

## David Steinberg, prominent expert on Myanmar, dies at 96

Mr. Steinberg often challenged U.S. policies on Myanmar, appealing for American engagement rather than sanctions.



David I. Steinberg, a preeminent Western analyst on Myanmar whose insights on the country informed journalistic coverage during decades of coups and bloodshed, including a scorched-earth campaign against the Rohingya Muslim minority, died Dec. 5 at his home in Bethesda, Maryland. He was 96.

His son Eric Steinberg confirmed the death but did not cite a specific cause.

Over a career spanning seven decades in think tanks, diplomacy and academia, including as director of Asian studies at Georgetown University, Mr. Steinberg sought to explain current political moves and crises through the lens of Myanmar's history and culture.

He also often criticized U.S. economic sanctions and diplomatic snubs as dead-end strategies in Myanmar that inevitably help Washington's rivals such as China.

He argued in favor of cautious but consistent outreach by Washington — with Myanmar as well countries such as North Korea and Iran — in attempts to gain even modest leverage and keep open channels with all political groups.

"I am pro-engagement," he said in a 2007 [interview](#) with the South Asia-focused website New Mandala. "If we engage, we should not insult those with whom we try to negotiate even if we profoundly dislike their policies."

In Myanmar, also known as Burma, the challenges for Western policymakers have grown more acute. Chinese influence and investment have surged as Beijing seeks an insider track to Myanmar's significant natural resources such as teak, copper, offshore gas reserves and the potential for [hydroelectric power](#) to feed the Chinese economy.

At the same time, the West's main hope for civilian-led political reforms, Nobel Peace Prize laureate [Aung San Suu Kyi](#), was silenced — jailed in a 2021 military coup. Even before that, Suu Kyi's international stature had plummeted because of her [defense](#) of Myanmar's military in 2019 amid its attacks on the Rohingya.

Myanmar's military-led assaults have claimed tens of thousands of lives and sent more than 700,000 Rohingya refugees fleeing to neighboring Bangladesh. In 2022, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said authorities in Buddhist-majority Myanmar were carrying out [genocide](#) and crimes against humanity.

In a somewhat contrarian view, Mr. Steinberg parsed Blinken's language. Mr. Steinberg agreed that Myanmar carried out "many despicable acts of destruction, murder, rape, arson, pillaging, war

crimes, or crimes against humanity,” but he [objected](#) to the term “genocide” as unhelpful and imprecise.

He believed Blinken’s comments undermined U.S. interests by extending the blame of genocide onto previous civilian leaders, including Suu Kyi, who are potentially crucial for any return to democracy in Myanmar.

“The U.S. action may appeal to some members of Congress and place the United States in a morally defensible position,” Mr. Steinberg wrote in an essay for the Pacific Forum, a foreign policy think tank. “But if the desired effect was also to delegitimize the Myanmar military, it does so at the expense of the previous civilian government.”

Such analyses left Mr. Steinberg open to criticism of being too nuanced and deferential in judgments on Myanmar — a country once seen as a potential regional power in the 1950s but that fell into recurring cycles of political instability and military-led regimes.

In 2005, a Myanmar pro-democracy activist, Myint Thein, described Mr. Steinberg as “the leading apologist of the Burmese military regime” for opposing sanctions.

But that same attention to historical context and cause-and-effect linkage made Mr. Steinberg an indispensable sounding board for journalists, scholars and researchers.

In hundreds of interviews and essays, he helped make sense of Myanmar’s churn of civilian governments and military coups. In the most recent putsch, the armed forces ousted Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy after its landslide election victory.

Mr. Steinberg was rare among Western academic specialists on Myanmar for his personal connections, spanning groups from merchants to military officials to Buddhist monks. Some relationships went back to his work in Myanmar from 1958 to 1962 with the [Asia Foundation](#), a nonprofit development group.

Mr. Steinberg also was a reality check on the various Western overtures to Myanmar. With Suu Kyi, he pointed out [her flaws](#) as well as her strengths during her political rise, beginning with pro-democracy protests in 1988. She was awarded the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) in 1991 while under house arrest. (She was under house arrest for a total of nearly 15 years from 1989 to 2010.)

He acknowledged her power and symbolism as the daughter of “the George Washington of Burma,” [Aung San](#), who negotiated independence from the British and was assassinated in 1947 just months before the end of colonial rule. Mr. Steinberg also called her “rigid and uncompromising.”

He contended that she would never abandon her deeply nationalist views, rooted in ideas of Buddhism as the country’s pillar and identity. He questioned whether she could accept other faiths and ethnic groups as political equals.

His assessments on Myanmar always circled back to one inescapable fact: that the military dictates everything from state jobs to education opportunities. “Until that changes,” he wrote, “they are going to be in a strong position in that society.”

## Early interest in Asia

David Isaac Steinberg was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on Nov. 26, 1928. His father was head of proctology at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, and his mother was a homemaker.

Mr. Steinberg said his interest in East Asia began in high school when he noticed the textbooks had few references to Chinese history. While at Dartmouth College, he was part of the last group of exchange students at Lingnan University in Canton, now known as Guangzhou, just before Mao Tse-tung came to power in the 1949 communist revolution.

Mr. Steinberg graduated from Dartmouth in 1950 and during the Korean War he worked for the National Security Agency, trying to decipher the codes of Chinese forces.

He received a master's degree in Chinese studies from Harvard University in 1955 and did additional postgraduate work at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

His four years in Myanmar with the Asia Foundation ended in 1962 when the country expelled all outside groups. Mr. Steinberg remained with the organization and relocated to Hong Kong and then South Korea, where he met his future wife, Myung-Sook Lee, a singer. (She later was known as Ann Myongsook Lee and became a music professor at George Washington University.)

In the late 1960s, Mr. Steinberg began a nearly two-decade career with U.S. government agencies, including coordinating programs in East Asia and other regions with the U.S. Agency for International Development.

He served as president of the Mansfield Center for Pacific Affairs think tank before joining Georgetown as a professor of Korean studies in 1990. He was the director of Asian studies at the university from 1997 to 2007.

His more than a dozen books include "Turmoil in Burma: Contested Legitimacies in Myanmar" (2006) and "Stone Mirror: Reflections on Contemporary Korea" (2002).

In addition to his wife of 58 years and his son Eric, survivors include another son, Alexander; and two grandchildren.

At a Senate subcommittee [hearing in 2009](#), Mr. Steinberg tried to convey Myanmar's collective mindset, including the military brass. He surprised lawmakers by saying that many in Myanmar's military harbored "enormous fear" of a U.S. invasion.

"We talk about regime change, we talk about outposts of tyranny," he said. "This reinforces the problem, I think, of trying to negotiate with them."

By [Brian Murphy](#), *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2024