
Robert (Skipp) M. Orr '76 Alumnus

At Florida Atlantic University

Major: History

In September of last year, Dr. Skipp Orr was confirmed by the Senate as United States Executive Director with the rank of Ambassador to the Asian Development Bank (ADB). His book, The Emergence of Japan's Foreign Aid Power, (Columbia University Press, 1990) won the 1991 Ohira Prize for best book on the Asia Pacific. He is currently involved with the forthcoming Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) in Honolulu where he will attend with President Barack Obama. A popular speaker, Skipp is known to have superb insights and personal observations on Japan, the U.S., the Asia-Pacific region, and Japan's evolving position in the bilateral and multilateral relationships that have shaped the region.

When I first arrived at FAU in the fall of 1974, it was still an upper level institution. I had graduated from Palm Beach Junior College. I wasn't sure what to major in, but since I had spent time in Europe and was a fluent German speaker I was drawn to the study of international relations. I found these interests' best served in the study of history.

I did take IR related courses in another department of the university but in reviewing class topics I found that the History Department offered more of what I wanted to learn about: How was the international order developed? What historical forces shaped our world? I came to find out that these questions were far more pertinent than anything else. I discovered that the FAU History Department consisted of brilliant scholars who would impart that wisdom to me. Moreover, I discovered they were great teachers. It was, in spite of going on to an MA and PhD in political science, the greatest gift of intellectual awakening in my life. To this day, now as an American Ambassador, the gift from FAU keeps on giving. It is to history I turn for my inspiration.

These days we hear of politicians denigrating the study of disciplines, including history. These short-sighted leaders argue that we should cut back on spending on disciplines such as history in our state university systems. We should exclude or minimize this and focus on producing people with engineering or business degrees in order to enhance our competitiveness. While not denying this, it is not just myopic...it's naïve.

I have had the good fortune to have spent 13 years as a corporate leader in Motorola and Boeing overseas. In the highly competitive international environment where the United States must be a participant, a wider ranging understanding of our world through history, foreign languages, and other cultural areas is not a luxury. It's a necessity. When our state and federal leaders are unable to comprehend, they undermine America's position in the world and hence our ability to be a player. And, as a consequence, this foolishness hurts the people of Florida, my home state. My guess is that these leaders have never left American shores and do not understand that we are living in a global environment.

The meaning of history for me was creating the open avenues of discourse with the world. Thanks to scholars like Professor Tsung-I Dow, I was introduced to Asia. Through Professor John O'Sullivan I learned of American development and diplomacy—the good and the bad. Professor Heather Frazer introduced me to south Asia and its history, which has become vital to my work today. Professor Leslie Derfler disciplined me mentally and in my writing—lessons I have never forgotten. The teachings of Professor Donn Curl on American Presidential electoral history opened a vista that would help me play a unique role in the Obama campaign. Professor Boyd Breslow gave me a lifelong interest in European medieval history. After almost 40 years, I still keep the notes from all these classes and remember the many things they taught me with gratitude.

In the years since I graduated in 1976, I have tried to maintain my links with the Department of History. I am so gratified that the generations that have succeeded those who taught me so well have also been gifted scholars and teachers. I am proud to call many of them friends today.

Now, as an Ambassador, and before that as President of Boeing Japan or Vice President/Director for Europe in Motorola or as a college professor of political science or when I was a Congressional staffer, I have harkened back to my history training repeatedly for guidance. This major helps students formulate the right kinds of questions that are necessary to develop scope. There is no other major like it. There is no other discipline that provides these enabling tools. Over the years I have repeatedly referred back to historical precedent to enforce or make a point. History will serve you in whatever profession or further study you undertake.

The meaning of history is to study and ponder. To me it is a never ending quest, with guideposts about which few agree but which are always there as markers. History at FAU is a wonderful stepping stone. It has served me so well.

