As the first president to lead the University from Beirut since 1984, President Waterbury was faced with enormous tasks of war recovery on all levels—from the physical infrastructure to curriculum building and faculty morale.

Looking back, President Waterbury said recently, “My strong belief then and now is that AUB, perhaps more than any other university in the Arab world, has the institutional culture and habits to serve as a model for the region in high quality academic research coupled with fine undergraduate and graduate teaching.”
MainGate: When did you first visit AUB and what were your first impressions?
My first visit to AUB was in the summer of 1960 when I was still a college student. I came from a very hot and dusty Egypt in August. The campus was quiet but lovely. I made a number of visits in the early 1970s, prior to the Lebanese civil war, when I was living in Egypt.

When you returned as president, what were your impressions then?
My first visit as president-designate was in October 1997, although at the invitation of Samir Khalaf [currently professor of sociology] I had given a lecture at AUB about a year earlier. During my 1997 visit, some explosives, probably sticks of dynamite, blew up in the Faculty III parking lot, bringing Prime Minister Rafic Hariri to campus, piloting his own armored Mercedes. I was very touched by his gesture of solidarity.

I also had a lively meeting with the faculty in Assembly Hall. It was wide-ranging and sometimes combative. It got my adrenalin up and I knew I was going to enjoy my assignment.

As the first president to live on campus in nearly 15 years, what were your priorities, and what particular difficulties did you encounter?
I knew I had to understand all the moving parts of the very complicated AUB machine. The medical faculty and hospital I knew would be a particular challenge as I had no prior experience in that area. I also suspected that faculty morale would be an issue—a combination of the lingering effects of the civil war and the fact that since 1984 the president had tried to lead from New York rather than Beirut.

In my early months I had great support and advice from then Vice President Makhlof Haddadin and from former Deputy President Samir Makdisi. I was also gratified that shortly after I was named president-designate Huda Zurayk accepted the deanship of the Faculty of Health Sciences, becoming, I believe, the first female dean in AUB’s history.

I came with one very strong presumption—that the lynchpin of a great university is its faculty, that a good faculty attracts good students, and good students and good colleagues attract even better faculty. So from the start my focus was on the faculty, trying to improve conditions for teaching and research and trying to recruit new faculty who could help move the institution forward. With that in mind I thought it of paramount importance to reinstate our academic promotion procedures suspended during some of the worst days of the civil war. This was a difficult decision because it changed significantly what had become part of faculty habits. The decision triggered a multi-year process of reviewing and harmonizing all of AUB’s promotion criteria and procedures.

As president, did you teach any courses?
Over my ten years I taught only two courses. One was on the dynamics of collective action and cooperation, a subject that has been at the heart of my research for decades. I taught it in the Senate Room at Marquand House. As I recall Jad Chaaban [currently assistant professor, agricultural sciences] was one of my students.

Later I taught a course in Nicely Hall, America through Foreign Eyes, part of the newly-founded CASAR. We explored how non-Americans have portrayed the country in writing, music, and film.

What do you think your students would most remember about your classes/teaching?
I try to be interactive and I try to engage students in practical experiments. This was easier to do in the collective action class than in America through Foreign Eyes.

Are you still in touch with any of your former students?
I have had more frequent contact with former student officers of the USFC [University Student Faculty Committee] than with students from my two courses. I have also had ongoing contact with some student club officers, such as Trustee Abdulalslam Haykal and former editors of Outlook.

You arrived at AUB after the war, but violent acts persisted during your presidency. Can you tell us about your experiences as president during the events of September 11, 2001, the 2006 war with Israel, and the street battles in Beirut during the spring of 2008?
Obviously these were very different experiences. I was actually in the United States on 9/11. I took the train from Princeton, New Jersey to New York and the AUB office, then at 51st and Third Avenue. My full reminiscences of that day were summarized in my remarks at the Opening Ceremony in 2001. Three surreal vignettes stick in my mind. The AUB office was fairly high up,
the firemen had been standing in the Trade Center towers. I could hear their siren of emergency vehicles. All public transportation shut down. People escaping Ground Zero had no choice but to walk out of Manhattan, using the bridges. At one point I looked down on Third Avenue from my office and saw thousands of pedestrians shuffling along in total silence, covered in the fine dust produced by the collapsing World Trade Center towers. I could hear their shuffling feet through my window.

The next day I took the same train to New York. At the Princeton station cars in the parking lot had tickets on their windscreens for parking overnight, almost surely the cars of people killed in the collapsing towers who had failed to come home the day before.

In New York I walked past the fire station on 52nd Street. On September 11 the firemen had been standing in front of the station drinking coffee, not knowing what would happen in the next hour. The following day they were hanging the photographs of something like six of their buddies who had died.

I was also in the United States when that vicious war took place. Thank goodness that AUB was in the capable hands of [then Provost] Peter Heath and the senior leadership along with thousands of others who came to work every day despite the dangers that literally lurked everywhere. I was able to get back into Lebanon by taxi from Amman about two weeks before the cease-fire. When my driver and I crossed the northern border into Lebanon, a Lebanese official looked at my passport and asked, “Are you the president of AUB?” When I said “Yes,” he said, “Welcome back, Mr. President.”

My first evening back, a hot sultry August evening, I walked up to the Green Oval where scores of families were enjoying the first cool breezes of the evening. They represented all parts of Lebanese society, every sect, every style of dress. But they all seemed to be at ease with one another. It captured for me what I had always known AUB is all about, and I never felt prouder of the institution.

The spring of 2008 was truly frightening because it bore the seeds of civil war—us against us. The Doha negotiations saved the country from what could have been an ugly internal fight. Hezbollah quickly took control of our neighborhood. [Chief of Protection] Saadallah Shalak and I got in his old Toyota and without security escort of any kind explored around Ras Beirut and Mazraa. As we came back onto campus through the Medical Gate, a large group of Hezbollah soldiers were cooling off under the banyan tree. Uniforms aside they looked like a lot of our students. They disappeared a day later and were replaced by Qawmiyun uniforms in the neighborhood. The outcome of the near civil war was the kind of hopelessly deadlocked government we have seen ever since, but that beats the alternative.

Do you have anything you would like to say to members of the AUB community?

Higher education should be competitive in all respects, but the competition should be friendly. We are all serving a larger cause of transferring and creating knowledge for future generations. So I want to see AUB be the best, but I hope for and welcome scores of other institutions that may rival AUB. I urge my colleagues at AUB to continue to strive for excellence, thereby setting an example that others may emulate and, indeed, duplicate.

What impact has AUB had on your life?

The ten years I spent at AUB were the most enriching and rewarding of my life. My wife Sarah and I became deeply attached to the institution and to Lebanon. I still look back in amazement that I had the good fortune to lead AUB.

—J.M.C.

In Short

- 1961: BA, Princeton, summa cum laude
- 1968: PhD, public law and government, Columbia
- 1968–71: Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Michigan
- 1971–77: Middle East Representative, American Universities Field Staff, Cairo and Rome
- 1978–98: Professor of Politics and International Affairs, Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs
- 1992–98: Director of Princeton University’s Center for International Studies and Editor of World Politics
- 1996–2008: President, American University of Beirut
- 2011: Senior Advisor to the Executive Affairs Authority on Higher Education, Abu Dhabi
- 1998: Named Princeton University’s William Stewart Tod Professor of Politics and International Affairs, Emeritus
- Since 2013: Global Professor, New York University Abu Dhabi
- Honorary Degrees: American University in Cairo, 2003; AUB, 2008; Princeton University, 2008
- Publications include: A Political Economy of the Middle East (with Alan Richards, 1990) The Hydropolitics of the Nile Valley, 1979; and The Nile Basin (a sequel), 2002