

Leslie H. Gelb, 82, Former Diplomat and New York Times Journalist, Dies

He was an editor, columnist and Pulitzer Prize-winning correspondent for The Times and served in a variety of government posts.



By Sam Roberts

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Leslie H. Gelb, an iconoclastic former American diplomat, journalist and prodigious commentator on world affairs, died on Saturday at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center in Manhattan. He was 82.

The cause was renal failure brought on by diabetes, his wife, Judith Gelb, said.

Mr. Gelb was 30 years old when in 1967 he took day-to-day charge of the team that compiled the secret Pentagon Papers, which had been commissioned by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara.

He later worked as an editor, columnist and Pulitzer Prize-winning correspondent for The New York Times, the newspaper that had overcome a court challenge by the Nixon White House and in 1971 published the papers, which revealed a damning evolution of Washington's intervention in Vietnam.

Mr. Gelb served as assistant secretary of state and director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs during the Carter administration from 1977 to 1979. He was president of the Council on Foreign Relations, the prestigious New York-based think tank peppered with policy experts and former officials, from 1993 to 2003.

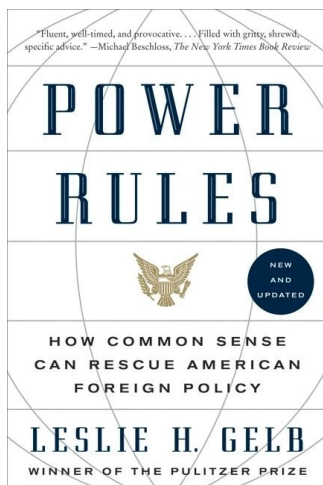
“Les Gelb was a unique star in American foreign policy,” said Winston Lord, another former diplomat and one of his predecessors at the council. “He was a patriot in its noblest definition who devoted his senior years to helping veterans and mentoring coming generations of policymakers.”

Having grown up in an insular Jewish family of parents who operated a small delicatessen in suburban New York, he was discovered at Harvard by Prof. Henry A. Kissinger and went on to defy the stereotype of Washington diplomatic doublespeak.

“Politically, he was a centrist and a realist,” George Packer wrote in “Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century” (2019).

Growing up against the background of the corner store where his parents worked 14 hours a day never left him. “It gave him a kind of immunity to the temptations and deceptions of power,” Mr. Packer wrote.

Mr. Holbrooke, a former assistant secretary of state, was one Mr. Gelb's many acolytes.



“Power Rules” one of several books Mr. Gelb wrote.
Harper Collins

“Les was a giant of mentors,” said his friend Richard I. Beattie, a lawyer and civic leader. “So many people, in addition to Holbrooke, looked to Les and wanted to know what Les thought. He was the go-to guy.”

Leslie Howard Gelb was born on March 4, 1937, in New Rochelle, N.Y., to Max and Dorothy (Klein) Gelb, Jewish immigrants from Hungary.

“He was a poor boy with bad eyesight and a sly, full-lipped smile,” Mr. Packer wrote. “The Gelbs read no newspapers and owned two books — the Bible and ‘The Rothschilds.’ They were loving parents with the worst lives of anyone Les knew.”

He graduated from New Rochelle High School and received a bachelor’s degree in government from Tufts University in 1959 after working his way through school as a valet parking attendant and dishwasher.

“He was so poor that his bride Judy’s parents refused to bless the marriage and so smart that he got into Harvard’s graduate school in government and so badly educated that he had no idea what his teachers were talking about,” Mr. Packer wrote.

Mr. Gelb earned a master’s and a doctorate in government and developed a fervor for international affairs in graduate school, where, Mr. Packer wrote, “Prof. Henry Kissinger picked him out and Gelb began to rise.”

Mr. Kissinger, who was one of the professors reviewing Mr. Gelb’s thesis and with whom he had an on-again, off-again professional relationship during his career, said in an interview on Saturday: “I thought he had an unusual perception of the intangibles that make the difference between success and failure in foreign policy. I respected him greatly whether he supported me or criticized me.”

In 1959, Mr. Gelb married Judith Cohen, who survives him, as do their children, Adam, Caroline and Alison Gelb; and five grandsons.

Mr. Gelb tried to enlist in the military several times, but was rejected because of poor eyesight, colorblindness and flat feet.

Mr. Gelb was executive assistant to Senator Jacob K. Javits, a New York Republican, from 1966 to 1967; director of policy planning and arms control for international security affairs at the Defense Department from 1967 to 1969, where he won the Pentagon’s Distinguished Service Medal; and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution from 1969 to 1973.

After a stint as The Times’s diplomatic correspondent from 1973 to 1977, he returned to government during the Carter administration and won the State Department’s highest honor.

In 1981, he rejoined The Times to serve as national security correspondent, deputy editorial page editor, editor of the Op-Ed page and columnist, and played a leading role on the team that won the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Journalism in 1986 for a six-part series on the Reagan administration’s Star Wars Strategic Defense Initiative.

He also received an Emmy Award in 1984 as a producer of the ABC documentary “The Crisis Game”; served on multiple boards, including advisory boards for “Democracy” and “The National Interest” magazines; and wrote a blog for The Daily Beast. In 1993, he was named American Father of the Year.

Mr. Gelb taught and lectured at various colleges and wrote several books, including “The Irony of Vietnam” (1980), with Richard K. Betts, which won the Woodrow Wilson Foundation Book Award.

Until about 1966, Mr. Gelb said he supported the Vietnam War — “the Munich analogy, domino theory, they’re very real to me,” he told WGBH in 1982.

But while working for Mr. Javits, he received a letter from a friend, an Army officer commanding a battalion, who said he had never seen an adversary fight as fervently as the North Vietnamese, “and he believed that it could only spring from the deepest sense of nationalism, and if that were the case, we could never beat it.”

Mr. Gelb also said he was originally opposed to the publication of the Pentagon Papers by The Times because “while the Papers show some lies, the main message is that our leaders, from Truman onwards, didn’t know hardly anything about Vietnam and Indochina.”

“They were ignorant,” he said. “And it also shows that the foreign policy community believed that if we lost Vietnam, the rest of Asia would fall.”

In a 2017 interview with WNYC’s “On the Media,” Mr. Gelb added: “These are wars that depend on knowledge of who the people are, what the culture is like. And we jumped into them without knowing. That’s the damned essential message of the Pentagon Papers.”

Mr. Gelb originally endorsed the Iraq War, too, for reasons that, perhaps, suggested that not much had changed since Vietnam.

His initial support for the war, he said, “was symptomatic of unfortunate tendencies within the foreign policy community, namely the disposition and incentives of supporting wars to retain political and professional credibility.”

Correction: Aug. 31, 2019

An earlier version of this obituary misstated Henry Kissinger’s middle initial. It is A, not M.

Sam Roberts, an obituaries reporter, was previously The Times’s urban affairs correspondent and is the host of “The New York Times Close Up,” a weekly news and interview program on CUNY-TV. @samrob12