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Interview with Mel Gurtov

Mel Gurtov

Portland State University, gurtovm@pdx.edu

Jacob Hutchins

Portland State University

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Mel Gurtov

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Headnote (200 words; use third person, present tense; example on page 107-08; use long summer form)	Mel Gurtov discusses his career trajectory and history, detailing his involvement with release of the Pentagon Papers and work studying the Vietnam War for the government. Explains how he came to teach political science and international studies at Portland State University, and his part in building and implementing the Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution program. Gives views on the nature and value of political science regarding international conflict. Answers questions about his shifting political position during the war and how this informed his career decisions.

Begin at 00:00

JH: Hello. My name is Jacob Hutchins and today I will be interviewing Mel Gurtov. We'll go ahead and jump right in. First things first, Mel, I was wondering if you could introduce yourself and your credentials, and then we will jump into questions about the interview project.

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- MG: I'm Professor Mel Gurtov. I was a Portland State University faculty member from the end of 1986 until retirement in 2008, in political science and international studies. My specialties are China and U.S. foreign policy.
- JH: First question. I was wondering if you could speak about what brought you to PSU initially?
- MG: I was teaching at the University of California Riverside and was looking forward to being in Oregon somewhere, because I had already purchased some farmland that I thought would be very nice for retirement, which it has turned out to be. Then the object was how could I get close to this land, which is actually closer to Eugene than it is to Portland by about 2 hours. The opportunity came up in international studies to be director in 1986, and so I went up and was interviewed. And, well, obviously I got the job.
- JH: Could you talk a bit about your journey, your academic career in political science specifically? What brought or interested you in pursuing political science?
- MG: When I was in college at Columbia University, I was actually an American history major, and for whatever reason I was always fascinated by the history of U.S. relations with East Asia and wrote a number of papers as an undergraduate on the Korean War, then the war in Vietnam before U.S. involvement. That led me to change career thoughts from law school to going on in international relations. I stayed at Columbia, got my master's in international affairs along with what's called a certificate in East Asian studies, and began my study of Chinese, which I then continued in a year abroad in Taiwan. Of course, that was a time when U.S.-China relations had not yet been normalized. While still not having a Ph.D., I was hired by Rand Corporation, which you may know is a major think tank in Santa Monica, California, because of my work on Vietnam.

There were not too many Vietnam specialists in those days, even though we were fighting a terrible war at the time. My very first book was coming out, published by Columbia University Press, on the early years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. I was one of those few so-called experts. I'm not sure how expert I really was, but the fact that I had written a book said something, so I was hired by Rand. That's how I got to California, and I continued at Rand for five years, became involved in the Pentagon

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Papers Project, which is a whole other episode in my life. After five years, I started my teaching career at the University of California.

JH: Could you speak a bit to how this background shaped your initial involvement in the development of Peace Studies at PSU, or perhaps what bridged these careers into bringing you into your involvement with Peace Studies at PSU?

MG: I think that's a very good question in my case, and the brief answer is that at one time, while I was still a graduate student, I was actually in favor of the Vietnam War, and at that time at Columbia there were rival student groups opposed to and in favor of the war. I was on the wrong side. [laughing] As I matured, or so I think, and began my teaching career and had a chance to more deeply explore the roots of U.S. involvement, and then even more so when I got to Rand where I was working under government contract, but had a chance to go to Washington because of the Pentagon Papers Project and read some of the classified materials on U.S. involvement in Vietnam. All of those things combined to move me politically to the side of being against the war. As Patricia [Schechter] may know—I can't imagine you do—but I actually was one of the very few authors of the Pentagon Papers that supported Dan Ellsberg at his trial in Los Angeles during those days in the early 1970s. But anyway, the more I was exposed to the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the more I came to embrace Peace Studies. In general, my scholarship from that time on was really motivated, and remains so to this day, focused on what I like to call "human interest analysis," which really is Peace Studies by another name.

JH: How did you come to be directly involved with the rest of the people that built the program?

MG: In the course of being director of International Studies, which took up the first five years of my tenure at Portland State, I got to meet any number of people, including most especially, I suppose, Rob Gould. Rob and I, and others who naturally came together because of our interest in non-violence and other Peace Studies values, began to try to formulate a program at Portland State that might address those kinds of matters. I don't remember the exact sequence of events that led us to the stage of saying "Yes, let's actually try to create a curriculum," but we were all of a similar mind and with similar values about the need for having Peace Studies within a liberal arts curriculum. At some point it evolved to thinking really seriously about what it would take.

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JH: We've spoken with a number of people about Peace Studies and their role in administering the program. You seem to occupy a slightly different place than a number of the other narrators we've spoken with in the nature of the courses you taught. I was wondering if you could speak a bit about your role in the academic growth of Peace Studies and the development of the classes you taught.

MG: The main thing I contributed was a graduate-level class on international peace keeping, which was a wonderful experience over a number of years because it brought in people from both the political science and peace and conflict resolution areas. We got a nice mix of students, usually about a dozen, sometimes even a little bit more, and for me it was a good experience; it was a growing experience because I had not taught that kind of a course before. I needed to acquaint myself with more of the literature than I was aware of on international conflict resolution. There is by now a pretty substantial literature in both theory and practice of conflict resolution at the international level. That's the niche that I chose for myself, and I'm very glad I did because it not only was a pleasure to get into that literature and the case studies that went along with it, but also, it informed one of my most recent books which is called *Engaging Adversaries*, which drew a good deal of inspiration from that course.

JH: Speaking of engaging adversaries, one thing we wanted to ask was that the Peace Studies program was established in or around a backdrop of the Gulf War. I was wondering if you could speak to how establishing the program against that backdrop affected or shaped the development of the ideas that drove it forward.

MG: That's probably true. Students and faculty were pretty engaged in that war. There were plenty of protests. I took part in quite a number of them along with my colleagues and students. Of course, the war had its supporters as well as folks like myself on the other side, very critical. I don't know that it spurred any huge increase in Peace Studies per se. You know, it's one thing to go out and protest, it's another to actually sign up for a course or enter a degree program. So I don't know, and maybe I'm wrong about this, but I don't recall at least that the war led to some big jump in enrollment. It probably should have, but certainly the backdrop was there, and for those of us that were committed to Peace Studies, and I include students, it made what we were doing all the more urgent.

JH: I see. One thing that we've spoken about, and this is slightly off the cuff, is theories of power. Theories of power relationships. With your academic background and your

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involvement with the development of the program, I was wondering if you'd be willing to speak a bit about how Peace Studies as a program can address different theories of power, if that question makes sense.

MG: It makes sense, but I'm not sure I have a sensible answer off the cuff. You know, Rob Gould, among others, were addressing that kind of question in their courses. I don't know how, frankly, how they treated the issue of power relations in their course. Of course, they were dealing with power relations in many different respects. I assume everything from landlord and renter, to factory worker and boss. I don't know if they got into power relations at a more governmental level, and probably not at an intergovernmental or international level, which is where to some degree I would have touched base with that issue. But I'd really have to do a lot more searching before I could really give a meaningful answer to that question.

JH: That's understandable.

MG: It is a good question. But probably Rob and others are much better equipped to get at it since they taught it.

JH: Fair enough. Since I have you here, I was wondering if you could speak a bit about your thoughts on the future of Peace Studies. Obviously the world right now is in a situation—not simply with the global pandemic but with a variety of complex geopolitical factors, there's wars all over the place—and I was wondering if you could speak a bit about your thoughts on the future of Peace Studies and the value it has going forward.

MG: You know, being out of academia for a while now, though I'm continuing to write and do research and all that stuff, but when it comes to curricular matters I don't really have much of a handle on the future of Peace Studies even at Portland State, let alone anywhere else. Logically, Peace Studies should have an ever larger role, you know, just given the way the world is, and I think more of a role than conflict studies which is, after all, political science, or at least international politics, typically devotes itself to. In political science, one of my criticisms has always been that it stops at the edge of talking about conflict resolution. Political scientists can be very good about assessing the background and evolution of a conflict, but they have usually very little say about, and very little training in, conflict resolution. That's where I found a niche for myself, but I

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don't know that among specialists there has been any great growth in this particular little industry. The curriculum on Peace Studies should be expanding, the number of people seriously devoted to peaceful resolution of conflict should be expanding, the kinds of conflicts that are occurring that need attention, for example in a pandemic, are constantly expanding and in ways that we wouldn't have predicted even 5 years ago. But I'm not too optimistic that that's where things are moving in the intellectual world.

Just on that subject, although it's not exactly Peace Studies: someone made me aware just yesterday of a new book called *Human Kind*, and apparently it's a very optimistic but very learned appraisal of where we are, and I say optimistic because contrary to so much of what is written today, the author, with considerable data which I haven't looked at yet but will, to support it concludes that really humankind is not such a bad breed after all. For all the instances of violence, which are so easy to point out, domestic and international, evidently he finds that there is a great deal more altruism, human kindness, for example in the pandemic that were facing now, and all the rest, than we usually acknowledge or teach about or try to learn more about. God knows we need more optimism today, although it has to be realistic optimism; but it just goes to show that it's so rare to find something like that, a serious thinker on the subject of peaceful behavior, let's say. So it just shows where we're at intellectually. I think we're a pretty backwards species, [laughing] and I was saying in introducing the book to some other friends that I suppose we're ripe to be taken over by some more civilized alien culture, except they would probably look at us and decide we're not well enough evolved. [laughing] I'd like to be more optimistic.

JH: Thank you, Mel. I really appreciate you taking the time to speak with us. What I'd like to do know is open up the floor. If anyone else in my class has any questions, if Patricia has any questions, I'd like to give them a chance to ask you.

LADY J: I'm Lady J. I am enthusiastic about conflict transformation, Peace Studies, all the language that is used to describe this cloud of creating world peace, basically. In specific, I'm a grad student at Walden University in Communications. I graduated from PSU last June with a social science degree and a concentration in conflict resolution. I am excited to talk to you. This has been interesting to learn about the way that you were able to shift your personal politics. You mentioned that throughout your work with the Pentagon Papers, it shifted how you thought. I just want to know more about what that looked like. Would it have happened if you didn't have access to classified information? What were the roots of that ideological shift?

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MG: Very interesting question. You know, people are always asked, and I'm often asked, about how I went from being a pro-war enthusiast to being very vigorously anti-war, not only on that war but on all other wars that have occurred since then. I think it's the experiential thing. When I got to Rand, to start my first professional job, even before the Pentagon Papers unexpectedly came up—because it was a secret project and I had no hint of it when I was hired—but I was hired primarily to work on the Vietnam War even though my fundamental training is on China. I happened to meet, at Rand, a small number of people who were also against the war. People who I regarded as intellectually very solid and credible. And I became friends with them, and I think that was very important in helping me to shift at that very personal level and be open to a critical look at the war.

Then, even before the Pentagon Papers, my first job at Rand was to analyze interviews, which are now available publicly but were classified at the time, interviews of captured soldiers from “the enemy side,” the Vietnamese Communist side. These presented a very human picture of why people joined the other side, a picture that was totally absent from our mass media and certainly was absent from the minds of people making war decisions in Washington. That too struck a chord, and as I read the enormous number of interviews that were available, my analysis, because that was my job to interpret these analyses and interviews, and my analyses were influenced in a very critical way about the war.

Then came the Pentagon Papers, the invitation to become part of that top-secret project, and that exposed me to even more information. You know, the interesting about it is that sort of final piece in my intellectual puzzle came about in the confines of the Pentagon, because that's where I did my work. In fact, it was in the office suite of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. You would think that in the bowels of the Pentagon, the belly of the beast, that I would be influenced in precisely the opposite direction, but not at all. That only added to my view that this was morally and legally, and in every other way, an unjustified war. That's the fuller explanation.

LIZA SCHADE:

I don't know if this is too personal for you or not: what was that transition from pro-war to anti-war like for you? I know, in my views, I grew up very Republican conservative and I have gone completely the opposite over the last ten years or so, and it's been a conflicting thing for me. I'm glad I'm at this side of it. But that said, how was that transition like for you? Was it something easy?

MG: It was gradual in the way that I describe it, but it was pretty easy. Of course, to use that word can be very misleading. It wasn't just "Oh, today I'll wake up and be anti-war," or something. I think it probably played into my background growing up in New York in a fairly liberal environment anyway. You know, learning from parents and others certain good values, positive human values, or what you might call "humane" values. They were all there, and I think that war, at that time, touched a nerve and led me to think more deeply than I had as a grad student. And so it went. Yes, along the way there was pushback, of course, from a variety of people.

LS: Did you lose friends?

MG: Not really from friends, but certainly at Rand Corporation, which after all, at that time, was heavily dependent on Department of Defense and other government contracts. So you can imagine that there were lots of people there that were hostile to those of us—and we were a very distinct minority—who were against the war and were therefore very happy when people like me left to go into academia. [laughing] One less problem to deal with. But nevertheless, I felt pretty firm in my convictions, and fortunately—and this is always very important—I had support. There was a kind of support group. I wasn't alone hanging out there on a limb. That's why my colleague at the time, Dan Ellsberg, who's still a friend of mine, when he and a few others came up with the idea, although some people think I came up with the idea... [laughing] when all five of us decided to write a letter, an open letter to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* specifically calling for U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, which was a very very unpopular thing to do, and was very much disliked by people working in government, including Rand, but we went ahead and did it. It was important that we were five and not one, and that we could deal with the resulting hostility. It's important to find like-minded souls and then fight the good fight.

30:33

LADY J: Since you said nothing is too personal, I wanted to dig in a bit and ask about how you mentioned the way that the friendship played a major role. I'm assuming you meant with the five people you wrote to the *New York Times* with? My question is, what was it about the way that they became friends with you that made you feel you could change?

MG: I think so, but if not, you can steer me in the right direction. Like I said, these five are personal, they are very warm individuals, humane in their personal conduct. Very smart. Much more learned than I, because at that time I was pretty junior, you know. It was very unusual that someone my age, which is to say 25, was a professional staff member at Rand. These were much older people, but they took me under wing and I just, in a variety of ways, learned from them as I did my research. I had tremendous respect for

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them. They were people of integrity, both personally and intellectually. I felt I was on the right track.

CLEOPHAS CHAMBLISS: Was it the information you uncovered working at the Pentagon that kind of helped you change your mind, finding out that they had been lying to the American people, or is it like, you know, a “War is bad!” kind of moment?

MG: I think that if you were to read the Pentagon Papers—and within a few days after I left Rand to start my teaching career, I was interviewed by the *New York Times* and gave my full support to Daniel Ellsberg for having started to reveal those papers—the thing that I said, the main message that I gave at the time and then afterward was that what was so important about the Pentagon Papers and why it was so necessary that they be made public was the record of deceit. Deceit of the American people, who were being told all along that the war was being won when in fact it was being lost. When they were being lied to about casualty figures, about bombing, about the terrible price that ordinary people in Vietnam were paying for the war, and on and on and on. So that was very much a factor in my thinking, and when I read those documents that were a part of my research, all of those very same factors were very clear. The terrible price that the Vietnamese people were paying for this war, which of course did not enter into the calculations of those making decisions at the highest levels. And that much became very clear as well with the Pentagon Papers. Those papers are valuable, terribly valuable, for that reason.

PATRICIA SCHECHTER: It was a beautiful question. On the one hand, Mel, your narrative resonates deeply with what I’ve been learning as a historian who’s parachuted into conflict resolution: that one of the first steps to conflict resolution is to humanize and understand who we’re in conflict with. The first part of your narrative was about hearing the voices of the Viet Cong, correct? Seeing them as humans making choices in constrained circumstances like we all do. But CC really raised another question, right? Someone could be like, “But they’re people, too!” and that’s not necessarily an

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argument against war, because wars happen between people and real people. But she really identified this other dimension of political corruption, political compromise that, together, found a powerful alignment.

MG: If I could just add something. One other element of that which is not often brought out, but I think is, again, something can be read from the Pentagon Papers and also from the material I was reading other than the papers. That is, at the highest levels of decision making on the war, the dehumanization not only applied to the enemy, but also to our supposed friends. In other words, the South Vietnamese who we were supposedly going to liberate were actually viewed with disdain. They were just, in a sense, in the way. They were corrupt, and inefficient, and they lacked the nationalist appeal of the other side. The whole idea was how to win the war without them.

CC: That goes back to that “white man’s burden.”

MG: [laughing] Yeah, in a way, yes. Yes. A very racist view. They were in the way.

PS: I want to be mindful of our time, and of course I want to give Jake the opportunity to ask the last question or the closing question. One thing that we’ve been bumping up against as historians in this project is this kind of cleavage in what people say, what people do, what people read, what people study between peace and conflict. Let’s face it: an artist, a newspaper person would say conflict is where power shows its teeth. It’s where we see ourselves with clarity. Peace is boring. Peace has no narrative. There’s no beginning, middle and end. It’s not a story, it’s a state. We’ve really struggled at different levels with how to study the history of memorialization of peace and war, and the very uncomfortable relationship between those two categories. In the middle of your discussion, you talked about how we’re really good at diagnosing conflict and less at the diagnostics of peace. I wondered if you wanted to say a little more about that.

MG: Well, I can certainly speak to it so far as political sciences are concerned. I think it’s pretty clear that in just the raw numbers, only a tiny fraction of political scientists studying international conflict really are interested in, much less writing about, the resolution of conflict. They can be very good at describing the origins and evolution of a conflict, the long history of it, and they can get into great detail about it, but they stop short of really thinking seriously about what it would take for this conflict to come to some kind of closure. Not necessarily resolution, but there are any number of options there for maybe managing the conflict. All of those are very important gradations of bringing a conflict to some kind of rough ending, and they just don’t want to touch those kinds of things.

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There's a project I'm involved in right now which may illustrate that. I've been associated for a long time with the journal *Asian Perspective*. I'm no longer the editor-in-chief because I retired from that, but I'm working with the current editor-in-chief. What we're looking at right at this moment is the U.S.-China relationship which, needless to say, is highly conflictual and getting worse. What we're doing is insisting that the authors of this special issue that we're trying to put together for the journal not merely addresses the kinds of conflicts that go into the U.S.-China relationship, but how do we get out of this morass? What will it take? What are some of the new ideas or things worth testing to try to deal with this? I'll be interested to see how many of these China specialists, who are all very good at their job in terms of talking about conflict, can shift gears and talk about resolution. So we'll see.

PS: Thank you for that. Historians are always a little envious of the political scientists because you tend to be more prognosticators. We tend to look back and you guys tend to look a little more forward. Your perspective is interesting that maybe not as forward as they might had peace been on the agenda.

MG: We don't want predictions. Those are usually wrong, and not many political scientists are interested in getting into the prediction game. We do want ideas, and for dealing with ongoing and very dangerous conflicts, ideas that reflect some serious multilevel thinking about what it would take. That's not easy, but that's a good intellectual challenge and, moreover, it might actually have some genuine value if decision makers actually choose to pick up a book, in a very anti-Trumpian way, and actually read what experts have to say. But that's a whole other challenge.

JH: Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with us, Mel. We appreciate it. That concludes this interview. Thank you everyone for participating.

MG: Thank you, Jake. Good luck with the project.