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**PARENTS OF THE FIELD PROJECT.**

*Interviewee; Dr. Ralph K. White*

*Date: 9<sup>th</sup> January 2003*

*Venue: Cockeysville, Maryland.*

*Interviewer; Dr. Chris Mitchell.*

Chris: Today we're interviewing Dr. Ralph White, who is one of the pioneers of applying psychological insight to the field of conflict and war and conflict resolution. It's January the 9<sup>th</sup>, 2003... we're visiting Dr. White in Cockeysville, Maryland.

Dr. White - I know from reading some of the material in your books that you've taught at Cornell and at Stanford. You've worked with USAID ... and at George Washington U ?

Ralph White: Not USAID - USIA. On the intelligence aspect of the organization....

Chris: Were you a government civil servant before you were an academic or did you go from academia to government? Where did you start?

Ralph White: Academia first, and then government and back to academia.

Chris: So where did you start...? Where were you first - in academia?

Ralph White: West Haven in Connecticut. My first three years of teaching psychology were there. Then I went to Stanford – a research project with Kurt Lewin, on autocracy and democracy...They printed... the book from the experiment...And then from there I went directly to the government and actually worked for CIA for three years - but the innocent part of the CIA ! I just did a radio broadcasts. Didn't have to kill anybody. Radio broadcasts – speak from the Voice of America, primarily... And then I was on the intelligence side of that, investigating Soviet public opinion, primarily and also inspecting the propaganda techniques used when I was on Soviet radio. Then I got into a conflict with Senator Dodd, to whom I delivered a paper on Soviet public opinion, which I had more or less focused on...The paper supported the proposition that on matters of foreign policy - as distinguished

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from the way Stalin treated his own people domestically - on what he said about who the great danger in the world was and [that was the] United States, the people more or less went along with it.

They went along... and they agreed, naturally, since they had no very good source of information other than the Voice of America and although on an average evening, I figured that we had some two or three million listeners in the Soviet Union, they still got most of their information from their own government, and they had no specific reason to oppose it. They went along with their government.

But I got in trouble with the senators - Senator Dodd - who became incensed at the idea of a picture of a Soviet Union - I better say what the date was. The date is very important. The date was long before - I don't know what to call it - the period when Gorbachev was in power. Long before Gorbachev and all we knew very definitely about the Soviet Union was the behavior of the government, mainly Stalin, until 1953 and Khrushchev from then on.

In the process, I became very much interested in the official relations between us and the Soviet Union - and most of all the Cuban Missile Crisis. And I believe that, in Khrushchev's mind, that was very predominantly a defensive action on his part. We had... this was the first time that a communist movement... it happened to be under Castro and it was the first time that there had been a successful revolution for as long as it lasted [and by now it's lasted quite a long time !] which simply delighted the people at the top of the hierarchy in the Soviet Union. The first time out, this thing that they'd been devoting their whole lives to, worldwide communism - preferably worldwide - and here it was, happening spontaneously, as it should, according to their [philosophy]

Well, this, as I said, incensed Senator Dodd - the father, I believe, of the present [Senator] ...[but] I was not fired. He wanted me fired. According to Senator Dodd, I must be fired for saying something so outrageous as the proposition that most of the Soviet people shared their leader's view of foreign policy. Not meaning revolution everywhere - the people weren't interested in revolution. They were concerned with the danger of American foreign policy to them, especially of a nuclear nature, and that was the point I was making. But he wanted me fired !

Ed Murrow was then in charge of USIA, the U.S. Information Agency, which I was working for, and he announced that White will not be fired - so I wasn't.

Chris: So [you decided to move ] ?.

Ralph White: Yes. But after three more years, I decided that the atmosphere in USIA was uncomfortable enough so that I would take the first good academic opportunity that I had, and I did. In 1964 I got a professorship at George Washington University in Washington. I was very glad to stay in Washington – a good place to study political psychology - and since then, I’ve done most of the writing that I’ve ever done, because in an academic setting, I found it more conducive to writing.

The three books that you have copies of – the first one came [out] in 1960, summarizing the experiments on autocracy and democracy in small groups that Lewin and Lipsett had started that I joined them in. I did nearly all of the writing of the book. Neither of them felt like writing and were glad to have me do it, but from then on, my writing attention has been devoted to the psychological causes of war - very broadly considered - and basing it mainly on not psychology but history. Of course, my raw data came... from history and from 20<sup>th</sup> Century history.

I have concentrated on trying to understand as fully as possible the context of the five main conflicts America was involved in in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – World War I, World War II, the Cold War, which was – only part of it was “hot,” but both the Korean War and the Vietnam War were hot and they were very much part of what we usually call “the Cold War”, and that brings us to where we are now.

Chris: This brings us up to date, but I want to go back a little bit, because the first of your books I ever read was the one that I think had the most influence on me as a young academic, and that was your book about Vietnam, *Nobody Wanted War*. Though, as you say, there were elements in that...[the first] few chapters were about the First World War and the Second World War. How did you come to write that book?

Ralph White: A background?

Chris: Yes.

Ralph White: Well, actually I started being interested in the causes of war when I was a junior in college. And with the blessing of my professor who taught me modern European history, I did a paper – it took me a full year to write, and I was so much interested in it, and he postponed giving me a mark for the course until the paper was done. “German Motives in 1914,” and that fascinated me because

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I had been through it as a child and I think the great majority of American citizens who were at all politically aware during the years of that war – I thought it was a black and white thing that Germany was the aggressor and France and Belgium and Britain and then the United States had to stand up to the German aggressors.

Well, what I discovered was that from their own point of view, the Germans were not the aggressors. It was primarily the English - and of course directly Russia and France helping Serbia - but thinking of England as a great conspirator behind those actors and also participating directly. Well, that was such a revelation to me that it turned not upside down exactly, but it gave me an entirely different perspective on the causes of war. I see it now. I began to realize that misperception – seeing things wrong – was even more important as a cause of war than evil motives.

The Germans, in their own eyes, were defending themselves and their allies in Austria against evil aggressors and that... I had to revise that when we came to World War II because I realized that Hitler was not the Kaiser. They were very different personalities and Hitler's war was Hitler's war, and it was a war of aggression. And there were some [people] who really believed, I think, that the Jews were the great enemies of the human race - civilized human beings - and that they were conspiring to cause the governments of the rest of the world to oppress Germany and he really believed that Germany was an oppressed country, and he jumped from that to dominate at least all of Europe, if not also the United States and that led to a much broader concept.

I have since then thought of most wars as being mostly due to misperception, especially the demonized enemy image, but some wars as being essentially power hungry on the part of the government, often one individual – Hitler, for instance, or Stalin.

Chris: One of the themes that comes through very clearly in *Nobody Wanted War*... seems to be a continuing theme through much of your writing and this is the idea of the need to understand and address – you use the word “empathize” and I remember you writing something ten years ago about empathizing with Saddam Hussein and pointing out that how different “empathizing” is than “excusing”. But empathizing seems to be something that you thought of very early on and have... continued to use.

Ralph White: Well, that has been unquestionably the concept in my writing that other people have latched onto with alacrity, including two that I am most pleased with. Two individuals have latched onto it in a

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big way. The first one was – my memory is getting old – William Fulbright.

Chris: Yes. Senator Fulbright.

Ralph White: Senator Fulbright and the very recent one was Robert McNamara.

Chris: Really?

Ralph White: Yes. Two people that are not generally put in the same category by most other people.

Chris: Generally not.

Ralph White: But McNamara has changed. He almost – in his very recent book, entitled *Wilson's Ghost* – it's a discussion, really of current affairs in the light of, or taken together with Wilson's ideas about war and its causes and pertaining to our effective international organizations... In this book he has two thirds of a page entirely devoted to quoting from my article on empathizing with the leaders – I don't use the word leaders, I use the word "masters", I think – masters of the Soviet Union....

Chris: You were talking about empathizing and McNamara's use of that idea.

Ralph White: Oh, yes. He was careful to define it as I do and that, I think, was probably true of Fulbright, too... I define it very simply as understanding the thoughts and feelings of others. Both the thoughts and the feelings need to be considered in relation to each other and each one helps to explain the other... In the case of the causes of war, it's necessary to distinguish between the psychology of the initial aggressors and the psychology of others who come in - very often on the side of the victim of oppression, as the United States – first England – Britain, and then the United States a year later came in against the Kaiser's government, and also, years later... the very beginning in World War II against Hitler.

That's too late. I don't mean it was too late to win the war, but the war could have been greatly shortened if the United States had come in sooner in either of those wars.

Chris: But *Nobody Wanted War* was mainly a book about Vietnam. How did you ... ?–

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Ralph White: Oh, yes. Only the first chapter was a very sketchy suggestion of how these same concepts applied to other wars, especially World Wars I and II.

Chris: But then did you actually visit Vietnam to write the book?

Ralph White: Oh, yes. I was there for two months in 1967 working for the American government – the defense department, actually, on Vietnamese [public] opinion.

Chris: And did you use a lot of that material in the book eventually? Because you wrote it very shortly afterwards. I think [it] came out in 1968, I think. .

Ralph White: Yes. It came out as a book length, but short book length issue of the “Journal of Social Issues” put out by...?

Chris: Psychologists for Social Responsibility if I remember rightly.

Ralph White: Yes. And that paperback article - long article, full length, the entirety of the journal article – that came out in 1966, actually. I did an intensive job during the first year of our being in the war studying its causes. I thought by then I had enough general ideas about the psychological causes of war and I read everything I could put my hands on to understand the [book about] the Vietnam War. I think I got a better idea of it and it was because I don't suppose anybody else studied it that thoroughly...This thing was read by the people I got acquainted with in Vietnam, starting in the summer of 1967.

Chris: What was their reaction?

Ralph White: Their reaction was [I think] some of them were dismayed that I put as much blame on the United States as I did... This is probably a good place in this interview to say that I am by no means a pacifist. I think we were right to get into World War I and should have gotten in sooner. I think we were right to get into World War II and should have gotten in sooner. We were very right to keep the Cold War from becoming hot but in the process, we demonized our image of post-Stalin Russia. Khrushchev was nowhere near as villainous as Stalin was, and of course, Gorbachev, when he came along, was the opposite.

Chris: It did take us a long time to realize that.

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Ralph White: A long time to realize that for most of the Soviet people, they wanted peace even more than we did all the way through, and that was an important point to make, and it applied also to the Vietnamese and the Koreans. I think the two wars that we were wrong to fight – mistaken – of the five were the Vietnam War and the Korean War. Instead, I have gone more thoroughly into the Korean War as to cover to some extent all five of the major conflicts that the United States has engaged in in the previous century.

Chris: When we were talking earlier, you made the point that you were a psychologist who... gradually moved into the field of history. I made the opposite journey. You were one of the very earliest people that I had read about in the 1960s and 1970s who were applying insights from psychology to problems of war and peace and conflict. Were you doing this on your own or were you part of a network of psychologists... I mean, we mentioned earlier the “Psychologists for Social Responsibility”. How important were they in the development of your ideas? You also mentioned Kurt Lewin and I’m going to ask you about Kurt Lewin in a minute but in the ‘60s and ‘70s, that era, what exactly...?

Ralph White: Pretty much alone. The people that I learned the most from in writing the later books were political scientists – three political scientists. They had lots to do with my thinking. One was – the first one was – you’re going to have gaps in this interview.

Chris: That’s all right.

Ralph White: I know these names so well and they’re the three political scientists, each of whom, I think, has contributed more to the psychology – the psychological causes of war - than any psychologist. There are a number of psychologists, too, who have contributed considerably – Herb Kelman – but among the political scientists, the one who has covered the problem of [inaudible] most thoroughly using almost exclusively political science data – historical data - is...

Chris: If I was completing your sentence, I would say somebody like Robert Jarvis.

Ralph White: Who?

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- Chris: Robert Jarvis. Do you know Robert Jarvis at all?
- Ralph White: Yes. Jarvis, you say? Does he pronounce it that way?
- Chris: Well, the British pronounce it that way.
- Ralph White: I think Americans all say Jervis, and he is certainly one. Look back in the early '70s and –
- Chris: The article you wrote for “World Politics” at more or less the same time.
- Ralph White: Yes. He’s certainly one of the three. A guy at Cornell, what was his name? Well, there are three, and they’re both very well known among political scientist and among peace-oriented psychologists who naturally apply the thoughts that they have gotten from political scientists. Each of those political scientists, by the way, has gotten a great deal from history. You need, I think, something like what I have...I wish I had had more history in comparison with psychology, because most of the raw data that you should go by if you’re trying to interpret wars comes from history. Both of those other names slip my memory but they haven’t any of them, I think, followed up much with their first major publications.
- Chris: One of the things I said very much influenced me was your first book about Vietnam. At least, it was the first book of yours I came across and then I remember you did another one where you went after another of your great interests, which was the Cold War and this was the book that you called *Fearful Warriors*, of which there’s a copy here. A book about... the psychological profile of U.S./Soviet relations, and that I think you wrote while you were still at G[eorge] W[ashington], if I remember rightly.
- Ralph White: I was at GW actually until 1980.
- Chris: And that must have been a good place to observe the psychology of war and peace from, just down the road from one of the great centers of decision-making... Were you still involved in talking to people in the various governments at that time? Did you keep up your contacts with the people in USIA or had Senator Dodd cut you off from those people?
- Ralph White: Oh, no, I don’t think he cut me off. He may have helped.
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- Chris: Probably with some of them.
- Ralph White: Yes.
- Chris: Most of your work at that stage was involved with looking at Soviet/U.S. relations but you did... sometime afterwards get involved in thinking about the first Gulf War and about Saddam Hussein. Was that a continuation of your thinking arising from your studies in the Cold War?
- Ralph White: Yes. Yes. More especially, I published a couple of articles fairly recently on the Serbs. The title was "Why the Serbs Fight," and the other was about Kosovo... and the Serbs' motivation in thinking and the last year of the war in Yugoslavia. That was the current thing that interested me most.
- Chris: Well, it's something which puzzled my students very much, how it was that people who could live together for several decades in relative peace and a fair degree of amicability could suddenly turn around and do some of those really appalling things to one another... Again, it's something which I'm not sure anybody can satisfactorily explain from either a psychological or a political way.
- Ralph White: The nearest I can come to it is that the Serbs are normally as peaceful as most people but that when they get into a war, they know no limits, that they have no history of trying to get along with other national groups.
- Chris: It's interesting, though, that the whole thing seems to have come round full circle, not just for them but for you, as well, because starting with the First World War and Sarajevo and the involvement of the French and the Russians on the side of the Austrians and then suddenly back in the 1990s, there we are, back in Sarajevo again and you are thinking about the Serb problem.  
One of the things that we're interested in in this series of the interviews is to try to find out how the field of conflict studies - conflict analysis, whatever one wants to call it - actually developed, and you mentioned earlier on one of the pioneers of the field whom we always mention to our students and never say much about, and that's Kurt Lewin, who was one of the first people to write about conflict, I believe. Who you worked with.
- Ralph White: Yes, for years.
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- Chris: What sort of a scholar was he? You earlier indicated that you did some writing for him.
- Ralph White: Yes, yes.
- Chris: What was he like?
- Ralph White: Oh, it wasn't Lewin that I worked with on the book. It was Lipset. But of course, some consultation with Lewin at first, but Lewin died in about '49, I think, and the book didn't come out until 1960. So it was Lippset and White. The original impetus came from Lipsett, but Lewin was greatly interested in the concept of studying democracy empirically and with experimental controls and I joined them later on in 1937 and worked with them into 1939. What was your question?
- Chris: I'm just wondering what your impression of Lewin was because he's a very shadowy figure as far as my generation are concerned and I think subsequently - this great man from the '30s and the early 40s.
- Ralph White: He was a very productive thinker, especially in using [field] analysis to psychological processes and it was lucky. I don't think, he was a rigorous thinker - and rigorous thinkers in mathematics... thought he was wrong to try to dignify his rather loose psychological thinking with the prestige of mathematics by calling it "topology", because topology is a branch of mathematics with a deal of dignity, I suppose, and actually, Lewin would [agree] that he didn't use any of the theorems or the hypotheses of topology applied to psychology, but he did use a pictorial approach and a general approach and that's what he meant by the word. He wasn't trying to borrow prestige from anybody according to him. Now, maybe subconsciously he was.
- Chris: People use to get very indignant about Kenneth Boulding, who was another person who did a great deal of diagrammatic work in some of his earlier writings but Boulding always had the defense that he actually was an economist - a mathematical economist, so he could defend himself by saying he knew what his diagrams meant and knew what the limitations were. But Lewin was always known in my part of conflict analysis ...as a "practical theorist". He always wanted to put his ideas into practice and I guess that's why there's this fascination with him because we know not very
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much about him and yet some of his ideas have become very familiar as they come down to us, so I was interested that you had actually worked with him.

Ralph White: He was fun to work with... fascinated by what he was doing.

Chris: And Lipsett = what was Lipsett like ?

Ralph White: Well, I told you that Lipsett started the whole thing, psychology/democracy experiments. But he came not from psychology or any other "respectable" academic discipline but from group work and especially recreational groups, like scout troops...He had been through college in Springfield, Illinois or Springfield, Massachusetts - I don't remember which - where there were a good many men who worked with boys in Boy Scout troops or in other ways and who, as he was studying there before he went to Iowa, who would argue.

One of their subjects of discussion was how... should you be as a scholar or as a leader of any teenage boys' group, and he [had] the idea of trying to find out... through careful, experimental controls to keep constant the things you wanted to keep constant and vary only the philosophy of the leader - the working philosophy of the leader. Well, that made quite a stir in the late '30s among educators and among industrial people [trying to apply it] to the factory. I don't think that people have been paying attention to it much, if any, since 1941.

Chris: There was a time in Britain in the 1960s when people in industry started to take up these ideas again but it ended very quickly in the 1970s. I remember when I was teaching a course on management of conflict in industrial Britain, there were some ideas that came out which I think went back to Lippsett and somebody like Mary Parker Follett in the early 1940s about leadership styles in industrial settings but it very rapidly reverted to the "management on top", an autocratic leadership style which is very much the British way of handling things in businesses and organizations.

Ralph White: I doubt if it's possible in business to be very much like the democratic groups in our experiment.

Chris: So you were at Stanford for how long?

Ralph White: Well, twice. My first two years were there working under Lewis [??] **Turmand**

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- Chris: And then you went back as a professor?
- Ralph White: Then I taught – no, not as a professor. During the two years later that I went back, I may have had the status of an assistant professor, I just don't remember. But I liked Stanford very much.
- Chris: The reason I'm asking about Stanford is because a lot of people that became important and influential in conflict research in the 1950s seem to have spent some time at Stanford in the old Center for Advanced Behavioral Studies there. I think Herb Kelman was there, for example, for a short while in the '50s, so perhaps it was after you were there, but Anatol Rapoport was there and Kenneth Boulding was there and Robert Angel was there – there were a whole group of them. Not for very long. For a couple of years, but it was certainly one of the places where the whole conflict research movement started in the '50s. But by that time, you were more interested in the whole propaganda aspect in the Soviet Union?
- Ralph White: Yeah, but I hadn't written anything that they would have been influenced by - because my writing on that subject didn't really begin until –
- Chris: Until the '60s.
- Ralph White: – let's see. 1967, I think, was when my book length article on the Vietnam War came out.
- Chris: I remember reading that at the time because I was looking for anything I could find about the psychological aspect of the war, and I remember – wasn't it one of your articles, "Three Not So Very Obvious Contributions to Peace" ? It was in the "Journal of Social Issues" and it was called "Three Not Obvious Contributions of Psychology to the Study of War." That was you, wasn't it?
- Ralph White: Somewhat later, I think.
- Chris: That's right. I just recommended that to one of my colleagues... But the "Journal of Social Issues" was one of the few places that seemed to publish articles on war and psychology. And didn't you write something as well that was published in "The Journal of Conflict Resolution" because they, for one, were very interested in
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material on psychology and war and psychology and conflict. I seem to recall reading something of yours in there.

Ralph White: Oh, I must have – that’s such a natural place to publish.

Chris: Did you have anything to do with setting that up and being on the board of advisors? I can’t remember whether you were involved in that at all?

Ralph White: I think not.

Chris: It was certainly a very pioneering journal when it started out. I think in the late ‘50s, early ‘60s, a whole stream of important articles... I’m fairly sure I remember reading at least one of yours in that journal. And then the Scandinavians started the “Journal of Peace Studies” in the ‘60s.

You keep coming back in a lot of your writing... to - as you said - this whole idea of misperceptions and mistakes in decision making and how countries get involved in wars that they really don’t intend to get involved in and they would rather avoid. This is sort of an unfair question, but I’m going to ask it anyway because we seem to be doing the same sort of thing at the moment. It does seem to me that, if we need to learn anything from your books, it’s something along the lines of not getting involved in the kind of process that we’re getting in at the moment because we are demonizing a lot of people and I’m sure they have their views and attitudes that we ought to understand. Do you have any suggestions as to how we might begin to empathize with some of the other people we are demonizing at the moment?

Ralph White: Saddam Hussein or –

Chris: Well, the rulers in Tehran, the rulers in Pyongyang... you must have thought about this.

Ralph White: Oh, yes. In a case like Saddam or Hitler, I think it’s important to talk a good deal about the power drive and what leads people to want power intensely. We can’t fully separate motivation from cognition, but it’s important to study their relationships, and, for instance, I think Hitler really believed his accusations against the Jews.

That was part of his psychopathology, and Stalin really believed his accusations against “the capitalist war makers” of the West. But that led to and was combined with some motivational

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differences, especially the overvaluing of power. Power, I think, was an obsession with Hitler and Stalin and Saddam. So the word “misperception” is somewhat too mild to represent this combination of obsessive motives and perceptions of the world.

Chris: A lot of my students don't like the word “misperception.”

Ralph White: You know my six main forms of misperception in the beginning of the Vietnam War. I haven't changed it much, but I'd like to tell you the most recent change. I would now list three groups of two. Demonizing and exaggerated fear belong together and it's the exaggerated fear that directly causes war more than the demonized enemy image. There has to be a combination of belief that that guy over there has it in for you, wants to kill you and thinking he could, that he has the power to do it, and therefore you have to have power and that becomes pretty basic...”They” are just as dangerous whether they are inherently afraid or inherently [aggressive]. If the power seeking leads to an obsession or if a fear leads to an obsessive desire for power, those are the main variables, I think, of [the first pair].

Another pair consisting of military overconfidence and, well, a glorifying of the self in general - the national self. That's the broader thing. In the first pair, demonizing and exaggerated fear, there, too, it depends on your image of the power of the enemy. We never got excited against Albania, for instance, though they may have been just as evil as the Russians. They were just as good communists... Now in this pair, I should have put self glorification as the first one and the broader one, a main form of which - and the most war producing form - is military overconfidence.

And then two others that are not in themselves motivating to war - selective inattention and a lack of empathy and of all these six, it's the lack of empathy - and my definition of it - that has been picked up by most people, including friends of mine who usually find that the most [interesting].

These two people that I'm most delighted to have latch onto the concept, McNamara and Fulbright. They both latched onto that and define it my way. I think they realize that in order to be clear, the choice has to be made between empathy, used loosely as almost a synonym for sympathy [which is very common], and empathy scrupulously confined to understanding of a particular sort.

Chris: You talked... about people that you've influenced - McNamara, Fulbright, and you've certainly influenced me and I'm sure a lot of

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other people in the field, but looking back, you've talked about... history as being a major influence on you but whose ideas, whose theories, whose writings do you think most influenced you?

Ralph White: Funny. I never put the question that way. Well, the first people who – they were called “revisionists” in the 1920s - wrote a revised interpretation of World War I and they had a lot of influence on other historians. They really changed the main emphasis of historical writing.

Chris: So, a set of historians.

Ralph White: And nobody in World War II really influenced me... because the main facts were well known and I don't disagree with them. I mean, I don't disagree with commonly accepted theories of World War II. I do disagree and I wish more others in the West would have learned what I did in the 1920s about how misperception can cause war.

Jack Levy is the political scientist who has written [a good deal on this]. His work on misperception has been more important than any work on misperception that I know of... I mean, his work on the claims of misperception that occur in human conflict are more important in that context than anything other people have done in either political science or psychology.

Chris: Yes, his work is very interesting. Anybody else more recently? An interesting thing is you haven't mentioned a psychologist.

Ralph White: Well, among the psychologists – I have a block on this guy's name, too. Teaches in the Columbia College of Education.

Chris: Oh, Morton Deutsch !.

Ralph White: And Dean Pruitt - very much.

Chris: Yes, Morton has been around for a very long time... He was one of the people that I read when I was reading you back in... the late '60s and early '70s. He wrote a couple of very interesting books, one called *The Resolution of Conflict* - and I thought “Who is this guy and what is he doing in a teacher's college?” .

Ralph White: Morton Deutsch and Dean Pruitt, I think, in psychology, and the three in political science who I think have influenced me more than any of the psychologists. Do you know the one who wrote a book

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called *Between Wars*, something like that. It's kind of – or *On the Brink of War* – anyway, it was a systematic study of 16 crises that either did or didn't lead to war.

Chris: It's not Chuck Herrman, is it?

Jannie: I have two areas that I'd like you to formulate questions for us and I'll give you the areas and you can formulate the questions. One is to talk a little bit more about would be - as you saw the history of people's interests in peace, war, and conflict develop, to what extent was that interdisciplinary?

You talked about the influence of political science on you as a psychologist, but other than that, there were also people, surely, in other disciplines – international relations, sociology, even anthropology. So what is your sense - looking back - of the “interdisciplinarity” of people interested in studying this field and to what degree have they maybe cross pollinated – influenced one another?

Ralph White: Now it's interesting you mentioned anthropology. I have been interested in what [Margaret] Meade and what [Ruth] Benedict had to say about aggression and anger and so forth and relations between individuals but I don't know any anthropologist who has dealt with the problem on the level of masses or nations. Do you?

Jannie: No, but I was more wondering if you saw your study in the area of peace and war and conflict as something that was a context within which people from different disciplines influenced one another - or were you sort of alone in your world working on it and maybe now and then you were influenced by a political scientist ... What we're trying to assess here is was there a time when the field of people studying peace and war... came together out of different streams of interdisciplinary interest.

Ralph White: There was a flurry of interdisciplinary thinking in the early '80s with Jack Levy's...encyclopedia long article on misperception in international relations – misperception and international conflict. He criticized me, you may know, and I am glad he did because I was being superficial. But he started – he wrote that, at least, several years after my first work... which came out in '66 and his was, I think, in '82... But then there was this... guy at Cornell whose background was history and political science as Jack Levy's was, and as Jarvis was.



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It's the political scientists who have taken the lead and influenced the few psychologists who have[worked in] the same field and historians, of course...All of them had sources of raw material, raw data, that we have taken and applied our own concepts to and maybe modified the concepts on the basis of – I don't know anyone who was primarily a historian who did that. Their contribution has been to provide the raw data and organize it in terms of particular wars as it needed to be, of course. You need to – if you're going to understand the German Kaiser, you need to know a little bit about psychiatry and a lot about what Germany was like in those days - as a historian would.

There have been particular relationships between particular theorists. Individuals, yes. As you can see, I've got most of my ideas - that weren't original with me - I've gotten them mostly from political scientists and from historians who were interested in the psychological aspects... I guess I don't know any historian who has done anything thorough in the line of taking advantage of what psychologists have thought. I'm struck by the fact that rather than historians, [it was] two practitioners, Fulbright and McNamara, who have latched on [to these ideas].

Chris: I wish there was somebody like McNamara and Fulbright in the present administration who would "latch on" !

Jannie: That is a good segue to my last question.

Chris: Can I just ask one question in a slightly different form ? I'm thinking back 30 odd years now, Ralph, to when I was starting to read your book and thinking about the kinds of conferences that I went to at that time. They were conferences for political scientists, psychologists – I think I even went to one for anthropologists. Now... how did it come about that you, I think, started to go... [to] the conference of an organization called the International Society for Political Psychology? When did that all start to come together?

Ralph White: Well, it was – organized in '79.

Chris: Was it mainly organized by psychologists ? Was it led by political scientists or the psychologists or who did that? Who organized it?

Ralph White: There was one leading woman psychologist. Do you remember her name?

Chris: I can see her now - at the Mannheim conference.

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- Ralph White: I think she wrote a book called *Political Psychology*.
- Chris: Karen somebody?
- Ralph White: Seems like it could well have been, yes.
- Chris: But I know how you mean.
- Ralph White: She died.
- Chris: Young. Cancer.
- Ralph White: Young, I think. Yes. That organization has certainly thrived. Are you a member? Do you go to the meetings?
- Chris: I go to the meetings, yes... Then the other thing that happened in the early 1980s was there was this conference called the National Conference on Peace Research and Conflict Resolution, NCPCR. Now that certainly didn't exist in the '70s or the '60s but it was highly interdisciplinary. It still goes on every two years.
- Ralph White: I don't know that.
- Chris: It's another example of what I think we were talking about where the field "pulls in" anthropologists and historians and political scientists and psychologists and practitioners and academics. Interesting conference. Think about coming.
- Ralph White: I don't travel anymore. I don't see well enough to navigate outside of here.
- Jannie: My last question is... a segue to the practitioner point, which is in a sense. "So what?" - which is the question the students like to ask you.
- So now that we know that you have identified the problem of misperception very clearly, what in your mind do you want practitioners, peacemakers, third parties, to do with that information? In other words, how do they either prevent conflict or prevent a further war? What is it that you hoped would be learned from this and how do practitioners apply this knowledge in some way, shape or form?. If not to prevent war, then what else?
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Ralph White:

Curiosity about misperception. Curiosity about the misperceptions of particular nations and particular leaders. That is what is most needed as a starting point. From there on, I think the knowledge of the practice, and there is the diplomat himself... like, McNamara or Fulbright or government people. I think for them, and for the general public, the essential thing is curiosity about misperception, because if they have that, what could have led a sane person to do this terrible thing? That's our question and that would lead, of course, directly to misperceptions about the dialogue with the enemy.

Or why in the world would anybody dare to start a war in view of all the piled up evidence of how much harm it does compared with good? ...military overconfidence is a main answer - but the historians know about that. It's pretty obvious that a country overestimates its military power and takes undo risks without reason. I think we're doing that very much now. We don't - we haven't learned the lesson of Vietnam as to the likelihood of stubborn fighting by primitive groups - technologically primitive groups, [but tough] fighters and the lessons we should have learned from both Vietnam and the history of communism in China.

I think the six concepts that I have put forth and [talked about] here are almost the same as we defined them from the beginning of the Vietnam War. They should be in the back of the mind of any political scientist or historian dealing with the [outbreak] of war. They are so often illustrated and maybe should be called by their right names. Not that my names are any "righter" than anybody else's, but they should be called by names that suggest misperception, because misperception is - a lot of historians describe it in the concrete; how the Kaiser was fooling himself about the British, for instance.

But... in the back of their minds, I think the biggest contribution that a book like mine - any of the second or third books in that pile - the biggest contribution practically is to sensitize whoever reads it - and certainly historians and political scientists and government people dealing with foreign affairs - sensitized them to psychological processes and psychological phenomenon that they might not have been curious about already or might not have had even one good name for.

For instance, a great many people talk at some turn or other about "lack of empathy". Such and such a country hasn't understood such and such another country. Germans all throughout World War I didn't understand the British. But their terms have been terms like ordinary English terms - lack of understanding of the feelings of others, lack of understanding of

the motives of others and I think “empathy” is a particularly apt term. McNamara and Fulbright thought so, are representing precisely that concept and once you get that clearly in your mind, you name it when you see it, and that helps. You may not name it when you see it if you don’t have that in the back of your mind.

**[End of Audio]**

**Duration: 95 minutes**