Modern American History (2024), **7**, 424–439
doi:10.1017/mah.2024.39

Q&A

The WRITER'S STUDIO with Pulitzer Prize Winners Beverly Gage and Jefferson Cowie

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The Pulitzer Prize brings with it eminence in the profession and an abundance of opportunities to speak to a wide public that only a select few in the profession experience. For Beverly Gage, winner of the 2023 Pulitzer for Biography (*G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century*, published by Viking Press), and Jefferson Cowie, recipient of the 2023 Pulitzer in History (*Freedom's Dominion: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power*, published by Basic Books*)*, this culminating event has also afforded them the chance to pause and reflect on their careers and anticipate next steps. We are grateful that they were willing to look back and forward as authors in conversation with *Modern American History*, which they have served as members of the editorial board. In August of 2024, Thomas G. Andrews and Darren Dochuk had the privilege of Zoom-chatting with Gage and Cowie for over two hours, about matters ranging from the mundane (word counts, filing methods, etc.) to more profound queries about the fonts of their curiosity and passion for history, and the ambitions that drive them to write well with empathy, creativity, and impact. Celebrated authors with numerous awards to their name, they mostly cherish (paraphrasing Gage) "just having the time to think and write serious books": that "is the prize." That commitment to a quiet life with words shines through in the discussion that follows.

Below is a transcript of the conversation, which has been lightly edited only for clarity, punctuation, and space. We have done our best to maintain the spontaneity and informal tone of the free-flow conversation.

Darren Dochuk: Let's start with your experiences as junior scholars and how they led you to these award-winning texts. What lessons did you learn early on? How did you discover the way you wanted to write, your voice as an author? And how did this manifest in the production of these major works?

Beverly Gage: I would say I always knew from the moment that I went to graduate school that I wanted to write books that would both be serious works of scholarship, and would speak to some larger audience as well. So that was always my aspiration, and I tried to fashion my writing voice in that way, even in my first book, which you know had to be the tenure book.

One of the main things that I learned from writing that first book was that I wanted to write about something people had actually heard of. My first book was about a forgotten event, the 1920 bombing of Wall Street. It turned out that the book got some traction, but it also had some challenges in terms of explaining to people why they ought to be interested. Working on J. Edgar Hoover has its own challenges, someone who's as big and famous as he is. But that was definitely one lesson that I took away.

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Jefferson Cowie: It's funny. Bev, you wanted to study something people had heard of. I don't think I've ever studied anything anybody's ever heard of. My first book, *Capital Moves*, was about four communities and a factory that moves through them from the Northeast down to Mexico. Because of the obscurity of my topics, I learned that what mattered to me was a kind of cinematic lens. I wanted the reader to see and feel my topics. Because people don't know these places, or don't know this factory, or in the case of *Freedom's Dominion*, Barbour County, know anything, it is really important to be able to picture it, smell it, feel it, and enter the history I hope to tell.

I also think about how powerful song lyrics can be given their ability to say a great deal with tremendous economy of words. Those tools can be the fastest ways to kind of telegraph how a place feels. And it's really important to go to those places, sit with them, and experience them in a fairly deep way, in order to write about them compassionately.

So, I think that's what I learned: immerse yourself and find the big story in the little place, which is what I've tried to do in most of my work.

Dochuk: Having achieved the style and mode of writing you want, have you found your "calling"? Have you found what you want to do for the rest of your career in terms of method, or are you open to exploring new approaches, even genres?

Gage: In some basic way, yes. In fact, having taught at Yale for twenty years, I've become convinced that historians each have a unique writerly voice. We might not talk about it, but we have recognizable styles.

I would say two other quick things. One is that as I go along in my career, I am more and more convinced that just having time to write and think and write serious books is the prize. I mean, that's what is most valuable, because, as you go along in your career, you get dragged into a million different things. Other opportunities come along, whether it's more public-facing work or teaching work or administrative work. And I feel very deeply that I do want to write books for the rest of my life.

The second thing I'll say is that I am now writing a book that is radically different from the Hoover book. It is short. It is a kind of romp through American history. I definitely did not want to sit down immediately and write another 800-page book that would take a decade to research. I will do that again soon enough, but not right away.

Cowie: I think what I was unaware of in my conceptualization of projects, but eventually became explicit in my work, was my tendency to unpack what might just be a seemingly uninteresting place, or person, or event and see how the light can shine or be refracted in different directions out of that otherwise unremarkable thing, whether it's a community or a factory or an individual. I think that will stick with me for much of my career writing history.

And I think that's the pitfall or limit of social history: not drawing out the big themes enough, to really get at how the macro, political, economic, national, and transnational dimensions are embodied in some of those people, places, and events. You have to open the thing up and let it shine.

It's funny to hear you say you're gonna do a "romp" next Bev. I'm also kind of doing something more playful and less constrained. I am working on a book based on the style of the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, who wrote a three-volume history of Latin America called *Memory of Fire*. In those books, he manifests the epic of Latin American history through weird, slightly magical realist snapshots of history. I'd like to do that for U.S. history.

Gage: Well, I'm doing something that is not too dissimilar I think. I'm calling it "a road trip through U.S. history," and it's an attempt to get at some of the big moments and controversies in

American history through thirteen different places. So I have actually spent the last year and a half traveling the country, going to historic sites, and writing about them. But it's intended to be a short, engaging kind of book, and I am hoping to get it out before or at the very beginning of 2026, which is going to be the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. I think there's going to be a lot of history talk in 2026, and I want this to be a thoughtful early intervention.

Cowie: I think historians, especially those who've managed to get a little bit of experience under their belt, are trying to think about history in different ways, trying to pull at some of the assumed ways we think about the past. And I think it's really exciting—an exciting moment in our profession.

Thomas G. Andrews: I'm curious, if your future projects are romps, then are you implying that *Freedom's Dominion* and *G-Man*, were slogs? Looking back on those, what sort of mode characterizes them, in terms of your process, as opposed to the product?

Cowie: I hope it's not a "slog," but a coherent argument framed around a single theme and place. Barbour County has a certain amount of interest, but examining how one of the most important ideas in American history operates in opposition to federal power—now that gets juicy, it gets politically charged. I think that an idea, like freedom, can offer a great deal of narrative drive. In my new work, I'm trying to balance conflict and dissent within a sense of national cohesion, which is a very difficult thing to do. One or the other—national story *or* conflict and dissent—is easy. Doing them together is tough. James Baldwin talked about the conflict within a "common history," and so that's what I'm trying to do. I don't believe in textbooks very much, and I struggle to embrace national narratives. So this new project would be the closest thing to those genres that I would try.

Gage: I think I might be a little more sympathetic to national stories, so that might be an interesting discussion to have, although, like yours, mine is a very curated set of local stories that connect up to something bigger than they are. But on the question of Hoover and the biography: Was it a "slog?" I would say sometimes yes, but mostly no.

One issue that a lot of people thought I might have in writing the biography was just spending all of that time—I spent more than a decade on it—with someone I didn't particularly like or admire, and at times was just horrified by. But I actually never found it to be a problem. One of the things that I like about doing history is taking these leaps into other people's worlds and world views. And so I really remained fascinated by J. Edgar Hoover that whole time. I didn't lose momentum in that sense, and so it didn't feel like a slog. I was really energized, because I feel like the world that he helped to create matters so much today.

But it was a huge challenge, because there was just so much material. He was at the FBI for forty-eight years, and he was alive for even longer than that. It was a giant bureaucracy that produced an enormous amount of paper, so at a certain point, I needed a strategy because I understood that I couldn't get through everything, and if I did, I'd be in real trouble. You know Robert Caro gave this famous advice: "Turn every page." It's the name of a documentary about him, and it's something he often says. I like that investigative impulse, but I actually am not sure that it's great advice. It would have been terrible advice for me, I think, had I turned every page. I actually never would have written the Hoover book—and it took long enough, and is long enough, already.

Cowie: Can I bounce off a couple of things that Bev brought up that I think are really important? I think what you bring to Hoover, and what I tried to bring to Barbour County, is what every historian/writer should do: start with empathy. You can't come at your project with an antagonistic attitude, thinking that "I'm gonna write the story of people I just don't like." You have to start with a certain sense of empathy. I walked away from George Wallace with a kind of odd respect despite our antithetical values. The guy was cagey. He was really smart. He was self-educated, even though he went to college. He was also, you know, conniving, and did all sorts of bad things that we can and should all know about. But I think you have to walk in their shoes in order to really write about them with any kind of conviction whatsoever. It doesn't work if you're just going into combat with your subject.

That said, I was lucky enough to write most of this book at a posh place like Stanford, with a year at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS). Wherever you are, you have to find ways to vent off the pain and the trauma when writing about horrible stuff like lynching and reconstruction coups, and I felt a sense of vertigo thinking about weight of history while strolling through Stanford's manicured palm trees. I spent a lot of time not just writing but walking around that beautiful place trying to release the dark burdens of history from my body and mind.

Andrews: Jeff, you are touching on the invisible processes involved in writing books like yours—what it takes to sort of hold accounts of horrific violence and to do them justice. How do we talk about horrible things in a way that doesn't feel pornographic, in a way that respects the people involved? It is a vague and big question, but if you could lift the curtain on these types of processes that we really never actually talk about: how did you arrive at a sense of empathy for George Wallace, for instance? How did you navigate the pressure of that weight of bureaucratic documentation and find your way through without just being weighed down?

Gage: Right. How do you survive, emotionally? In terms of dealing with the sources, and I imagine Jeff would agree, there are two related issues. On the one hand, you do want to take this leap of the imagination even into the mind of someone that you profoundly disagree with, dislike, and disapprove of.

On the other hand, you want to make sure that you're not captured by that person's worldview. And I think that is a particular problem for biographers. Often biographers are working on people that they love. And they want to say, "Wow, look how great this person is." That wasn't my particular problem. But I do think—because so much of the materials that I was working on were FBI documents, things that Hoover had produced, things produced by his friends and admirers, press coverage of him, etc.—I had to be careful about keeping space between myself and my subject. One of the ways that I did that—and I think this speaks to a little bit of what Jeff was saying—was to let those documents kind of reveal their own horrors in some way. I think of the FBI's famous campaign against Martin Luther King Jr. To actually sit with that material and think about what they were doing, or to look at what they were doing to the Black Panthers . . . .

There's this one document, one of the FBI's COINTELPRO documents from the sixties, that was about this activist that they and the local police had just hounded from city to city to city—a guy who had joined a radical organization, maybe still had some radical ideas and impulses, but had nonetheless been arrested and harassed and surveilled and had his family life disrupted over and over and over again. They go in, and they do it one more time, and then they're gleeful because he just collapses on the ground and starts crying and gives up. Even when you're writing about someone like Hoover, having these real stories of the damage that he inflicted and letting those live too is really important.

Cowie: When you were asking that question, Thomas, the first thing that came to mind was a chapter in my book called "Lynching as an Act of Freedom," which is a shocking title. It takes a long time to get to that point, to put seemingly contradictory ideas like that together in a single phrase. I got the title from a local headline that read something like "City's Finest Lynch Negro." You gotta walk a long way in your head to figure out how and why people can consider this most heinous of acts to be a virtuous thing. And that is really difficult, but that's the job.

And you're right, not making it pornographic. I mean white people in Barbour County were doing horrible things to people's bodies, I mean unspeakable stuff. And how do you relate that in a clear, succinct way, without indulging it, but not stepping back from the horror? You cannot flinch from the fact that they are connecting lynching to what should be the most virtuous dimensions of the American creed. I got a tiny bit of narrative satisfaction from the fact that the leader of one of the lynch mobs, a prominent doctor, would, later in life, feel the spirit of his victim riding with him when he was alone late at night. That's a decent narrative end to a difficult chapter.

Living in and expressing that tension is hard. I don't mean to be melodramatic, but there is a certain amount of trauma going through this stuff. After what I call the "Reconstruction coup," when Barbour County whites slaughtered Black people right in front of voting booths in 1874 and then threw up their hats and said, "Three cheers!," you need to morally condemn that, but you need to understand it as well. And that's the next step: understand the mindset. That's our job, right? I think we get confused between our politics and our job as historians. Our politics stall us out a step short of fully understanding what these people think they're doing.

Andrews: Does doing this job, striking this difficult balance, does it come easy for you, in your first draft? Or is it something you have to go through, from a really condemnatory version, and then an exculpatory version, until you find the middle? Can you say a little bit more about how this unfolded across your projects?

Gage: I didn't have to go through those steps exactly, but I did find that I needed to go back over my writing a lot. I have fifty-eight chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion, and I went back over almost all of them and tried to make sure that my voice was clear throughout. I didn't write the book in order, but even if I had, I would have needed to do the same thing.

Cowie: My problem was that I'm not a southern historian. *Stayin' Alive* is a national story of a single decade, but I've never told anything of this distinct scope. What I wanted to do was tell a big story about American history grounded in something very specific, but I didn't know anything about how to proceed. I'd been thinking about freedom as an analytical problem for a long time, and then I just stumbled across Barbour County. And then the two just came together. So, the problem for me was entering a completely new historiographical universe. My compass was sort of spinning for a guy who, you know, who thought history began with the National Labor Relations Act in 1935.

This was disorienting. So three of the book's sections worked pretty well. But the one called "Federal Power in Repose" was really hard. After a manuscript workshop I did, one of the preeminent historians of Alabama basically told me I had no idea what I was talking about, and I had to go back and totally rework it. Thank goodness I did, as his advice was invaluable. So for me, it was about getting more refined in terms of sensitivities of scope and scale, region, and theme.

Gage: If I can just pick up on a couple of things there: one is specific to this moment in an academic career. I spent most of my career studying the twentieth century, and one of the things that I wanted to do with this much shorter book that I'm writing was not only get away from my desk a little bit, but actually be able to plunge into other fields and other time periods that I haven't visited in a long, long time.

And then the second piece—since there may be some graduate students who are reading this—is that this exploratory process made me tremendously grateful for the way Columbia University structured its oral exam fields when I was there. At the time, you didn't have very much choice about what you were doing: you had to do an early America field, a nineteenth-century field, a twentieth-century field, and then you had one boutique field that had to be global in some way. The reading that I did more than twenty years ago, in those fields that I didn't end up writing about immediately, was just so important for my thinking and for my ability to synthesize ideas, even for understanding Hoover's early life, which really comes out of the Civil War and late-nineteenth-century politics. That graduate school experience turned out to be super valuable. In any career, there are these moments of expansiveness. Graduate school was one of them. And then I think this mid-career moment is another. They're very exciting, and we should embrace them even as we're specializing.

Cowie: I couldn't agree more on both of those points. One other little detail: the first thing I did was go back and read J. Mills Thornton's *Power and Politics in a Slave Society*, published in 1978, and one of the first studies to actually look at the social history of politics, to figure out how politics is rooted in the local. That book kind of grew out of the social history movement, and I read it for an Old South seminar back in grad school. It had an impact on me that lingered. I went back and found he mentions freedom and anti-statism probably more than two dozen times in that book, and I had circled each one. So part of the project of a historian is exploration, another part is rediscovering what you've been thinking about on a different level, perhaps for decades.

Dochuk: It seems like both of you were able to sustain interest in these award-winning projects for over ten years. Even though you kept things moving forward, were there any surprises that emerged along the way? For example: Jeff, what was it about Barbour County that made it the place to go and dwell in with the idea of freedom? And Bev, a biography of someone like Hoover is a daunting task: what made you think it was the right time for such a huge book, and then how did that initial spark of curiosity and conviction evolve over the time it took to write the book?

Gage: Once I was about ten years into the project, after most of the work but before its reception, had you asked me if it was a good idea for a second book, I would have said no. Perhaps it would have been better to do something a little more contained and do this as a third or fourth book, but that's not what I did. And it's because I had the idea back in graduate school. I felt energized by it. It seemed to come sort of organically out of my first book. I wanted to be brave and try my hand at something really big—a daunting subject. I did feel at times that it took a certain kind of courage to do that—to take a figure who has been reviled and try to say, well, he deserves a serious look. To take on someone who's had his fingers in so many different things … I was a little intimidated by it and I didn't exactly know what I was getting into in terms of scale.

That said, the basic framework, ideas, and historiographical inspiration for the book remained the same from beginning to end. You can look at my book proposal from 2009, and it says this is about someone who is a conservative state-builder who takes Progressive-era visions of state professionalization and combines them with a deeply rooted conservative ideology, and then builds a part of the state that we don't spend enough serious time thinking about. So, in addition to writing a biography, I always knew that those were the themes that I was really interested in. But there were all sorts of pieces that I came across that I had no idea I was, first, going to encounter and, second, find interesting.

I actually began to get very interested in his early life, for example. Jeff has talked a lot about place, and I got very interested in this place known as Washington, DC. The city looks so different in the years that he is born and coming of age than it does by the time he dies. He never lived anywhere else. So I got really into Washington's local history. I got very interested in things like Hoover's college fraternity, which I had seen references to but did not fully understand. It's a fraternity called Kappa Alpha, and when I sat down and started reading his fraternity journal, it turns out it's this very famous Old-South Lost-Cause fraternity. During the years he's coming of age, it has lots of very prominent segregationists and Southern Democrats in it. So, you know, there are moments like that early on. And then there were moments in his professional career that I also had just never thought a whole lot about. Some of them were a little redemptive, like the fact that the FBI did actually try, starting in the 1940s, to manage the super problematic challenge of investigating and prosecuting lynchings and other forms of racial violence in the South.

And then other moments were interesting for other reasons—like the story of the Nazi saboteurs who showed up on Long Island in 1942, were hunted down in very problematic ways by the FBI, and then had this crazy military tribunal. Eventually they're all executed. I hadn't really thought a lot about the politics of World War II as they impacted the FBI, or as the FBI shaped them. But I found myself much more interested in many of those things than I had anticipated.

I would say one of the downsides for me of doing a biography, and I'm curious if this was similar for you, Jeff, was the mandate of completeness. There are some things that I'm a lot more interested in than others in J. Edgar Hoover's life. For example, the Kennedy assassination . . . . Yeah, I'm as interested in the Kennedy assassination as anyone else. But I'm not as interested in it as in these other aspects of his life. Still, there was absolutely no getting around it, because it was so crucial to not only American politics, but Hoover's life and the FBI's experience. I had no choice but to do a reasonably deep dive into that literature and into these massive FBI files on the subject. Had I been writing some other genre of book, I might have just stepped over that whole topic.

Cowie: I wanted to re-emphasize something Bev said at the beginning—having courage of your curiosity, to learn to trust your instincts. Listen to that inner voice. Scratch that itch, because usually the more you've absorbed history, the more a certain maturation has happened in your historical consciousness, the more you see rays of light leaking through the gaps and pressing outward.

Because, there are tensions, there are issues, there are questions, there are frictions, and all of that is what draws me forward. It's less, "Hey, nobody's ever studied this." It's more, "What does this have to say?"

In terms of surprises, the biggest for me was the fact that George Wallace was from Barbour County. I had been thinking about freedom and the problems of freedom and reading about freedom. But I didn't have any way to talk about it, and I knew I didn't want to tell a national narrative, i.e., "This is what Jefferson said, this is what Lincoln said, etc." I wanted to uncover the gritty practice of freedom, and I just happened to drive through Barbour County, drive through Eufaula, and I had a little spider sense saying, "this is it." This is the place I can do the project, but I didn't know anything about Alabama let alone Barbour County. I turned to my wife as we were driving through. She googled on her phone and said, "Well, I don't know but they did not have their first integrated prom until 1991 . . . ."

So there's probably a certain selection bias there, since this is a fairly extreme place. But the interesting thing about it that surprises most people, if they know anything about my work, is I found out George Wallace is from Barbour County later, after I had started the research. When I started, the book was going to be about the town. Then I found out Wallace was from the south end of the county. I said, "Oh, well, now it's a county study." It was fate at that point, because I had spent so much time thinking about Wallace in *Stayin' Alive* and to a certain point in *The Great Exception*. Things kept revealing themselves. And the biggest problem I had was the opposite of Bev's issue, like you pick up a large book on Hoover and you're expecting to hear everything about J. Edgar Hoover. But my book isn't a study of a county or a town. It's a study of an idea, and how that idea is put in motion, and its tension with federal power. Rather than include everything, I only talked about when and where freedom showed up.

Gage: I didn't include *everything*, for the record.

Cowie: I stand corrected. But since it was about the idea, not the place, and the place is just used to express the idea, so much is left on the cutting room floor—so many great stories that really weren't connected to the sort of tension with federal power that I was looking at. And vice versa: I lost a lot of stuff because I was limited to one county. For instance, the greatest federal intervention after Reconstruction was the Tennessee Valley Authority, but that wasn't in my county, so I didn't get to talk about the TVA. So my research and writing were simultaneously narratively rich and restricting.

Finally, I'll say the biggest problem I had was I was writing in the middle of COVID and Trump, and Trump and COVID. The next day I would go back and read what I wrote about freedom the day before and ask myself, "Is this just confirmation bias?" "Am I just finding whatever I want in the archives during this hothouse moment?" Because this history had really weird resonances with contemporary concerns. So I actually forced myself to go back to the sources each time and confirm: there it is, there it is, there it is! That's one of the reasons I stopped the story when I did; I wanted it to help make sense of the present without being presentist.

Dochuk: Two quick follow-ups: Jeff, this is a history of ideas grounded in a place. Nevertheless, the place matters. So how often did you go back and walk the streets of Eufaula? What did that do for you? And since the book has been published, have you been asked to come back and visit and talk about it at all?

And Bev, to your point: You do a brilliant job of biography, but what is also stunning is your attention and accountability to historiography, and to the different strands of historiographical conversation and interventions that you engage. You do that in a really extensive note on sources. I can imagine your word count was already pretty substantial. How emphatic were you in honoring the work of other historians and historiographies in the note? Did you get any pushback from the press?

Cowie: You have to reveal the word count Bev. We all want to know.

Gage: The text itself, without all of that back matter, was something like 340,000 words.

Cowie: Without the notes?

Gage: Without the notes. I will say that Viking never gave me a hard time about that. When I gave my editor a complete draft, it was maybe 10 percent longer than that. We did some culling and refining, but they never gave me a hard time about it being long, and they actually never gave me a hard time about what I wanted to do with the back matter. They supported my inclusion of both footnotes that tell you the archival sources, plus a pretty extensive "note on sources" and a bibliography.

One related challenge: maybe it's just biography, maybe it's J. Edgar Hoover, maybe it's all history books, but it seems like my readership skews slightly older than the American population. At any rate, the font is really small. So production-wise, that actually is the one thing I ended up a little bit uneasy about.

I should also say they let me publish 130 photos. And that was a very interesting process, because there's a photo at the beginning of every chapter. And then there are two full photo inserts. But again, they didn't put up any resistance, and were actually quite brilliant helping me work through all of the extratextual pieces.

Cowie: Most of the research I did was in Montgomery, which is where the really fantastic Alabama State Archives are. Montgomery has also become an interesting place to be, largely thanks to the work of the Equal Justice Initiative, Bryan Stevenson's organization. The State Archives, which is one of, if not the, first State Archive (as opposed to private historical societies), is really well done. And so it was a pleasure to work there. But, of course, I would frequently go back to Eufaula and Barbour County, and I'd drive around and I'd walk around. I needed to smell it. I needed to touch the trees and stick my feet in the river (well it's a lake now) . . . . I needed to talk to the people, eat lunch at the diner, and that's how I work. I didn't do any interviews; that sort of personal reportage isn't directly in the book. But I need to feel it directly in order to write about it. So I often went back.

Since winning the prize, I've given talks in Mobile, Tuscaloosa, Montgomery, and all that, but I've not been asked to come to Barbour County. We did go back with some of the members of the Pulitzer Committee, and we did a podcast in which I walked around and talked with wonderful Kelly Lytle Hernandez. That was fun. Oh, and they wouldn't let us do an interview in the Shorter mansion, one of the big fancy faux antebellum homes that Eufaula is famous for. So word was out. We also checked the book out of the library, it had been checked out like twenty times. So it was being read. But nobody from the town has asked me to come. I was kind of hoping the NAACP would, but maybe someday.

Andrews: Bev, you spoke a little about editing and trimming the manuscript. That brought to mind a broader question about the ways in which other people, agents, editors, friends, etc. who reviewed parts or the whole of the manuscripts—these are trade books, so I'm not sure if you had secured peer reviewers on your own, or whether these presses went about that—so can you say a little bit more about the collective dimensions of authorship for these books?

Dochuk: Can I just add one clause to that? Both of you worked with research assistants too: I'm curious about how much you leaned on their help with research. What did you entrust them with? What did you feel you couldn't?

Cowie: I wrote a lot of this at the Stanford CASBS, and it was really interesting to talk about this to people in an interdisciplinary setting, with a lot of political scientists, economists, anthropologists, and the like. I could ventilate it outside of historians' circles, which I really enjoyed. But, in general, I always turned specific chapters that I was concerned about over to people who knew a lot more than I did. For example, the lynching chapter I sent to people who know lynching or the Reconstruction stuff to people who know Reconstruction. By far the greatest experience I had in terms of the collective dimensions of this (besides my wife being an incredible editor who read every word and edited it down and in the end refused to have it dedicated to her because she preferred to be associated with a more joyful book topic) was what they call a "book scrub," or manuscript workshop. I found that experience so much richer than peer review. I had five historians, all of whom read it. They all brought comments, and each person talked a little bit about their own area. And then we did this incredible exchange. It was more lively and dialectical than a standard peer review that drops on your desk like an anonymous ton of bricks. It was great—just one of the best intellectual experiences I've ever had. I got to choose the best people in this realm, and they read it, and the responses I got were invaluable and so generous. Some of them gave me eight or ten single-spaced pages of comments to think about, so I became a big fan of that kind of process. And I know more universities are doing workshops like this for junior faculty. I think the more we push that direction, the better we will be as individual scholars and as a profession.

Andrews: Was that part of the Stanford thing, or was that something else?

Cowie: I did it at Vanderbilt with my own research funds.

Oh, and research assistants, right? So, I really only had one person help with primary research. I had a number of people help me fact check my footnotes for me and make sure I got the quotes right and stuff like that. But I had this young man from Guatemala who was just on fire about history, and we spent the summer in Montgomery just going through the files together. I'd pick boxes, and we'd work side by side. It really allowed me to sort of move through more material with another set of eyes than I might have been able to on my own. It was a great experience.

Gage: Well, I'll start with research assistants, since we're talking about that. I used quite a few research assistants for this book. In part, because there was just so much material that needed to be gathered in so many different places. And then, in part it was because I myself didn't feel like I could go everywhere. Hoover was in office under eight presidents, each of whom has a presidential library. And I was raising a little kid for most of this time (who is no longer a little kid). He came with me on several summer research trips to DC, which I think he ended up rather enjoying because he is now going to college in DC. He's actually going to George Washington, which is J. Edgar Hoover's alma mater, funnily enough.

Anyway, I had to produce some chapters along the way in order to go up for tenure. So I sent my research assistants out doing the stuff that I wouldn't have gotten to for another five or even eight years in some cases. And then I myself really drilled down on the sections that I decided to start with, which happened to be the twenties and thirties.

Over time, I used various researchers for places that I just couldn't physically pick up and go to for any number of reasons. I don't really ask assistants to do a lot of filtering for me; I just ask them to photograph everything and send it back to me. I like to work with undergraduates, because I think that it's a great experience for them. It is its own form of teaching and mutually beneficial.

But there were lots of other collective investments in the project. I knew I had to produce writing for tenure, but I was a little intimidated by J. Edgar Hoover, and intimidated by the idea of going up for tenure at Yale. So I thought, "I'm gonna need a support system." For those early phases of the book, I had a pretty intensive monthly writing group that consisted of four historians. Everyone lived in New Haven. Our one rule was that nobody could have power over anyone else. So I had one other colleague in the history department at Yale who was in the group, who was similarly untenured, and then one person who at the time was teaching at Wesleyan, and one person who is an independent historian and scholar. We all got together every month, and we all were writing books, and we all had to produce new material every time.

It was a great mechanism not only of accountability and of support, but also of just forcing everyone to cough it up earlier than they might want to, rather than holding onto it and massaging it. So that was hugely valuable for that early period. And then, when the manuscript was nearer to completion, I happen to live with a history professor and he was forced to read the whole thing. I had several lovely historian friends who read the whole manuscript, gave me lots of comments. Then, like Jeff, I reached out to many people—to whom I am hugely grateful—to read particular chapters. Hoover's life bounces around between so many different subjects that I wanted some specialists to look at what I wrote.

Cowie: Can I just follow up on the idea of writing groups? I didn't have one for this book because I kind of knew what I wanted to do, and I knew how I wanted to do it. But for about ten years in Ithaca, when I was at Cornell, we had an incredible group. It was called the Chapter House or "Beer and History," because we met at a bar called the Chapter House. I really honed my writing skills thanks to that group. And I became so dependent on them that, for awhile, I wouldn't submit anything until it had gone through this group. We have moved on, but they're still in my head. I can already know what the critiques would be from each of the people in that group. It was really dynamic, and there's actually a story about it in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.[1] It was just wonderful. It was also social. We'd do one round of drinks where we just talked about kids and school and whatever. And then the second round we would get down to work on whoever's chapter was that day. It was transformative. I still rely on the thinking of those people.

Dochuk: Would you both say your relationship to the pen has become less collective, now that you're deeper into your careers?

Cowie: Yeah, I haven't used a pen since 1993. But definitely, I'm much more of a solitary writer now. I think part of it is confidence. I have other people with me in a sort of imaginary way around the table sometimes, but I'm much more professional now. I don't just start writing hoping it goes somewhere. When I wrote *Freedom's Dominion*, it was kind of frightening how structured the process was—there was a whiff of Fredrick Winslow Taylor haunting the production. There are four parts, five chapters in each part. The chapters are very short. They're about 5,000 words each. It was much less iterative, and involved much less second guessing than my earlier books. I had a clear way for it to unfold both structurally and analytically, and I followed it pretty much to a tee.

Gage: I'm the same way. I think there is a learning process that goes on between your early and mid-career. This little book that I'm writing right now is very much on the Jeff model: thirteen chapters, about 5,000 words each. I started writing it in June, and it's going to be done soon because it's due in October. I actually feel like I know what I'm doing. I'm going to share it with people, but I'm just sort of trying to plow through with the writing. The Hoover book was much too big and sprawling to do independently that way. A biography comes with a certain inherent structure, and that is one of the beauties of it. But it was very hard to organize otherwise. I didn't know how many chapters there would be, or how long they'd be. I knew what the sections of the book would be, but that was it. I had some sense of the big picture, but I had just never done it before, so I didn't know exactly how to pace it all. There was a lot of trial and error in the beginning.

Cowie: How did you organize all of your research material?

Gage: I have a gigantic FileMaker database. I made a deal with myself to stay hyper-organized. They were almost all digital documents. Some FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] requests came through on paper, and there are some exceptions. But I tried to look at everything once and put notes and quotes and everything into this giant database. I like FileMaker because you can create all sorts of fields. You can have a date field. You can have subject checkboxes. So once I was like eight years in, I got to the point where I said, "Okay, we're doing chapter 36. Chapter 36 is Joe McCarthy. So now I'm gonna hit the Joe McCarthy button and get everything in one keystroke."

Andrews: How did you organize yourself, Jeff?

Cowie: Not as systematically, but similarly—I just had a spreadsheet. But I had the outline very clear in my head about what each chapter was going to cover. So the documents for each section and each chapter were in a spreadsheet, and I could just hit the link in the Excel file and bring up a copy of the document.

I'll tell you what they don't tell twentieth-century historians doing stuff in the nineteenth century. That handwritten stuff, you know. You have to start reading stuff written by somebody writing a letter on the back of a horse…. It was challenging.

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[1] Michael B. Smith, "History with a Beer Chaser," Chronicle of Higher Education, 10 December 2012.

Gage: Yeah, but they don't have the volume problems, or at least the volume problem that I had.

Dochuk: Let me follow up on a related point: You've written these books with an eye toward the broader public. How did this affect your writing, and is there any advice you can offer other scholars, especially more junior ones, along those lines? Is it a healthy ambition, or do you feel that it should only come with maturity in the profession?

Gage: Well, I was always doing that, even in graduate school. I wrote for magazines, and I had been a journalist very early on. So that always seemed like a pretty natural part of the conversation and just the way my mind works. One of the ways that it was particularly useful for the Hoover book is that, since he was such a big, well-known, and controversial subject, the things that people thought were relevant kept changing. When I started in the late aughts, there was still a post-9/11 atmosphere: surveillance, civil liberties, the Patriot Act, etc. That was a live politics in a way that has really receded in recent years. Then, a few years later, it seemed like it was going to be all about race and policing. Then, a few years later, there's Donald Trump firing James Comey, having this showdown with the federal intelligence bureaucracy. And so you've got this whole world of presidential politics and the history of the administrative state that came up. All of these things remained part of the Hoover book. But being in these ongoing conversations allowed me to test the waters, and see what people found relevant and engaging. This let me sort through framing questions while writing, without necessarily making the book particularly presentist.

Hoover posed particular challenges in that sense, because he is a figure about which there are incredibly powerful generational divides among people who are still living. There are a lot of people who are alive today who remember him in one way or another, viscerally and powerfully, whether they love or hate him. I was born about two months after Hoover died, part of the first generation that didn't have a living memory but had the image of Hoover of the late sixties and seventies: "Evil J. Edgar Hoover," the only thing we had ever encountered in popular culture. And then there are people who are in their twenties and thirties who have basically never heard of him. I wanted them all to be reading the book. So I was trying to reintroduce him to these very distinctive and different audiences, who are coming at him from very different vantage points.

Cowie: You know, by writing for the *Times* or something like that, I learned two things that I end up asking myself about constantly: "Where's the nut graf?" and "Don't bury the lede." These are very mechanical things that nobody ever taught me in grad school—ways to anchor where you are going in a very mechanical way. That became very useful, not just because the reader gets oriented a few paragraphs in by a nutgraf, but as a writer you have these core components that you are going to constantly refer to in order to not get disoriented as a writer. It forces you to frame the entire project mercilessly. So in terms of writing mechanics, I found doing some journalism stuff really useful. Those editors are tough, however; sometimes you don't even recognize your piece by the time they're done with it.

But I've become a little less enamored with journalism. It feels a little less sincere, less rewarding, than scholarship, but I still do it. I'll often think of great ideas for op-eds and stuff, but I don't act on a lot of them because I'd rather go outside or write something more enduring.

Gage: Yeah, I would agree with that. I have slowed my pace, partly because earlier on I wanted to prove that I could do this. But now I have less to prove and more time to foster my curiosities. When I do write in shorter form, I want it to still be more in-depth: essays, book reviews, but also longer essays. I have the dormant op-ed file too, but that process can take quite a long time and be very uncertain and disruptive. I feel there are a lot of voices clamoring out there in the news cycle. And actually, what we can really contribute, and what we have the protected space to do, are these longer, deeper, more thoughtful things that other writers might not have the structural circumstances to be able to produce.

Cowie: Yeah, earlier on you said the most important thing we can do is have the time to write, and I think that's so true. And that's why I don't know how people engage in X (Twitter) and all the social media stuff. To me, and this is personal and not at all objective, that stuff is antithetical to what I'm trying to do. Playing political ping pong on a daily basis doesn't allow me to deepen my historical game in the way I want to.

Andrews: Maybe we can move to our endgame here. This has been wonderful. Maybe a couple remaining wrap-up questions?

Dochuk: Here's one: were you surprised by the opportunities, but also responsibilities, these prizes brought to you? And how have you managed the logistics of notoriety while trying to stay active as teachers, carrying out your service, and so forth? How do you manage your time with all of these invitations and opportunities coming your way?

Cowie: I had a funny experience, and I suspect it's very different from Bev's. I released a book that is a history of a place nobody's ever heard of two days before Thanksgiving, and it was kind of crickets. It's not a sexy topic; there was no real hook beside the freedom discussion. It was after the midterm elections, stuck between Thanksgiving and New Year's, which is kind of a dead zone for serious nonfiction. But then it was on the cover of the *New York Times Book Review*, and that changed the conversation quite a bit.

But the launch was really kind of in a weird space, and I figured at first that my gamble on a kind of reemergence of this kind of old-school community study—this concept of micro-history connected to a big national idea of federal power—it probably didn't work out on a scale I might have hoped. And then it sort of grew in a little more organic way. And then the surprise of the Pulitzer, of course, was mind blowing. All to say that it was not a huge launch, and then it built more gradually.

Oh, I'll tell you a quick story: My wife and I were sitting right here in the living room when I started getting a stream of phone messages. All of a sudden people were congratulating me, but I didn't even know Pulitzers were being announced. I turned to my wife and said, "I think I won something," but I didn't know what. A friend then explained, "You won the Pulitzer Prize!" I turned to my wife with the news, and she said, "That doesn't make any sense!" She meant the way we were hearing the announcement didn't make sense, not that the quality of the book was inadequate for such an honor. But I get a lot of mileage out of that at home—my Pulitzer doesn't make sense.

After the prize I ended up with a speaking agent. They really handle things well, but I think there's a real downside to the agent thing. They do a great job; I was on the road all last year giving a ton of talks. But some of the stuff you want to do falls through the cracks—the little talks to maybe a community college that has no money or a reading group, things like that. You have to squeeze those in on your own because the agent is pursuing bigger game. I have mixed feelings about the agent thing. But it does make life easier.

Gage: Well, I had a somewhat different experience, and I may have been to blame for yours because it sounds like we had similar pub dates! My book also came out right around Thanksgiving. There was a moment when I was not sure if it was going to hit, and that caused some anxiety. But from November all the way through May there was a wild ride in which the book was getting all sorts of attention in places that were like one's wildest fantasies. I didn't understand before, but the Pulitzer is the culmination of a whole prize season. It's like the Nerd

Oscars or something, but there are all of the smaller awards leading up to it. So the process was actually quite intensive. Some you win, some you lose, some you have to go sit on a stage, some you'll get shortlisted for but won't win, etc. There was just a lot of that kind of up and down, though mostly up for me in this case.

I had already planned to take the spring semester off (I was on leave). So I did most of the media stuff in November and December, because the media cycle is actually quite short. There is TV, radio, and endless podcasts. The podcasts were super fun, most of them, but most of those engagements were late in 2022, then I did most of my traveling once I went on leave in January.

Actually, one of the reasons I decided to write this road-trip book was that I was traveling the country anyway. I would have a lecture to give in place X. They would fly me in, sometimes they would even pay me, and then, if it worked for my conception of the road-trip book, I would use that lecture then as a base from which I would do a regional road trip. For example, the first micro-road-trip I took was in Texas because I was giving a talk at the LBJ library. So that's my chapter on Texas history. I was always doing something else on my own time while promoting the Hoover book, and that was really nice.

One of the challenges of publishing a book is that the rest of the world is just encountering the book at the moment that you're sick of it. So it was really fun to do all these talks and podcasts and such, but I didn't want to spend another nine months exclusively immersed in J. Edgar Hoover!

Cowie: Yeah, that launch date matters. When I did *Stayin' Alive*, it came out on Labor Day, which was perfect. There were a ton of reviews and interviews and stuff for the launch, so it briefly went to like top-three figures on Amazon. I actually got a lot more reviews and awards for that book than I did for *Freedom's Dominion*.

Gage: Since you brought up Amazon, one thing that was a real surprise to me was that the audio book actually outsold the print book. Now that's partly because the audiobook sales are all concentrated in one place, but in my case the audiobook generally outranked the print book, either hardcover or paperback.

Cowie: Sorry to change tacks, but what about influences? I want to know, were there any biographies that you liked before writing this one, Bev?

Andrews: We can go there: both of you, who did you seek to emulate, or who inspired you as writers?

Gage: Well, I'll pick up on the biographer question since Jeff posed it. For anyone who's writing a big, gigantic biography of an influential bureaucrat, there is only one book that looms large, and that is Robert Caro's *The Power Broker*. That was a book that I admired, but also from which I really tried to depart. I wanted *G-Man* to be a biography that was driven by a scholarly argument. The fact that it is a reasonably popular genre and people who do not regularly read history might want to read biography made it tricky. But I looked to a lot of historians, people like David Nasaw, Linda Gordon, and other scholarly historians who had taken on the genre of biography.

There was one funny moment while writing in which I was on a panel at Yale with two of my colleagues, both of whom were writing biographies that ended up being quite influential. I was the junior member of the cohort, just getting started. David Blight was in the middle of writing his book about Frederick Douglass, and John Gaddis was writing his biography of George Kennan. The panel was interesting because each one of us had a different relationship with our subjects. David loves Frederick Douglass. John knew George Kennan. Then here I was with

Hoover, the worst person in American history. All three books ended up winning the Pulitzer Prize years later.

Cowie: When I started this project, I put a big poster of James Baldwin over my desk. He's leaning over, face down, on the couch, editing something with pages sprawled out on the floor. So for me, style begins and ends with Baldwin. I love his compassion, and how succinct he is. He's in the epigraph of the book.

I also thought a lot about Edmund S. Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom*. I think of my book as a bit of a follow-up to his in a way. I really liked what he had done there, and was very moved and impressed by his exploration of slavery and freedom. And so, you know, thinking about how the ideas that he had going on in the Chesapeake continued in Alabama was really important. I also continue to be inspired by people like Richard Russo, a novelist who has that capacity to write in sort of gritty, blue-collar detail. And Eduardo Galeano, back to Galeano, who I'm trying to emulate structurally and stylistically. I'm trying to use detail in a way that reveals way more than the number of words I can commit to that detail. I find that very compelling and challenging.

Andrews: Let's end on this: What key lessons have you drawn from the process that you would impart to more junior scholars and writers?

Gage: This might sound strange, coming from a J. Edgar Hoover biographer, but I would say that it is important to feel a kind of organic connection with your subject. Most of these projects, dissertations, etc., are going to be sustained over incredibly long periods of time. And it's going to be something that you're going to have to live with. For me, that didn't mean picking my favorite person in the world. But it did mean finding something where I was just fascinated by it every day. Coming out of the Hoover project, I'm still very interested in biography. But I think I'll spend most of the rest of my career exploring the ways in which debates over communism and anticommunism really structured the politics of the twentieth century. I think that is getting a little bit lost in the historiography, and certainly lost generationally. I like having that central historiographical question. It was a question I explored through Hoover. It's a question that I explored in my first book. And it's a question that I am going to keep exploring.

Once I'm done with my road trip book, I'm planning to write a biography of Ronald Reagan. He's a great vehicle for the communism/anticommunism question. I'm animated by that question. I'm fascinated by it. And I think having a real emotional connection to your work, following it and having faith in it, is really important. And then also taking care of yourself along the way, because this kind of work is a marathon, not a sprint.

One of the things that I have been amazed by is just how long it sometimes takes for ideas to come to fruition. I had the idea to write the Hoover book when I was in graduate school, and it entered the world twenty-five years later. Sometimes that's just how it is. If the ideas are part of you, they're going to stick. But they might not all happen right at once.

Cowie: Yeah, for younger scholars, I agree. I think connection, as Bev says, is really important, that you gotta live with this a long time. And if you're finding it dry the first year, you're gonna find it dry-as-dust ten years later, let alone twenty years later.

I think a way to achieve that is a certain boldness in the types of questions you're asking. The scale of the topic doesn't have to be big, but the question has to be big, and there has to be some sort of investment in that question.

That said, I think too many young scholars are grinding away on a narrow vision of the narrowly political dimensions of history. I don't mean that history isn't political. But we have something to offer that's kind of below the political, something more profound than just the simply political. We're all writing about things right now that have political consequences, that are shaped by the political world, that will have something to say to the political issues of the day. But the real value added for historians is something below that, something more subterranean, something more grounding. I think we need to keep our eyes on that and not get too swept up in the contemporary political implications of our work.

And then in terms of style, I think you gotta feel it. You gotta find a way to organically connect, really resonate with it. Maybe you have to force yourself to do that. But I think you need to have an emotional connection with what you're doing.

On a mechanical level, my advice is very simple: short sentences, short paragraphs, short chapters. You can have as many of them as you want. But if you're putting in a lot of subordinate clauses and a lot of long sentences, you're doing nobody a favor, and you're probably hiding the fact that you don't know what you're talking about. You cannot hide from a simple, declarative sentence, because it is a simple, declarative sentence. And you need to work to get to the point where you can stand behind a very straightforward statement of what's going on without a whole set of modifiers and subordinate clauses.

Gage: Can I add one last thing? Often people come to graduate school and enter the profession of being a historian, which is a daunting thing to do, because they really love history. They're fascinated by it. Somewhere in that process, that curiosity and enthusiasm can get lost. It can get ground down under all sorts of other things. So I'd say, hold on to that spark. That's the prize. Just continue to be curious in the ways that Jeff was just saying. That approach might be political in some broad way, because history has political consequences, but it's not necessarily narrowly political. It can just be about what a weird, strange, magnificent, terrible thing it has been to be a human being over time in the United States and elsewhere. And I think holding on to that is what makes history last as a career.

Cowie: I was going to return to the quote, the cliché, "The past is another country." But given the combination of globalization and lack of historical consciousness, we actually know other countries better now than we know the past. Right?

Dochuk: The past is another *county*.