Jackson School Journal: Let’s start by learning a little more about you. Could you tell us about your academic career?

Bessner: In college I went to Columbia and I interned at the Council on Foreign Relations my senior year, which got me oriented towards US foreign policy. I majored in modern European history and I became really interested in bringing history to bear on US foreign policy and US foreign relations. However, I guess I would say that my interest in security and foreign policy really began in graduate school when I became involved with the American Grand Strategy Program at Duke University. The idea essentially was that academics could bring their knowledge to bear on US foreign policy and create a better grand strategy. I originally applied to graduate school to pursue a degree in European history and I became really involved in seeing how the insides of European history and American history affect US foreign policy.

Jackson School Journal: We often learn about the Cold War as something that was very reactionary and although the US was becoming less isolationist it was still very inner looking, but your book seems to contradict this a bit.

Bessner: The major goal of the book is to demonstrate that the Cold War didn’t emerge out of nowhere in 1947, that it wasn’t just a reaction to the Soviet Union’s actions in 1945-47 or to US policy makers’ view of the Soviet Union that formed before, during, and after World War II. Instead, you need a much larger perspective in order to understand the ideological framework that allowed something like a very long Cold War to happen or even begin. What I show is that the collapse of democratic central Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century was really important for how American liberals understood the US and its role in the world, particularly that the US represented something they called “Western Civilization” or “Judeo-Christian Civilization.” Such a worldview was a moral one bent on defeating things that were anti-humanity. At first, that thing was Nazism and fascism, and then they transferred those beliefs about the Nazism onto the Soviet Union because Stalin had already taken a number of terribly crucial actions. The main idea is that in events like the Cold War there are hinge points in history where ideological frameworks are very crucial for understanding how international relations developed, and that it’s important for scholars and also practitioners to understand the importance of the history of ideas to US foreign policy and foreign relations.
Jackson School Journal: What do you think accounted for the rise of these defense intellectuals during this time?

Bessner: There's a long history in the US of using experts for policy-making purposes, stretching back to the Progressive era. You see it with economists being used in Dollar Diplomacy and during the late 19th and early 20th centuries throughout the Latin American/Caribbean regions, and even the use of lawyers and business people. But, what happened in the Cold War is that a bunch of different strands came together. First and foremost, during World War II hundreds if not thousands of social scientists entered state administrations. They left universities in their home countries—actually one of the major founders of the Jackson School [George Taylor] worked at the office of War Information with individuals like Hans Speier, one of the intellectuals that I studied for my book. In World War II the US was fighting a global war for the first time in its history (they had participated in World War I primarily in Europe and also only started in 1917) and it required area experts, people who knew the language, had knowledge about the culture, society, and politics of other nations.

As a result it asked social scientists to enter the state administrations and the people that I focus on were actually German exiles who were really important for the development of liberalism in New York City in the 1930’s and were part of this cohort that transformed how American foreign policy makers understood how social science could be useful for their own purposes. After the Cold War a lot of these foreign policy makers were interested in keeping these individuals around, so they helped create institutions like the RAND corporation where they helped form institutions like the Council on Foreign Relations and Brookings Institution to focus more on using social science knowledge, in addition to creating academic institutes like the Jackson School or the MIT Center for International Studies, which could bring academic knowledge to their own foreign policy making.

“The main idea is that in events like the Cold War there are hinge points in history where ideological frameworks are very crucial for understanding how international relations developed, and that it’s important for scholars and also practitioners to understand the importance of the history of ideas in shaping US foreign policy and foreign relations.”

Jackson School Journal: How did you first become interested in this field of work?

Bessner: I became interested in foreign policy through my internship with the Council on Foreign Relations and then through the American Grand Strategy Program. I also became interested in the exiles since my advisor in graduate school, Malachi Hacohen, studied exiles and that phenomenon. Through him, I became interested in exiles and sort of how their experiences in other nations
affected the American experience or American culture and various other things about the United States. What I hoped to do during my graduate studies was to combine these two interests in the history of exile, the history of transnational flows. With my background in foreign relations I focused on the individual Hans Speier, who was both a German academic and an exile who nevertheless became an important foreign policy person and member of the foreign policy establishment during the early Cold War.

**Jackson School Journal:** What was it like to intern for the Council on Foreign Relations?

**Bessner:** I really enjoyed it. I was an intern with their public relations department so I basically copy-edited, read and did a little bit of research. It was mostly not a research position but I did a little bit for all the publications that came out. What was most interesting for me was that it provided me access to see how think tanks operated in the American foreign policy establishment. It was really great to meet the members, people with academic backgrounds who themselves came to affect American foreign policy or who sought to affect foreign policy. It was a way to see how ideas themselves and ideas created in these nonpolitical spaces come to affect foreign policy.

**Jackson School Journal:** Do you have any advice for Jackson School students in general or those who might want to pursue a similar career path?

**Bessner:** My number one advice would be to learn languages. It’s really important to learn and be familiar with a language. If the opportunity presents, say if you’re interested in being someone who works for the State Department who specializes in let’s say in Mexico, spend time in Mexico and learn about the politics, and its society so that you’re not just speaking from an American perspective. If you really embed yourself in these other societies, that will give you a much better sense of the language and build your cross-cultural skills. I also would advise to think broadly about career paths. Degrees from the Jackson School and any one of the area studies or general studies or the Jewish studies can be used for a lot of purposes. Don’t limit yourself – you could work at think tanks, in the government, as a journalist, as a research analyst, as a consultant, you could go into academia… it provides you with a broad swath of career choices that are otherwise unavailable to people without that international studies background.

**Jackson School Journal:** Do you have any recommendations for any news or other resources that you follow, especially those that pertain to your area of study?

**Bessner:** The best for German would be Der Speigel or just the national newspapers are good. I would try to keep on top of magazines like Foreign Policy and to go to a lot of talks here. The opportunities you have as an university student are probably not repeated elsewhere in society so while you’re here I would really try to take advantage of talks you’re interested in. Podcasts that I use include Blogging Heads, they have a lot of really good and interesting stuff on international affairs and
BackStory with the American History Guys which is just a really cool podcast for those interested in history. As for reading lists… really just read broadly and don’t just read the New York Times. Twitter’s a really good way to get news information and to get news sources. If you curate your Twitter following well you could have a good sense of foreign news really quickly and domestic news as well.

*Interview by Sarah Foster*