Joseph S. Nye Jr.
Power in the Global Information Age
(London / New York : Routledge
2004

Nye IV

17 Essay on career choice*

A 2 SI

> Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler, long I stood and looked down one as far as I could. . . .
>
> Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken"

I have always loved Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken," but in truth my career is one in which I have traveled two roads, both the academic and the governmental. Some who pursued only one road have gone further in achieving a high position or in the length of their list of publications, but I would not trade with them. I have found both halves of my career satisfying and cannot imagine my life without either. I would like to recommend such a course to others, but I must confess that it is not easy to plan to take two roads. In my case, serendipity played a large role.

I certainly had no fixed plan to take the roads I did. I grew up on a farm in Northwest New Jersey, and that childhood bequeathed me a lifelong love of the outdoors. As a teenager, I wondered about a career as a forester or a farmer. For a spell, I was influenced to think I might want to follow in the example of the friendly local minister. My father was in the securities business, and I often felt I would wind up following in his footsteps. He loved his work. He used to say that "in my business, you are in everybody's business," and he encouraged me with visits to his office on Wall Street. At the same time, he never tried to control my choice. It was a wise approach which allowed us to remain close without feeling tension or guilt about my decisions. I have followed his example with regard to my three sons, none of whom has chosen an academic path.

When I went to college "down the road" at Princeton, I had no idea what I wanted to major in, much less choice of career. I found psychology, history, politics, economics, and philosophy all interesting, so I chose an interdisciplinary major in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. For my senior thesis, I wrote a history of a private firm in Philadelphia as an example of Schumpeter's theory of entrepreneurship. I was gratified to win a prize, but what the thesis taught me was the fascination of original research and trying to make order out of a chaos of empirical material. In retrospect, the most important thing I got from Princeton was a broad basis in liberal arts. I still find myself remembering lessons from my early science and philosophy courses. When students sometimes complain to me that their liberal arts education is not preparing them for anything, I respond that it is preparing them for life. College courses are like building blocks. An undergraduate business degree allows you to pile them into a tall tower quickly. Liberal arts is more like a pyramid with a broad base that does not reach the same early heights. But when the earth shakes, and it likely will more than once during the course of a career in today's world, pyramids are more stable than towers.

Career choices at age 21

Senior year arrived and I had no clear idea of what I wanted to do as a career. At that time, all healthy males faced a period of military service. I decided to join the Marine Corps. An older friend had just finished officer training for platoon leaders in the Marines and made it sound appealing. Friends encouraged me to apply for a Rhodes Scholarship, but I was uncertain about it. By chance, as I entered the library one day to work on my thesis, I bumped into a professor of English whose course I was taking. He asked what I intended to do next year. I replied, "Marine Platoon Leader's Corps." He shook his head and said I really should apply for the Rhodes. So I did. I remember in the Rhodes interview being asked what I wanted to do for a career. I had enjoyed writing a column for the student newspaper so I said that I wanted to try to understand society and write about it. "Oh, a pundit?" they asked. I looked puzzled, but they gave me the scholarship anyway. During the summer after graduation, I worked as a night reporter for a local newspaper. I found that writing as a reporter merely scratched the surface of what interested me. I went to Oxford cured of any desire to pursue a career in journalism, but with nothing in its place.

Besides postponing my career choice for two years, Oxford had several important effects. One was time to experiment and travel. I thought of becoming a novelist, but, I decided to postpone any such efforts for a later stage in life. (My novel, *The Power Game*, will finally be published in 2004.) Also important was the ethic of public service that went along with the Rhodes. I enjoyed my tutorials in philosophy, politics, and economics, but the most important aspect of Oxford was making foreign friends and expanding my interest in the rest of the world. In particular, I remember long discussions with a friend from Ghana over the future of democracy in Africa. To this day, I believe that making friends who help you see the world through the eyes of foreigners is as educational as any formal course in college. Even if you never want to work overseas, you do not really know what is "American" until you can compare it with what is not American. And in a world of growing globalization, distant events can have a powerful effect on your life and career.

By the end of my two years at Oxford, I was leaning toward a career in government, perhaps in the Foreign Service. At the same time, following the example of another friend, I decided to apply for the PhD program in government at Harvard. I thought a PhD would give me options if it turned out that I did not like the Foreign Service.

Career choices at age 24–28

Some people like graduate school. I found it a period of great anxiety and continual work. There was so much to learn and everyone seemed to know more than I did. In the first two years, impending oral exams loomed like a sword of Damocles. In addition to endless reading, I worked as a research assistant for a professor and taught sophomore tutorial. And I wanted to finish in four years. Perhaps that is why I do not recommend pursuing a PhD unless you need it. If you want to teach, it is a necessary union card. For most other purposes, it strikes me as a lot of pain for the amount of gain.

The best part of graduate work was writing my thesis. I wanted to get away from Harvard and feel creative again. I also wanted to find out what was happening in the newly independent countries in Africa. The idea for my thesis came from a seminar I took on economic development. Professor Ed Mason had just returned from chairing a World Bank mission to Uganda. He said that economic rationality argued for maintaining the East African Common Market, but it would take a political scientist to answer whether that was possible. That was my challenge. My new wife and I spent 15 months in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania collecting data, interviewing political leaders, and trying to understand how politics and economics interacted in new nations.

Life in Africa was exhilarating. Trying to make sense of what was happening around me proved to be an all-absorbing challenge. I decided to postpone the issue of a job search until I returned to Cambridge to write my material. One tropical evening in December, standing on the lawn of the East African Institute of Social Research at Makerere University, someone handed me a letter. I opened it and discovered that the government department at Harvard was offering me a teaching job. Since I had no other plan, I decided to accept and try it for a while, knowing I could always change if I did not like it. The while turned out to be quite long.

Early career choices

Having set my foot on the academic ladder, I quickly developed a desire to climb it. While I enjoyed teaching, all the signals I received made it clear that progress depended on research and publication. My thesis had won a prize and I worked hard to turn it into a book. I presented papers based on it at the American Political Science Association and the International Political Science Association. The idea of government service did not vanish, but it receded into the background for consideration at a later date. It was clear that I needed first to succeed as an academic. That meant I had to pay my dues.

I soon started to plan my second major research project. I had discovered that there was a thriving common market in Central America, though my thesis had explained why, despite their economic merits, common markets were difficult to maintain in less developed countries. So I polished up my Spanish (sitting in the same courses as some of the students I was teaching) and applied for a grant to spend six months in Central America. To explain the anomaly, a few years later I followed my intellectual curiosity to Geneva, teaching and researching regional organizations and the politics of trade more generally for a year. The result was a second book, *Peace in Parts*, which was necessary before the impending decision on tenure.

Tenure is the hurdle that looms in front of all academics at this stage of their careers. One tries to banish it from daily thought, but it is like sharing a bedroom with an elephant. I remember asking Richard Neustadt, a senior member of my department, whether I should try to take a leave from Harvard and pursue a policy job in Washington. His advice: save that for later. Focus on getting tenure first. Other mentors such as Stanley Hoffmann pointed out interesting areas for research and suggested my name for the editorial board of a journal, *International Organization*. That led to further contacts—the famous networking effect—which provided a sense of professional direction. Just as chickens have pecking orders, when academics meet they tend to discuss who is working on what research and how it ranks in the pecking order. It may seem odd, but it is hard to ignore.

One of the benefits of these early professional activities was making a number of new friends. In particular, Robert Keohane and I found that we shared common interests, common dissatisfaction with the field of international organization as it was then conceived, and enjoyed working together. This led to fruitful collaboration on a number of articles and on our book, *Power and Interdependence*. It also produced a lifelong friendship. I think the ideas of both of us were better for our collaboration. Tearing apart each other's drafts and rewriting them both refined and accelerated the work process. The important lesson is not to be afraid of collaboration and not to wear your ego on your sleeve.

Another satisfaction about focusing on an academic career at this stage of life is that it has more flexibility in terms of family. In the long run, being able to spend time with my wife and children as they were growing up was more important than any aspect of a career. I know that my wife, Molly, thinks that I spent too much time on work, but when I compare the flexibility of my hours during my academic years with the rigidity of my schedule when I was in government, the former has a much better fit with small children.

Molly and I celebrated tenure with a quiet dinner and a fine bottle of wine way above our budget. I would like to say that at age 33, I began to seek a role in government, but there was a complication. I was not a member of the political party then in power in Washington. That is the price one pays for waiting until after tenure. You never know when opportunities in government will arise. If you really want to go that route more than anything else, you should probably take advantage when lightning strikes. As it turned out, it was not until seven years later that I went to Washington, where I spent two years before returning to Harvard, mainly because I had promised my children that I would. I thought I would go back into government after a few years out. Thanks to choices of the American electorate, however, those few years turned out to be 12. Planning a career as an "in and outer" is not easy in a democracy!

Career choices at 40

Fortunately, I was excited by the work I was doing on transnational relations and interdependence. Some of the academic writing had policy relevance, and I began to write articles and op-eds in that style. I was invited to join the editorial board of *Foreign Policy*. I attended conferences and meetings on policy issues at places like the Council on Foreign Relations and Ditchley, where I developed another type of network. I also participated in a policy study on nuclear energy and trade in nuclear materials organized by the Ford Foundation. It was probably through these writings and contacts that I came to the attention of people involved in Jimmy Carter's 1976 campaign. I submitted a paper or two for the campaign, but played no significant role. After Carter won, I was quite surprised to be invited to join his transition team as a consultant on nuclear proliferation. Later, when Cyrus Vance was appointed secretary of state, he asked me to be a deputy undersecretary in charge of Carter's new initiatives on nonproliferation. It took me no time to say yes.

It took me a lot longer to become good at my job. Eventually, I was presented with the State Department's highest medal, the Distinguished Honor Award, but in my first months I thought I might not survive. At most, my administrative experience had been the management of one secretary, (and some might say that the other way round). Here I was in charge of 30 or 40 people and supposedly coordinating a major policy as chair of the interagency committee. Once again, everyone knew more than I did. There was no shortage of experienced bureaucrats who wanted to cut me out of the action. Because Carter's policy was unpopular in some quarters, figures in the nuclear industry and Congress said they would get me fired. I found myself going to work at 7 a.m. and returning near midnight. I sought advice from a wide variety of sources. It was my steepest learning curve since first grade.

In retrospect, I might have adjusted to a major policy job more quickly if I had had an earlier apprenticeship in government. Certainly, the second time I went into government years later was much easier. It is hard to overstate the difference in the two cultures. One of the big differences is the premium on time. In academic life, time is a secondary value. It is important to get things just right even at the price of being late. In government, an A+ briefing that reaches the president's desk after the foreign minister has arrived in the Oval Office is an F. Timing is everything. And brevity is a close second. I remember academic colleagues sending me seminar-length papers (like I used to write) with solutions to the proliferation problem. They could not envision a world in which I had to read overnight intelligence and press clips before the morning staff meeting with the secretary and, after that, was caught up in a whirlwind of events until I returned home that evening too exhausted to read anything.

I remember watching some academics who tried to maintain their old habits after they entered government. They either changed or were shunted aside as irrelevant. This does not mean that academic training is irrelevant. On the contrary, it provides the intellectual capital which sometimes allows an academic to set forth a strategy that might escape a career bureaucrat. It is vital to set and maintain priorities and not become a prisoner of one's in-box. But there is little time on the job to develop new intellectual capital.

Partly for those reasons, and mainly for family reasons, I returned to Harvard when my two-year leave expired. I found that there were many intellectual puzzles that arose when I was in government which I had no time to figure out. I was particularly intrigued by the ethical issues involved in foreign policy in general, and nuclear weapons in particular. When I returned to Harvard, I switched part of my teaching to the Kennedy School of Government where there was more concern for policy issues. There I found that teaching a course on ethics and foreign policy to a bright group of students was a great way to work out my ideas, eventually published as *Nuclear Ethics*. At the same time, I developed a large course on international conflicts for the core curriculum in the college and took pride in being able to explain foreign affairs to freshmen and sophomores. Later, the course became the basis for a popular textbook, *Understanding International Conflict*.

Choices at 55

Much as I enjoyed my teaching and writing. I still hoped to spend another period in government. In the late 1980s, I wrote a book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, which argued that America was not in decline (as was then the academic fashion to predict). I also became very interested in the role of Japan, which some saw as a challenge to the United States. These intellectual puzzles gave me much to chew on, but I missed the chance to affect policy and to use the administrative talents I had belatedly discovered. At this stage in life, there are numerous offers of deanships and college and university presidencies. I had considered but resisted such opportunities a number of times. I preferred administration in government, but as such prospects faded after the election of 1988, I began to wonder about succumbing. I tried a period as an associate dean. Fortunately, I was rescued by the election of 1992.

In 1993, I returned to Washington as chair of the National Intelligence Council, the body which coordinates interagency intelligence estimates for the president. Much as I enjoyed it, I was tempted by a policy job which would let me implement some of the issues I had been writing about as an academic. I moved to the Defense Department to become assistant secretary for international security affairs under William Perry, with whom I had helped to organize the Aspen Strategy Group in the 1980s. If ever I wanted to see the world, this was almost too much of a good thing. In one year, I visited 53 countries in 52 weeks!

I enjoyed the Pentagon so much that when my two-year leave from Harvard expired in January 1995, I decided to resign my tenure and stay on in government. Finally I cut the umbilical cord! Yet within the year, I was back at Harvard as dean of the Kennedy School, a job for which I had earlier said I did not want to be considered. The major consideration in my change of mind (which took more than a month to decide) was the aftermath of the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. The national debate about government struck me as polarized and confused. I worried about what was happening to public life in our country. I was struck by the irony of the fact that while I was working *in* government, I was too busy to think about what was happening *to* government. I decided that the Kennedy School, with its multidisciplinary faculty and its tradition of combining analytic excellence with policy relevance would provide a base for addressing my concerns. Since returning, I have organized a faculty study group that has addressed issues of declining trust in government (*Why People Don't Trust Government*), the effects of the information revolution on government (*democracy.com?*), and issues of a global nation (*Governance in A Globalizing World*). I do not regret my decision to return to academic life. I am now wise enough to realize that it is highly unlikely that I would ever return to government.

Summing up

If you are attracted to both analysis and action, a career as an "in and outer" has a lot to offer. Academic life allows you to follow your intellectual curiosity and to knaw on interesting bones. Writing provides a sense of creativity. Teaching is fun. Meeting your students in later years is enormously satisfying. In addition, you are able (within limits) to control your own time and agenda. With policy jobs in government, you do not control your own time or agenda. There is little opportunity to explore ideas, much less smell the flowers or read poetry. On the other hand, such jobs can be very exciting at times. Not only will you meet the great (and not so great) and be present at fascinating events, but occasionally you can put your own stamp on issues of considerable importance. That is a different sense of creativity: to feel that you have helped to shape an important policy outcome.

Focusing solely on one or the other may lead to higher achievement in that domain. There are trade-offs both in time and recognition from switching back and forth. Some people who choose one road will be jealous and some resentful of intruders and deserters who try to have their cake and eat it too. It all depends on what you want out of life. For me, the in and outer approach has been worth it, but I enjoyed my academic base in its own right. The biggest problem is the difficulty of planning such a career. Notice what a large role serendipity played in the story I have told above. You can walk in a field with a golf club in a thunderstorm and not be struck by lightning. There is no sense selling short your academic career in hope of being struck by political lightning. If you want both, make sure that you start with the one that will be most satisfying if the other does not happen. That way you cannot lose.

Note

* This is a revised version of my essay in a Career Services booklet for Kennedy School students.