregon Avenue, not far from the sports arenas. To the surprise of no one, his peers elected him president of the Barnes Club, the History graduate organization. I'm not positive, but I think that it was during his presidency that the Barnes Club organized its first conference. Held annually each year since, that conference remains a great venue for students, nationally and internationally, to go public with their research. Many SHAFR presentations originated as Barnes Club presentations.

John also immersed himself in his coursework, and he excelled at it. The same goes for his work as a teaching assistant. I remember so well, and so fondly, John's assisting Dieu Nguyen and myself when we developed and launched our team-taught course on the Vietnam War. What a wild and rewarding ride that was. At the time, TA-ing in an elective as opposed to a survey was a treat for Temple history graduate students (the department held fast against allowing graduate students to teach their own courses before completing their comps), and both Dieu and I lobbied for John. He did a magnificent job, and in the process added the Vietnam War to his menu of interests, and later publications. (I need to interject that during his last year at the University of Hawaii, John studied and became close with Gary Hess. Gary was at UH as a visiting chair. He sparked John's interest in the Vietnam, and together they wrote a chapter on Bernard Fall for David Anderson's edited volume, *The Human Tradition in the Vietnam Era*.)

John wrote a paper in my seminar on Dean Acheson (he may have started it in a class in Hawaii—I forget such

details), for which I introduced him to political psychology. He drew on a variety of theories about cognition to emphasize the influence of Acheson's Anglophilia and his attendant affection for the British Empire on his policy prescriptions and inclinations. That grew into his dissertation. For his outside reader we recruited Bob Jervis from Columbia, the dean of political psychologists. John's dissertation became his first book: *Acheson and Empire: The British Accent in American Foreign Policy*. It's a great if unconventional book, not unlike John himself.

I could go on and on, dipping into such matters as John's filiopietistic affection for the Irish, which led him to study Ambassador Henry Brady and in fact edit his memoir, but I provide just a rough sketch of John and our continuing relationship over the decades to signal what he meant to me, and why he was so special. After a couple of one-year appointments and a stint house sitting for our family, John moved to Cincinnati for a tenure-track position at the University of Cincinnati's Blue Ash campus. He remained there for over twenty years, rising through the ranks to full professor. John matured into an outstanding teacher-scholar, and I was honored that he consulted me every step of the way (over beers whenever geography allowed).

He didn't always take my advice, however. After several years John became increasingly involved in the professors' union, first at Cincinnati, then throughout Ohio, and ultimately nationally. Union organizing ran in his family. He told me of his intentions, and I told him to be careful. I was not supportive. It would take time away from his teaching and, perhaps even more so, his research. I reminded him that there were never enough hours in the day for us to get done what we needed to get done. That is the cross that committed faculty must bear. He conceded that I was right, but he went ahead anyway. John had values, and he stuck to them. Those values included putting others' interests above his own. In seemingly no time at all he became a leader of the union movement, serving as president of both the University of Cincinnati's and state of Ohio's AAUP.

John squared the circle, however. He wrote a book about it, *Collective Bargaining and the Battle of Ohio: The Defeat of Senate Bill 5 and the Struggle to Defend the Middle Class*. It proudly sits on my bookshelf. And I always took delight in receiving word from all my friends who taught at universities across Ohio about how much they treasured John. They could not adequately express how much they appreciated his service to them, to all of them. I won't go so far as to claim that John proved me wrong. He simply did things his way.

When Temple's Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy and the Department of History organized a symposium to mark my retirement, John was probably the first graduate student whom I put on the invitation list to give a paper. He accepted, of course, and put together a presentation that focused on Truman's foreign policy. This was the beginning of his last project, a book-length exploration of presidential decisions for peace inspired by Gary's book, *Presidential Decisions for War*, and even at this point his argument was sufficiently original and challenging to provoke lively discussion from the audience, which included Mel Leffler. As he always did, John took on board Mel's thoughtful critique. He was a vacuum for constructive criticism. On my computer I have three draft chapters that John sent to me for review and comment after he returned from conducting research in Europe. John passed away before he could complete the book. But especially in the aftermath of his kidney transplant, when he felt better than he had in years, he enthusiastically and I must add joyfully responded to my suggestions and let me know that he was already undertaking the revisions. I will never delete those files or those emails.

Everyone who knew John will attest that he was a gentle

soul. Yet he was fierce in his determination. He overcame kidney stones and a kidney transplant. He overcame his advisor moving 6000 miles away. He showed all that he could be a teacher, a scholar, and a union organizer, activist, and lobbyist. He led by example, not histrionics, and he gave real meaning to the concept of the collective good. Moreover, he did this all while manifesting the greatest humanity—and humility.

John was only 66 when he passed away, but what a legacy he leaves. And what a model for us all to follow. John would frequently talk about how much he learned from me. I should have told him more frequently how much I learned from him. What a tragedy that I, that none of us, had more time with him.

*Richard H. Immerman*

