

My Career in the Scientific Enterprise

John Campbell

The Impetus for My Professional Life

Upon reflection now in my advanced years, I realize that my career was set in motion upon the death of my father when I was 13 years old. Before his sad death of cancer at age 49, he shared with me reflections on his own life and his hopes for my future. He asked me, as a final legacy, to use my life to help make the “whole world a better place”. Not knowing what that meant for me, I made that promise.

During World War II, my father spent 3½ years in POW camps as a slave-laborer in Nagasaki, Japan, shipyards, and later coal mines. He suffered many serious injuries, illnesses, and psychological cruelty. Fortuitously, he was in a nearby coal mine in Orio when the atomic bomb fell on Nagasaki in August 1945. However, soon after his “liberation” and return to the destroyed Nagasaki, he was exposed to nuclear radiation. Before he died in 1962, my father tried to tell me what he witnessed in newly bombed Nagasaki — but could only say “words can’t describe the most dreadful sights imaginable.”

Following his return to civilian life in the United States, my father enrolled in Louisiana State University on the G.I. Bill and obtained undergraduate and graduate degrees in psychology and social welfare. At LSU, he met and married my mother, and in 1949 I was born, followed by my sister Roz in 1951. My father spent his remaining years as a university professor and school administrator, working to “liberate” special-needs children confined in horrific 1950s Louisiana “asylums” and to create special educational facilities for them. For this work, he was posthumously awarded in 1962 by the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., Foundation at a gala event in Washington DC, hosted by President John F. Kennedy, and attended by my mother.

Youthful Thinking

While at Ruston High School, I began to read and think about world conditions and events that led to my father’s tragic fate. My years on the high school debate team were invaluable for learning how to quickly find factual information in the local university library (pre-internet 1960s). At age 16, I wrote an essay entitled “World Peace”, winning a student writing contest. The essay was a teenager’s take on how crises in natural resources, health, food, and demographics can push

modern nations to collide and people to die. The essay concludes urging the use of science and greater knowledge to bring about improved abundance and security for all. I continued my scholastic explorations on this topic during my college years at Tulane University and then graduate studies in sociology at The University of Texas at Austin.

The White House

My life took a dramatic turn when a former professor at Tulane University recommended me to the newly organizing White House staff of President Jimmy Carter. In 1977, upon arrival at the White House, I began work on policy reports of special importance to the President: developing new U.S. programs for health and food assistance abroad. Next, I managed the creation of the Presidential Commission on the 1979 International Year of the Child, and subsequently was appointed its staff program director. The IYC Commission was chaired by Jean Young, wife of UN Ambassador Andrew Young.

And my life with Sheldon began during these years! He worked in communications for the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the IYC Commission.

High-Tech Texas

In 1981, Sheldon and I enrolled in graduate schools at the University of Texas at Austin — I in the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs and he in the School of Communications — from which we both obtained graduate degrees. My focus at the LBJ School was on the politics of and policies for science and technology. In 1982, I was awarded a Fellowship at the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Science and Technology, organizing Congressional hearings, chaired by then Representative Al Gore, on new developments in computer sciences and biotechnology. In 1983, back at UT Austin, I authored publications on the emerging high-tech industry in Texas.

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n 1985, I was appointed senior policy analyst for Science and Technology with the Texas Select Committee on Higher Education, in the Office of the Texas Governor. The Select Committee report resulted in a restructuring of Texas universities and state funding of university research rewarding competitive excellence. The Texas Legislature unanimously enacted the Select Committee's Charter for Higher Education, instrumental in launching the Texas era "From Oil and Cattle to High-Technology."

After obtaining his graduate degree, Sheldon was media director for Keep Texas Beautiful, Inc., producing videos on award-winning "clean cities" in Texas.

National Academy of Sciences

In 1987, I was invited to join the staff of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington DC. I became senior program officer of the Government–University–Industry Research Roundtable, composed of national leaders from each of those sectors. I managed reviews of the opportunities and challenges for the rapidly expanding research programs in U.S. universities. I organized a symposium of national leaders of academic research from Germany, France, Japan, Russia, and India to address global challenges for universities.

I was next appointed Associate Executive Director of the NAS Office of International Affairs. I worked on multi-national NAS projects, including managing global academy conferences on Science and Population (New Delhi, 1993); Science and Technology and Cities (Istanbul, 1996); and Science and Technology and Global Sustainability (Tokyo, 2000). During 1994–1995, I served as associate director of the German–American Academic Council in Bonn, Germany. In 1996, I was seconded to Royal Society of London. In 1998, I joined the staff of the President of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, developing new global initiatives.

The highlight of my NAS career was as staff director for the May 2000 Global Summit of National Science Academies on “A Transition to Sustainability,” held in Tokyo. In planning for this event, I visited Japan several times, working closely with officials of the Science Council of Japan and the Office of the Prime Minister. But most memorable was my private meeting with Japanese Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko to discuss topics on “global sustainability” for the Emperor’s upcoming keynote address to the Academies Summit. With lasting memories of my father’s tragic fate and his last request to me, discussing the future of the world with the Emperor of Japan was the most astonishing moment in the arc of my life.

During these years, Sheldon was a staff officer with the NAS Film Committee, providing expert input into the PBS television series, The Infinite Voyage. He subsequently began his communications career with the World Bank, headquartered in Washington DC.

InterAcademy Council

During 1998–2000, I managed the creation of the InterAcademy Council, a consortium of the world’s national academies of sciences, to advise the United Nations and other global organizations. In this effort, at the request of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, I organized meetings of national academy presidents, held at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January 2000 and January 2001.

In 2001, I was appointed Associate Executive Director of IAC and served as study director of its first publication, “Inventing a Better Future,” proposing ways to strengthen scientific and engineering capacity within all nations. This publication was officially released in 2004 at a ceremony and press conference hosted by the UN Secretary-General at the UN Building in New York. The study panel was co-chaired by Ismail Serageldin, formerly Vice-President of the World Bank and then Director of the new Library of Alexandria in Egypt; and Jacob Palis, Director of the Brazil National Institute of Mathematics and Secretary-General of the Third World Academy of Sciences.

In 2005, I was appointed Executive Director of the InterAcademy Council. Sheldon and I moved from Washington DC to Amsterdam, where IAC headquarters was located at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). The president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences served as co-chair of the IAC Board, and thus I traveled often to Beijing to work in an office at the Chinese Academy headquarters.

Sheldon continued teleworking for the World Bank as an editorial consultant.

As Executive Director of the InterAcademy Council for eight years, I managed its staff and programs, with a governing board of 15 national academy presidents from every continent. I oversaw the production of IAC reports to the United Nations on topics such as climate change, agriculture, future energy sources, women in science, and responsible conduct in scientific research and publications. It was a privilege to work with the eminent scientists and technologists from around the world who served *pro bono* on IAC study panels.

In October 2013, I officially retired after 28 exciting and meaningful years with the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and the InterAcademy Council. The IAC remains an active organization, now joined with the new InterAcademy Partnership of 100 national science academies to provide a global voice for the world’s best scientists.

Life in Austin, Texas

In this next phase, I am enjoying life with Sheldon and VZ in high-tech, high-rise, energetic, and weirdly entertaining downtown Austin, Texas, USA.

Sheldon continues as a part-time editorial consultant for the World Bank. He is also actively participating in the Texas Jewish Historical Society, serving as its president during 2021–2023.