



The December 2024 issue of the Applied History Network Newsletter spotlights member-contributed news items for more than 200 leaders in the Applied History movement across 50 institutions.

This newsletter is prepared by the Applied History Project at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center and edited by Jason Walter and Ivana Hoàng Giang.

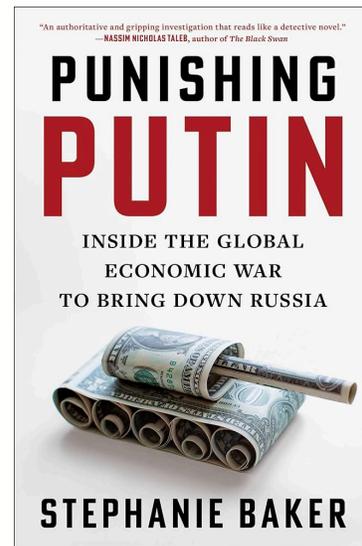
If you would like to submit an item for next month's issue, please email it to igiang@hks.harvard.edu with the subject "January Applied History Update" before Thursday, February 6.

Latest History Books Illuminating Today's Headline Challenges and Choices*

Baker Deconstructs the Effects of Russian Sanctions

Punishing Putin: Inside the Global Economic War to Bring Down Russia by **Stephanie Baker** (Senior Writer, Bloomberg News and Bloomberg Business Week) is "a masterful account of recent U.S. and Western efforts to leverage their financial and technological dominance to build a revanchist Russia to their will. It has not gone entirely to plan." So [writes Keith Johnson](#) (Reporter, *Foreign Policy*) in *Foreign Policy*. Providing "a clinical analysis of the very tricky balancing acts that lie behind deploying what has become Washington's go-to weapon," the book also

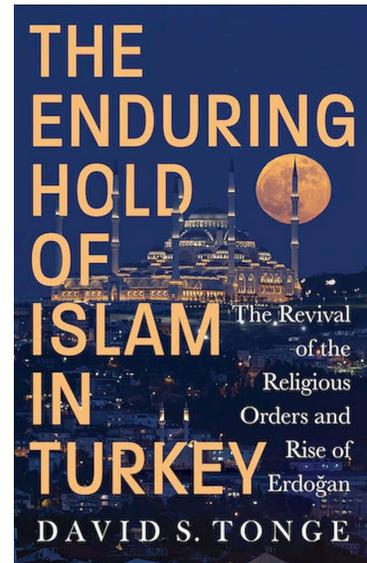
draws on historical and recent examples relevant for Applied Historians, all with less-than-optimal results, including Athens' embargo on the city-state of Megara, an ally of Sparta in 432 B.C., and the US oil embargo against Japan in 1941. Further, as Johnson states, "Osama Bin Laden is dead, Kabul is lost. Cuba's still communist, and a Kim still runs North Korea, but the love of sanctions has never waned in Washington." The weaponization of economic tools may be tempting, "but it is difficult to turn them into a precision weapon, or even avoid them becoming counterproductive." Much of Baker's book "centers on the fight to sanction and undermine the oligarchs loyal to Putin who have helped prop up his kleptocracy." As Johnson explains, the weaknesses in that approach are: first, "it's tricky to actually seize much of the ill-gotten billions in oligarch hands;" and second, "the offensive has not split the oligarchs from Putin... 'his power is much stronger because now they're in his hands.'" Meanwhile, "the real sanctions fight is over Russia's frozen central bank reserves—two thirds of which are in the European Union—and the ongoing effort to strangle its energy reserves without killing the global economy." Despite the sweeping and unprecedented level of Western sanctions on Russia, they "have not ended Putin's ability to prosecute the war." Baker argues that "Greater enforcement of sanctions, especially on energy, will be crucial to ratchet up the pressure and start to actually punish Putin. The one thing that is unlikely is that the sanctions battle will end anytime soon—not with Putin's Russia, and not with other revisionist great powers such as China, whose one potential weakness is the asymmetric might of U.S. money."



Tonge Places Religion at the Center of Turkey's Resurgence

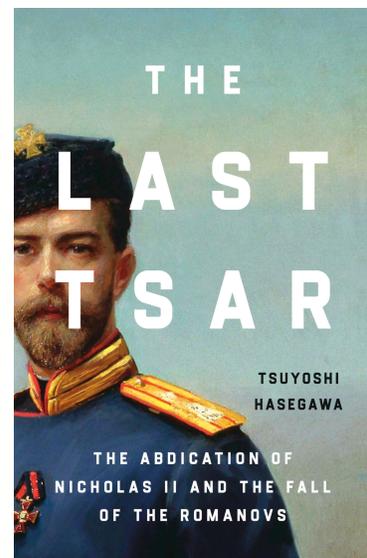
The Enduring Hold of Islam in Turkey: The Revival of the Religious Orders and the Rise of Erdogan by **David S. Tonge** (Author, Journalist) focuses on how "the 'inexorable return of Sunni Islam in general, and the mystical religious orders in particular'" are integral to Turkey's culture today. As **Peter Frankopan** (Professor of Global History, University of Oxford) [writes](#) in the *Financial Times*, despite the apparent secularization of the country under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, "the past century has not been one of declining influence of religion in Turkish society... for, 'Erdogan's New Turkey is Old Ottoman rather than neo-Ottoman.'" At the center of the revival, the Nakşibendi fraternity and its branches "have entrenched themselves across all Turkish institutions." Frankopan

emphasizes, “Their hold on the state today is immense”—from their ability to mobilize the electorate, to their leaders’ expansive and entwined business interests, to their wide reach outside the country, built on the global Turkish diasporas and their infrastructure extending “from Central Asia to the Balkans, from Cologne to Brooklyn.” Tapping into the Nakşibendi groupings, Erdoğan has built “an all but unassailable power base as a result.” However, Tonge points to more lasting consequences for Turkey. First, “Islam in the Ottoman Empire was rich, deep and variegated.” Today, those attributes have given way “to a Nakşibendi world view that is identifiable across all the different fraternities that is strident and ‘intolerant.’” Second, New Turkey is “about more than Erdoğan.” The Nakşibendi “have structures that are broad, ubiquitous and resilient. ‘They and their millions of adherents will be there to shape... and colour the contours of post-secular Turkey.’” In concluding, Frankopan offers a view most Applied Historians will disagree with: “Tonge has done a wonderful job in reminding us that it is not the individuals that matter to history, but the institutions that provide the pillars on which power is built.”



Hasegawa Reinterprets the Collapse of the Romanov Dynasty

The Last Tsar: The Abdication of Nicholas II and the Fall of the Romanovs by **Tsuyoshi Hasegawa** (Professor Emeritus, University of California, Santa Barbara) is an often-told story. “But Mr. Hasegawa won’t allow himself to fall prey to the fallacy that things had to turn out the way they did.” So [writes Sean McMeekin](#) (Francis Flourney Professor of European History and Culture, Bard College) in the *Wall Street Journal*. Of particular interest for Applied Historians, “His narrative is rich with observations about paths not taken and about the unintended consequences of the paths that were indeed taken....” McMeekin cites the monarchists’ 1916 assassination of Grigori Rasputin, the faith healer who assumed a satanic role at the court, which was intended to strengthen the czar’s position but instead weakened his standing with the workers of Petrograd. And a year later, after the czar sent a battalion of loyal troops to suppress the mutinies that



had spread through the capital—the event known as the February Revolution—insubordinate commanders rescinded his decision to use force and restore order without his knowledge. Drawing from these and other circumstances, “Mr. Hasegawa’s masterly narrative shows that it was the actions and manipulations of Russian elites pursuing their own interests that, in a ‘dazzling sequence of toppling dominoes,’ ended the Romanov dynasty—not inherent flaws in the czar’s character, or structural problems with the monarchy, or popular pressure from below, as historians have variously argued.” That said, the author is critical of the czar, terming him “the most ‘inadequate ruler in all of Europe,’” particularly in his refusal to deal with the influence of Rasputin and in his abdication to his brother, Mikhail, who declined to serve, rather than to his young son and heir, Alexei. A pernicious circle of advisers also bears responsibility for one of the watershed events in early 20th-century history, leading to a chaotic Provisional Government and, subsequently, Lenin’s Bolsheviks. Reflecting on the historical drama, McMeekin suggests, “One could just as easily conclude from Mr. Hasegawa’s account that for all their stubbornness, superstition and blundering, it was Nicholas, Alexandra, and Rasputin—and not the cousins, generals and politicians plotting against them—who better understood Russia and the imperatives of its governance: namely, that to rule such a vast and fragile empire, especially in wartime, even a flawed autocracy was preferable to anarchy.”

**The inspiration for this section of the Applied History Network Newsletter comes from Paul Kennedy. In an email chain triggered by his review in the Wall Street Journal of Nicholas Mulder’s Economic Weapon, he wrote, “I must confess that I enjoy doing these ‘history that illuminates the present’ book reviews for the general reader and international businessman. They are rather different in nature from the more scholarly pieces I would do in, say, The International History Review.” He went on to explain: “For many years, when I was still at the University of East Anglia in the U.K., I was one of the two main anonymous [!] book reviewers of all books in history and politics for The Economist . Although it was tough going because you didn’t know what was the next book that arrived in your mail, it was incredibly challenging. ‘Your task,’ the book review editor demanded, ‘is to explain in not more than 650 words to an IBM executive flying from Boston to Atlanta why a new biography of Bismarck is worthwhile—or not.’”*

Publications of Note

Belfer Center Experts Discuss “The Fall of Assad: What’s Next for Syria and Lessons from History”

The swift fall of Syria’s Assad regime was only the latest reminder of how regional conflicts have unintended consequences. In a compilation of initial reactions gathered by Harvard’s Belfer Center, **Graham Allison** (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Douglas Dillon Professor of Government, Harvard Kennedy School) [highlights](#) the failure of Obama’s declaration that “Assad must go” in 2013, noting that “In the real world, Obama ‘went’—and Assad remained” and reminding readers that “successful statecraft requires more than declarations.” **Ziad Daoud** (Senior Fellow, Harvard’s Belfer Center) argues Assad’s fall is a sign of the wide-ranging consequences of Israel’s war against Hamas and Hezbollah, comparing it to the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and highlighting that “the consequences of the 1947 war only became fully apparent four years later, when a military coup in Egypt cited the defeat in Palestine in the first paragraph of its first communique. The lesson—just because things appear quiet and stable today doesn’t mean there’s no combustible mix simmering.” Finally, **Meghan O’Sullivan** (Director, Harvard’s Belfer Center) concludes that “At another time, the United States and its allies might have become involved in brokering a Syrian government and helping it craft and lead a transitional period,” but with America’s declining willingness to undertake nation-building efforts, “Neither the outgoing Biden Administration nor the incoming Trump Administration will have any proclivity to play this role in Syria.”

Ferguson and Mens Compare Today’s Middle East to Europe’s Congress System After French Revolutionary Wars

Israel’s war against Hamas has reshaped the Middle East, with fronts expanding from the West Bank and Lebanon to Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Iran. Writing for the Hoover Institution’s Caravan Notebook, **Niall Ferguson** (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Milbank Family Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) and **Jay Mens** (Former Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Senior Fellow, Policy Exchange) [compare](#) the current breakdown of the Middle East’s regional order to that of the European order after the French

Revolutionary Wars. They note that while “Europe’s descent into the mid-twentieth-century maelstrom stemmed from the breakdown of its own system,” the current crises in the Middle East “have unfolded in a vacuum where no such system ever existed.” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s strategy echoes that of Otto von Bismarck, they argue, as he represents a “conservative who has been forced to become a revolutionary,” seeking to use “a certain pragmatism” to reshape the international environment to his advantage. They delineate the differences: while Bismarck’s successors led Europe into war by taking the “risks that he had eschewed,” and Britain was too hesitant to deter them, today “the greatest danger is that Israel’s leaders pursue goals that are beyond their means” while the US “fails to pursue a consistent policy aimed at perpetuating regional balance.”

Bew Urges Pragmatic Realpolitik for Labour’s Foreign Policy

John Bew (Professor of History and Foreign Policy, King’s College London; Former Chief Foreign Policy Adviser to four British Prime Ministers) [outlines](#) a bold vision for Labour’s future in his article “The Rise of Machinepolitik.” Drawing on the 19th-century origins of realpolitik, he argues that idealism alone cannot guide Britain’s global strategy. As he puts it, “A seat at the table has to be earned, just as it was in 1945,” underscoring that raw power and productive force are the dominant forces shaping the international order today. Weaving together lessons from historical figures, including Prime Minister Clement Attlee and Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, Bew contends that to protect Britain’s security and economic interests in an unpredictable world Labour must embrace a pragmatic approach—one that values rules-based systems yet adapts to the harsh realities of global politics.

Logevall Makes the Case for Biography’s Power for the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study

“What I’m suggesting is that human beings have the capacity for moral choice. They are not entirely at the mercy of impersonal forces, even if those forces limit the options available to individuals—both ordinary individuals and leaders—in any given situation.” So [writes](#) **Fredrik Logevall** (Faculty Mentor, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Laurence D. Belfer Professor of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School) for the fifth edition of *The Wittrock Lecture Book Series*. “Consequently, it is

the historian's task to work out precisely the range within which historical actors enjoyed freedom of maneuver, to identify possible alternative courses of action available to them *at the time*, and to judge their actions accordingly." For example, Logevall explains, while Winston Churchill's leadership "mattered greatly" for World War II, he could not stop the swift advance of the Axis powers in Europe and Asia or the decline of the United Kingdom as an empire. "In other words, Churchill could not change the course of history, and he had to fashion his policies within the constraints he inherited." Both biographical and counterfactual analyses underlie Logevall's argument that the context within which policymakers operate today may very well have turned out differently: "A surviving Kennedy would most likely have avoided the kind of large-scale escalation in Vietnam that Johnson pursued in 1965," changing the history of the Cold War. In December, Logevall also [published](#) a review of Max Boot's *Reagan: His Life and Legend* in *The Times Literary Supplement* and [appeared](#) on the *Engelsberg Ideas* podcast to discuss legacies of the Vietnam War.

Tooze Explains Concern over "Escalation of Tension between the Great Powers"

Writing in the *South China Morning Post*, **Adam Tooze** (Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of History, Columbia University) [argues](#) that China's dominant manufacturing capacity today can be traced back to effective Chinese industrial policy in the 2000s. As for European industrial policy interventions at that time, Tooze writes that Europe "unwisely terminated" them, "clearing the field for the Chinese who seized the market." China's "huge strides" technologically have made its industry what by any standard can only be described as "world beating." Western criticism that Chinese industrial policy "challenges jobs in the West" and "destabilises our political systems, our democracies," Tooze says, "should just be recognised as what it is: it's ultimately a political argument, not an economic argument." Reflecting on recent history, Tooze explains, "There was an original China shock of the early 2000s and there is now a phase 2 China shock coming for certain very high-end manufacturing." The lesson is that "if we, for once, counted the benefit to consumers rather than just the losses to producers," the balance sheet did not provide grounds for war in the early 2000s and still should not today. After all, "The really deeply alarming thing is that the atomic card is back," and it would be most wise to deescalate tensions rather than fuel them with debates that are political rather than economic.

Nye Examines US History of International Activism vs. Isolationism to Frame Trump's Choices

In “Anticipating Trump’s Foreign Policy,” **Joseph S. Nye, Jr.** (Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus, Harvard Kennedy School) [examines](#) how President-elect Donald Trump may reshape America’s role in the world in *Project Syndicate*. Nye considers how Trump’s embrace of unpredictability, combined with his “America First” rhetoric, recalls America’s history of oscillating between global activism and more insular approaches to foreign policy. Nye draws on earlier traditions—Woodrow Wilson’s push to secure democracy worldwide, John F. Kennedy’s Peace Corps outreach, and George W. Bush’s democracy-promotion agenda—and contrasts them with Trump’s “city-on-the-hill” posture, which historically favors national priorities above universal ideals. By examining these shifts in US foreign-policy strategy over time, Nye presents the choice facing US policymakers in the second Trump administration: whether to uphold long-standing alliances and multilateral commitments or to pivot toward tariffs, selective alliances, and transactional diplomacy.

Gewirtz Finishes Four Years in Biden Administration Working on China

Julian Gewirtz (Former Senior Director for China and Taiwan Affairs, National Security Council) recently left government service as part of the presidential transition. The author of *Never Turn Back: China and the Forbidden History of the 1980s*, a history of the cautious opening of Chinese society in the early 1980s, Gewirtz served in the State Department as Deputy Coordinator for Global China Affairs before joining the National Security Council. *Never Turn Back* has been praised as “The definitive book on China in the 1980s” and “Exceptionally well-researched,” and Gewirtz’s argument—that a more liberal China was and still is possible—has resonated among historians and policymakers alike, helping to shape both policy towards China and scholarship about it.

Gavin Emphasizes Value of “Sorting Out What Really Matters” When Applying History

In his introduction to the latest issue of the *Texas National Security Review*, published on the heels of the presidential election, **Francis J. Gavin** (Giovanni Agnelli Distinguished Professor, Johns Hopkins SAIS) [writes](#) that in “Seeking solace and insight, I do what historians always do: return to the past.” However, he finds that “This exercise quickly dispels any nostalgia for a supposedly halcyon golden age of American politics.” According to Gavin, it was the first contested presidential election in 1796 that was “perhaps the nastiest,” making it so that “Vituperative, polarized politics, with candidates and parties trading invectives and accusations of treason, have been more the rule than the exception ever since.” Gavin advises Applied Historians to think critically about “how we remember the past.” Andrew Jackson, the most common presidential analog for Trump, is also remembered as Franklin Roosevelt’s hero. “Both were presidents who, like Trump today, inspired intense levels of both adoration and fear and loathing.” Yet, Gavin writes that these comparisons are not “to suggest any easy parallels or comparisons to our current world” but rather to “caution us against over-confidence in our ability to identify what contemporary factors and forces will matter most in the future, while also pushing against romanticizing a fantasy version of the past.” Gavin also [spoke](#) at Stanford University’s Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies in a seminar titled “Thinking Historically – A Guide to Statecraft and Strategy.”

Walt Warns that Intimidation in International Relations Rarely Succeeds

In “Trump Can’t Bully the Entire World,” **Stephen M. Walt** (Robert and Renee Belfer Professor of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School) [contends](#) that threats and intimidation alone rarely secure enduring foreign-policy gains. Drawing lessons from the 1990s—when US leaders assumed unmatched global power—Walt shows how other nations often push back together against domineering American tactics, undercutting the would-be enforcer’s influence. Previously, the United States combined its formidable might with alliances and promoted shared values, reducing foreign resistance to its international actions and agenda. Now, Walt warns that a direct, transactional posture under Donald Trump risks alienating partners and prompting them to form new coalitions or simply stall on obligations. History illustrates that while intimidation can elicit symbolic concessions, it seldom produces

stable outcomes. Instead, a barrage of demands and penalties may lead to isolation or crises—outcomes he believes the new administration is ill-prepared to confront if the international environment turns openly hostile.

Simms Warns of Consequences from Europe's Failure to Invest in Defense

Brendan Simms (Professor of the History of International Relations, University of Cambridge), writing in *UnHerd*, [compares](#) Europe's current lack of geopolitical ambition to southern Italy's lazy acceptance of Italian unification, which amounted to the conquest of the south by the north. "What Sicilians want from politics is 'sleep and they will always hate anyone who tries to wake them,'" Simms writes, quoting the 1958 Italian novel *The Leopard*. Simms writes that Europe has chosen to abstain from competing in modern geopolitics. It has lost its economic edge and—despite promises to revolutionize its defense outlays—it remains an American security protectorate. Simms argues Europe has two avenues for major change: it could build itself into a stronger geopolitical force as a federalized Europe, or the individual European countries could increase their defense efforts within NATO. Unfortunately, Simms writes, Europeans have decided against fundamental reform because, like Sicilians, “they prefer the rest of oblivion to the effort of action.” Simms warns: “While the continent sleeps, things are changing, and will continue to change, just not for the better.”

Inboden Reflects on Carter's Mixed Legacy of Failed Presidency and Flourishing Post-Presidency

William Inboden (Director, University of Florida's Hamilton Center) [commemorates](#) the late Jimmy Carter—“America's oldest ex-president”—in *World*, noting the popular view that Carter's single term was a failure eclipsed by a long life in retirement full of humanitarian achievements. Inboden demonstrates that neither assessment fully captures Carter's complexity, emphasizing the 39th president's devout faith, genuine moral commitments, and willingness to learn from his foreign-policy missteps. Carter's major triumph, the 1978 Camp David Accords, endures today as a rare, stable peace treaty in the Middle East. Yet, Inboden argues, Carter's early neglect of military preparedness emboldened the Soviet Union, while his

diplomatic misadventures, such as attempts to personally broker deals with authoritarian regimes, undermined his successors from Reagan through Biden. Even after his loss to Ronald Reagan in 1980, Carter's four decades of ex-presidency brought devoted volunteerism, grassroots diplomacy, and the founding of The Carter Center, which advocated for human rights and monitored elections worldwide. However, Inboden also recounts how Carter's ill-timed freelance negotiations abroad—attempting to forge agreements with figures like Saddam Hussein and Kim Il Sung—often caused headaches for future administrations. Altogether, Carter's presidency and post-presidency, Inboden argues, provide enduring and often overlooked lessons for his successors in the Oval Office.

Gage Examines Kash Patel's Nomination as FBI Director Through a Hoover-Era Lens

Writing in *The New Yorker*, **Beverly Gage** (John Lewis Gaddis Professor of History, Yale University) [explores](#) Donald Trump's plan to appoint Kash Patel as FBI director and dispels easy parallels between Patel and J. Edgar Hoover, whose biography she published in 2022. Despite Hoover's egregious civil-liberties violations—most notoriously the surveillance of Martin Luther King, Jr.—he was, Gage argues, an institutional builder who cherished the FBI's independence, believing in a (selective) nonpartisanship. Patel, by contrast, appears intent on turning the FBI into a partisan weapon that secures Trump's power and undermines the Bureau's own independent standing and legitimacy. Patel's book, *Government Gangsters*, depicts top FBI officials as leftist “mandarins” bent on destroying the country, revealing an agenda more focused on purging the Bureau than on preserving its institutional strength. Even if Patel's goals are ultimately thwarted, the resulting struggle is likely to erode public trust in the Bureau and leave its work more politicized, fulfilling Patel's broader ambition to “expose” the so-called deep state, writes Gage.

Herman Outlines “The World War II Lesson for DOGE” in *Wall Street Journal*

If the Trump administration successfully applies lessons learned from the private sector to transform the federal government, “Americans will witness the most significant change in the operation and philosophy of governance in 120 years,”

[writes](#) **Arthur Herman** (Senior Fellow and Director, Quantum Alliance Initiative at The Hudson Institute). “Fortunately, the precedent for this kind of transformation occurred more than 70 years ago, when American private industry mobilized to win World War II.” In 1940, Franklin Roosevelt gave General Motors President William Knudsen 18 months to “mobilize enough of American industry to produce the greatest outpouring of modern weaponry the world had ever seen.” Today, Herman recommends President Trump and Elon Musk must take three steps to revive “what Knudsen and Roosevelt called ‘the arsenal of democracy.’” First, seek out the most productive industries and business entities. Second, balance risk with efficiency to focus on results instead of the process. Third, create incentives for innovation as effectively as the private sector does.

Van Evera Argues Great Powers are Historically their Own Worst Enemies in *Newsweek*

Has World War III already begun? Amid the return of great power competition, notable figures in intelligence, finance, and politics have started suggesting that it has. *Newsweek* put the question to a panel of experts, among them **Stephen Van Evera** (Professor of Political Science Emeritus, MIT). He [argues](#) that WWIII has not yet started—“And it won’t start soon as long as the United States adopts prudent policies toward the world’s other major powers, China and Russia.” He explains that great power conflict generally occurs due to one power exaggerating the threat posed by another, responding with “unwarranted belligerence,” and provoking the formation of “a powerful countervailing alliance that destroys it.” This has been the cause of seven of the eight cases of complete great power defeat he identifies since the 1790s—France in 1815 and 1870, Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1918, and Germany, Italy and Japan in 1945. The defeat of France in 1940 is “the sole instance since well before the French Revolution (1789) in which a major power experienced conquest that it did not provoke by its own unwise belligerence.” The lesson? As long as the US can refrain from creating a truly existential threat through unnecessary provocations, it will be safe from great power war.

Radchenko and Alperovitch Evoke Nixon’s China Gamble to Rethink Diplomacy with Pyongyang

In “Trump-Kim, Part II, Could Shake Up the World,” **Sergey Radchenko** (Wilson E. Schmidt Distinguished Professor, John Hopkins SAIS) and **Dmitri Alperovitch** (Chairman, Silverado Policy Accelerator) [draw on](#) Cold War precedents—especially America’s 1970s outreach to Mao’s China—to argue for a fresh American approach to North Korea. The authors recall how President Richard Nixon’s diplomatic gamble, despite profound ideological differences between him and Chairman Mao Zedong, helped Washington gain leverage against the Soviet Union. They suggest Donald Trump’s renewed contact with Kim Jong-un could similarly exploit historical Sino-Russian tensions and disrupt North Korea’s alignment with Beijing and Moscow. Alperovitch and Radchenko cite earlier Kim family attempts to balance between rival patrons, emphasizing Pyongyang’s deep-seated mistrust of outside powers. Taking a cue from the past, they propose that partial sanctions relief, a formal peace treaty, and limited nuclear concessions—not an immediate push for full denuclearization—might yield a more durable breakthrough, reminiscent of Nixon’s pivotal overture to China.

Rosenwald Says Democrats Should Learn from Bill Clinton's Use of Media in *MSNBC* Op-Ed

“The history of Democrats trying to grapple with conservative talk radio suggests that a grand strategy for liberal media will have two key prongs,” [writes Brian Rosenwald](#) (Scholar in Residence, Partnership for Effective Public Administration and Leadership Ethics, University of Pennsylvania). First, put “Democratic guests on the types of male-focused podcasts that Trump targeted.” Second, create “well-funded liberal shows that focus on entertainment, not advancing political goals.” Rosenwald highlights one exemplary predecessor: Bill Clinton, “the first Democrat to recognize the importance and potential of talk radio.” Clinton successfully leveraged the medium in 1992 and continued building outreach upon entering office. Republicans, however, won a majority in the House despite Clinton’s “presidential radio blitz before the 1994 midterm elections.” Democrats tried expanding talk radio to recover from the defeat, but the party lost its grasp on the medium’s growing importance over time. The 2004 debuts of the Air America radio network and Democracy Radio were Democratic initiatives that soon lost steam as well, given the lack of financial support and sustained engagement. Today, podcasts and streaming programs give the Democratic party a new chance—that is, if candidates “demonstrate to voters that they can shine in hostile interviews and engage with people with whom they disagree” and if hosts can “focus on creating engaging, authentic, entertaining programs” instead of advancing political goals.

Walton And Quinlan Reveal Longstanding History of Supply Chain Sabotage and Urge a Collaborative Approach Today

Writing in [Foreign Policy](#), **Calder Walton** (Assistant Director, Harvard’s Applied History and Intelligence Projects) and **Kevin Quinlan** (Principal Engagement Lead, Altana) chronicle decades of espionage and sabotage aimed at adversaries’ supply chains—from Cold War operations like the CIA’s rigged Crypto AG cipher machines and “INTERING” to the modern era’s digital breaches such as Russia’s 2020 SolarWinds hack. They argue that while the Soviet Union was never an actual economic threat, China’s interlocked state-commercial system poses a far more formidable challenge for the United States, fusing national, corporate, and military strategies to surpass Western powers in emerging technologies, with Israel’s recent sabotage of Hezbollah pagers a harbinger of what is likely to come. Walton and Quinlan argue for a “whole-of-society” response to confront China’s integrated

approach, urging US policymakers to treat private companies as strategic partners rather than mere vendors. Urging policymakers to look to history for guidance in navigating supply chain challenges, they conclude that “Chinese policymakers, in other words, seem to have a greater appreciation for the history of supply chain sabotage. The US government would benefit from a greater appreciation of the forms of sabotage that worked successfully in the past, and of the changes in supply chains, and the tactics of their adversaries, that have occurred in the interim.” Walton’s 2023 book *SPIES: The Epic Intelligence War Between East and West* was also the subject of an *H-Diplo* roundtable [review](#) last month, with reviewers praising it as a major contribution to the study of the Cold War.

Ledford Highlights Importance of Latin America for America’s Global Strategy

In “America Must Put The ‘Americas First,’” an essay for the Hoover History Lab, **Joseph A. Ledford** (Hoover Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) [argues](#) that US foreign policy must prioritize strong economic, diplomatic, and security ties with Latin America and the Caribbean. Drawing lessons from George Shultz and Ronald Reagan, he highlights how neighborhood policy—regular engagement and “gardening” among regional partners—anchors America’s broader global strategy at the time of competition with the Soviet Union. Instead, by neglecting its own hemisphere, the US invites adversaries such as China and Russia to expand their influence, undermining American leadership. Looking to the next administration, Ledford urges policymakers to remember Schultz’s maxim that “Foreign policy starts in your own neighborhood”—renewed visits, binding economic initiatives, and integrated security cooperation are all vital to containing threats from transnational cartels to great-power rivals.

Messingschlager Reviews Westad and Chen’s *The Great Transformation*

In a review of *The Great Transformation*, **Stefan Messingschlager** (Research Associate at the Chair of Modern History, Helmut Schmidt University, Hamburg) [highlights](#) how **Odd Arne Westad** (Elihu Professor of History, Yale University) and **Chen Jian** (Hu Shih Emeritus Professor of History and China–US Relations, Cornell

University) trace China's remarkable pivot from Maoist autarky to market-driven power during the "long 1970s" (1969–1984). Messingschlager underscores the authors' depiction of Deng Xiaoping's role as the principal architect of China's modernization. Even as ideological conservatives resisted reform, Deng guided the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and forged links with foreign investors—both of which propelled an economic boom. Yet, as the review notes, Westad and Chen's book also highlights the costs of this global integration: in 1989, the violent clampdown on Tiananmen protesters revealed the regime's readiness to subordinate political liberalization to strict party control. By integrating domestic crises and geopolitical realignments in one sweeping narrative, Messingschlager concludes that *The Great Transformation* offers a compelling new lens on China's distinctive state-led path since the 1980s.

Wolf Underscores “Benefits and Limits of Privatisation” from UK Experience in *Financial Times*

Martin Wolf (Chief Economics Commentator, *Financial Times*) [writes](#) that we can learn from the UK's recent history in privatizing publicly owned industries. The UK became a pioneer four decades ago when it began privatizing a few large businesses and then, over the next 40 years, transitioned from privatizing monopolies or quasi-monopolies to contracting with private suppliers of public services. “The experience has now been lengthy and varied enough to learn some important lessons,” writes Wolf, “the most important of which is that the basic principles of economics matter.” The provision of water and railways during the Margaret Thatcher years illustrated problematic examples of “privatisation of public services that are not natural monopolies, but that also do not have informed customers able to look after themselves and, if necessary, shift to other suppliers.” Wolf concludes with questions for readers: “Are profit-seeking businesses really the best way to provide such services? Would it not be better if local authorities did so? Or, given the known failures of the latter, might it be wiser to consider some form of mutual or charitable provision as an alternative?”

Schadlow Outlines a Reindustrialization Agenda for Trump's Second Term

In a recent essay, **Nadia Schadow** (Former Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategy, National Security Council) [underscores](#) the national and economic security imperatives of “reindustrializing” the United States—particularly as Beijing’s export restrictions on critical minerals highlight American vulnerabilities. Schadow contends that while a robust industrial policy harkens back to Alexander Hamilton’s vision of domestic manufacturing as essential for sovereignty, today’s “manufacturing trifecta” demands more technology-driven approaches—streamlined permitting for strategic projects, public-private partnerships to cultivate skilled workers, and a more pragmatic framework for trade and investment. Ultimately, Schadow argues, these measures would boost the United States’ “arsenal of democracy” and reestablish its historical position as a global manufacturing leader.

Bick Illuminates How History Can Help Decode “Strategic Surprises” in Syria

In *Engelsberg Ideas*, **Alexander Bick** (Associate Professor of Practice in Public Policy, University of Virginia Batten School) [examines](#) the sudden collapse of Bashar al-Assad’s government in December 2024 in light of the history of “strategic surprise” in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Drawing on historical analogies—from Joseph Stalin’s disbelief before Hitler’s 1941 invasion, to President Obama’s early assumption that Assad’s fall was imminent—Bick illustrates how the deeply held assumptions of national governments can often mask warning signs, leading to misguided policymaking. As Bick shows, Syria has repeatedly shocked outside observers since the start of the Arab Spring, whether through the unexpected rise and fall of ISIS or Russia’s unexpected and consequential military intervention in 2015. For Bick, these episodes illustrate a deeper pattern: strategic surprises often stem less from missing information than from leaders’ entrenched mental maps—a dynamic he argues the United States and its allies must correct by methodically questioning their own assumptions and more rigorously applying history to contemporary decision-making.

Farrell Traces “The Rise and Fall of Economic Statecraft” in *Foreign Affairs*

Reviewing *Dollars and Dominion: U.S. Bankers and the Making of a Superpower* by **Mary Bridges** (Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard's Belfer Center) and *Chokepoints: American Power in the Age of Economic Warfare* by **Edward Fishman** (Adjunct Professor of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University), **Henry Farrell** (Stavros Niarchos Foundation Agora Institute Professor of International Affairs, Johns Hopkins SAIS) [finds that](#) "Bridges's account may prove more relevant in the near future," given that Trump will not value technocrats' expertise in economic policymaking as Fishman does in *Chokepoints*. Farrell draws from *Dollars and Dominion* the illustrative historical analogy between the early twentieth century United States and China today. "Just as the United States resented the United Kingdom's grasp on global finance in the early twentieth century, China resents US power today and is trying to build its own alternative systems." Ultimately, however, "China's attempt to reorient the world economy around itself is sometimes as bumbling as the United States' was a century ago . . . China's Belt and Road Initiative is less an organized plan for world domination than a machine for shoveling contracts to well-connected construction companies. If this helps build a world economy with Chinese characteristics, it will be half by accident," perhaps comparable to the "the haphazard process through which U.S. dollar dominance came into being." Bridges also [discussed](#) her book in an event at the Wilson Center, appearing on a panel with **Marc Levenson** (Independent Historian) and **Harold James** (Professor of History and International Affairs, Princeton University).

Interviews and Speeches

Spohr Proclaims "History Must Be Pursued at All Costs" in Conference Keynote

"For all of us, the past is what we inherit. We don't need to mythologize or inflate it. It is shared knowledge and it's an anchorage in the present." At the annual conference of the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe this year, titled "History in Crise(e)s?" Kristina Spohr (Professor of International History, London School of Economics and Political Science) [delivered](#) the keynote address, "History at all costs?" She first highlights examples of "manipulation we have seen in recent years" from world leaders—Viktor Orban's interest in Hungary's history as veiling "his fiercely ethnonationalist and Euroskeptical political agenda;" Boris Johnson's

comparison of “the European Union with the continental dominion of the Nazis” as part of the Brexit campaign; and Vladimir Putin’s “special operation” to “de-Nazify and free Ukraine once more to bring those lands and peoples home into Mother Russia’s fold—in short, to repeat the victory of 1945.” Spohr’s takeaway is that “we must not be misled by those who willfully weaponize history for their political ends.” Recognizing the occasion of Finland’s Independence Day during her keynote, Spohr argues that “it is a bad analogy to try and sell” the Finland precedent “as something ideal to be sought” for Ukraine. “Neutrality was not a choice, but it was a necessity.” Spohr concludes, “the lesson surely is to uphold the rights and the norms and to learn, when we look back several hundred years, that just appeasing Russia is not enough. It does not work. You need to be clear about your own norms, rights, and principles to which, incidentally, Russia itself signed up to in 1975, and again, also in the Paris Charter of 1990.” However, she does not pause to ask how Ukrainians would vote if they were offered an option to become the Finland of the 21st century.

Toft Discusses New Book *Civil Wars: A Very Short Introduction* with Tuft University’s Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy

Drawing from examples of civil war over millennia, “from Mesopotamia to the English Civil War through to Chechnya in the 1990s and Sudan today,” **Monica Duffy Toft** (Academic Dean, Professor of International Politics, Tufts Fletcher School) [concludes](#) in her new book that “The issues people fight over have been plaguing humanity since time immemorial: ideas around power, resources, and emotions.” From her research, Toft finds that academics “can identify likelihoods” for when civil war may emerge by “looking at structural factors: ethnic polarization, elite factionalization, poverty.” When asked to apply these criteria to the world today, Toft says, “One of the countries that makes me nervous is the United States. If you look at the indicators of the United States, they’re there.” Recent history includes several examples of developed societies that have nonetheless fallen into civil war, including Yugoslavia, Syria, and Chechnya. The lesson? “We do not want to underestimate the ability of human societies to decivilize. It seems crazy that a society would undermine its economic development, constitutional protections, safeguards of human rights, and basic civil liberties. It seems irrational but it happens time and time again.”

Sarotte Compares the Case of Ukraine to Earlier NATO Ascensions

In her conversation with **Anastasiia Lapatina** (Ukraine Fellow, *Lawfare*) on “Ukraine’s Past and Future with NATO,” **Mary Sarotte** (Visiting Fellow, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis Distinguished Professor of Historical Studies, Johns Hopkins SAIS) [discusses](#) Ukraine’s uphill battle to join NATO while its conflict with Russia remains unresolved. She points to two previous cases when countries had to thread the needle of alliance membership: Norway, which placed limits on where NATO forces and weapons could go, and West Germany, which joined NATO without giving up its claim to German unity. Sarotte suggests Ukraine might adopt a similar approach—accepting constraints on permanent military infrastructure while insisting any division of its territory is only temporary. Though she calls the idea imperfect and a last resort, Sarotte emphasizes it could stop Russia’s current advance by giving Ukraine a firm defensive umbrella and, in the long run, preserve hopes of full reunification.

Gilman Advances “Planetary Thinking” Proposal for Today’s Global Crises in *Global Governance Futures*

Nils Gilman (Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President, Berggruen Institute) and **Jonathan Blake** (Associate Director of Programs, Berggruen Institute) [explain](#) on the *Global Governance Futures* podcast that they wrote *Children of a Modest Star: Planetary Thinking for an Age of Crises* in response, most immediately, to COVID-19. They say they witnessed “the abject failure of the systems of global governance to effectively address the pandemic.” Gilman and Blake’s thesis of “planetary thinking” suggests now is the time to move beyond nationalist, state-centered governance and embrace humanity’s interconnectedness with one another across borders and with ecological and biogeochemical systems across the planet. One “protoplanetary institution” Gilman cites as a historical analogy is the International Atomic Energy Agency, the functional scope of which expanded in 1962 so that international technocrats could inspect countries’ nuclear facilities around the world on behalf of the agency. “The reason why I fixated on the date 1962 is that’s the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis,” Gilman says, adding that “the prospect of almost coming to the brink of a nuclear catastrophe concentrated the minds of people in Washington and in Moscow to say, ‘We need to prevent proliferation... we’re willing to give up even slices of our own sovereignty in order to protect ourselves from the prospect of this kind of planetary scale calamity.’”

Miller Outlines How the US Can Retain its Edge in AI

On *ChinaTalk: AI Geopolitics in O3's Age*, **Chris Miller** (Professor of International History, Tufts Fletcher School) [explains](#) how lessons from earlier contests over microelectronics—especially during the Cold War—can guide America's response to AI breakthroughs like OpenAI's "O3" reasoning model. He notes that nations became microchip leaders by assembling strong industrial capacity, securing reliable supply chains, and sustaining major research programs. Now, a similar approach is needed to ensure the United States remains ahead in AI hardware and algorithm development, rather than letting potential rivals—such as China—catch up. Drawing parallels to the era when the US fueled semiconductor innovation, Miller argues that policymakers should not repeat mistakes of neglecting manufacturing expertise or underestimating the cost of cutting-edge science. His main point: America must treat O3's success as a call to invest in advanced chips and research in order to maintain its edge in this next wave of global technology competition.

Dell Emphasizes History's Importance in Economics in Yale Law School Lecture

For the John R. Raben/Sullivan & Cromwell Fellowship Lecture at Yale Law School, **Melissa Dell** (Andrew E. Furer Professor of Economics, Harvard University) [illustrates](#) "how history conditions the path of economic development" through the literature of persistence: "suppose there was some political or economic system that was enforced hundreds of years ago, and we find that it matters for economic outcomes today." She shares two of her historical research studies to demonstrate channels of persistence, one of which took place in Peru. In Peruvian districts subjected to forced labor, mining silver and mercury for the Spanish empire between 1573 and 1812, Dell found that people "today are much more likely to be subsistence farmers," they have "lower household consumption today," and the "children living in communities that were once subjected to this forced labor draft... are more likely to have stunted growth today." Dell also co-authored an updated study, [published](#) in December in Cornell University's *arXiv*, that "introduces News Déjà Vu, a novel semantic search tool that leverages transformer large language models and a bi-encoder approach to identify historical news articles that are most similar to modern news queries." The authors describe it as "a powerful tool for exploring parallels in how people have perceived past and present." To sum what has motivated all these economic research projects, Dell quotes the late Nobel

economist Robert Solow: “The part of economics that is independent of history and social context is not only small but dull.”

Brinkley Uses Counterfactual Analysis to Discuss Biden’s Legacy

Douglas Brinkley (Katherine Tsanoff Brown Chair in Humanities and Professor of History, Rice University) employs counterfactual analysis, a valuable method from the Applied History toolbox, to [discuss](#) how Biden may be remembered by historians. On a podcast episode of *Somebody’s Gotta Win with Tara Palmeri*, Brinkley argues, “Biden has a different view of what’s happened in this past year than perhaps historians, journalists and other commentators, because the Biden view of it is he was doing swimmingly well.” Referring to historical echoes of intraparty disagreement, Brinkley raises Gerald Ford’s “anger at Ronald Reagan” and feeling that “the conservatives were abandoning him” within the Republican Party in 1976, as well as Jimmy Carter’s dismay with “Ted Kennedy’s challenge of him, meaning damaging and denting him” in 1980. Ultimately, Brinkley maintains that Biden’s “legacy was going to be determined on whether Kamala Harris won.” If she had won, “We would be looking at inaugural here where Biden is lionized,” but “with Trump winning, the big loser becomes Biden,” and now “Biden is being talked about with cognitive decline and screwing up the Democratic Party and leading a leadership void. So, I think his legacy was tied to the election. It didn’t turn out well.” In the *New York Times*, on the day of President Carter’s passing, Brinkley, a Carter biographer, also [reflects](#) on the former president’s life as a “voracious reader.”

Jobs and Opportunities

Applications Now Open for the Clements Center for National Security’s 2025 Summer Seminar in History and Statecraft

The [Clements Center for National Security](#) at the University of Texas at Austin seeks applications from advanced doctoral students in history, political science, or related fields interested in careers in either academia or policymaking for their 2025

Summer Seminar, held from July 13 to July 18. The seminar will feature in-depth discussions with top scholars, senior policymakers, and intelligence officials, as well as sessions devoted to academic publishing and strategies for approaching the academic and policy job markets. Participants will explore the relationship between historical insights and national security policymaking. Each day will also have recreational time for participants to enjoy the mountain surroundings. This program is open to non-UT students only. The Clements Center will cover all travel and related expenses for participants. Visit the [Summer Seminar page](#) to learn more about the program and for application details. Application deadline is Sunday, February 23, 2025.

Texas National Security Review Hiring Executive Editor

[The Texas National Security Review](#) (TNSR) is seeking an Executive Editor to help lead one of the nation's premier journals on national and international security. The Executive Editor collaborates closely with the leadership of the University of Texas at Austin's [Clements Center for National Security](#) and [Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law](#), along with the journal's editor-in-chief, the chair of the editorial board, and members of both the editorial and advisory board. To learn more and apply, [click here](#).

Texas National Security Review Hiring Digital & Technical Manager

[The Texas National Security Review](#) (TNSR) is seeking a Digital and Technical Manager to oversee all technical and digital aspects of the TNSR journal and the Horns of a Dilemma podcast. The person holding this position will manage the print and online editions of TNSR, ensure consistent and engaging social media and web presence, and coordinate the production, editing, and promotion of the accompanying podcast. The successful candidate will be a technically savvy project manager capable of overseeing all digital content and coordinating publication timelines to ensure the highest quality in national security discourse. To learn more and apply, [click here](#).

Applied History Articles of the Month

[“The President Who Wasn’t There”](#) – Peggy Noonan, *Wall Street Journal*, December 26, 2024.

While the full record of the Biden administration remains to be “fully reported not by journalists but by historians,” **Peggy Noonan** (Columnist, *The Wall Street Journal*) [writes](#) that the initial story of the Biden White House seems to eerily echo one from the early 20th century: First Lady Edith Bolling Wilson and top aides’ efforts to mislead the public about Woodrow Wilson’s incapacity to lead following his own health failures in 1919. “Political parties, like people, must beware the stories they tell themselves, the stories they weave and come to believe that just are not true,” Noonan warns. “The not-true ones can get you in terrible trouble, especially the ones you use to justify your actions and that make poor personal motives seem noble.”

[“A Bible-bashing, gun-toting governor holds lessons for today”](#) – *The Economist*, December 19, 2024.

What is the lesson for American politics today from “forgotten” Governor Sidney Catts? *The Economist* [argues](#) it is that “there is nothing new under the Florida sun,” suggesting the former Florida governor—“a man of the people who grew up in luxury” and “fulminated against immigrants and reviled the media, thrilled the pious and stoked scandal and indictments”—to be a relevant historical analogue for today’s political currents. A century after Catts, US politics continues to demonstrate that “The ideal of America as a melting pot has always jostled with a view of it as a fortress. Facing change and complex problems, Americans, like many others, have sometimes looked for scapegoats and strongmen. Such populist irruptions are not fatal to democracy but part of it.”

[“Stopping ‘Endless Wars’ Is Easier Said Than Done”](#) – John Spencer, *Wall Street Journal*, December 10, 2024.

If President-elect Trump wants to realize his promise to “put an end to endless wars,” **John Spencer** (Chair of Urban Warfare Studies, Madison Policy Forum) [writes](#), the US must learn harsh lessons from its previous strategies. The United States “underestimated the Viet Cong’s determination” in Vietnam and saw its “most

advanced military force in history” falter against the Taliban’s “local knowledge, ideological fervor and steadfast resolve” in Afghanistan. According to Spencer, the “abacus fallacy” of reducing war to a numbers game and the “vampire fallacy” of relying on technology persists today, leading to the common misbelief that Kyiv would fall swiftly in February 2022. “To be successful, Mr. Trump must resist the allure of quick fixes and instead embrace strategies that reflect the unique nature of each conflict.”

[“A Surprising Historical Figure Offers a Lesson for Elon Musk and the Dept. of Government Efficiency.”](#) – Laura Ellyn Smith, *TIME*, December 3, 2024.

Recommending the incoming Trump administration to look back to a “far less remembered” predecessor, **Laura Ellyn Smith** (Assistant Teaching Professor, Arizona State University) [writes](#) that “the key to the success of Musk and Ramaswamy’s effort might be how well they learn from [William Howard] Taft’s push to make government more efficient.” Taft’s goals were not unlike Trump’s, including “cutting waste” and “expanding executive power,” but Taft “recognized that the government — and the challenges facing the U.S. — had grown far beyond the point at which a President could micromanage affairs.” Ultimately, “Taft was less concerned about the number of employees in a particular department than in streamlining work, installing the best people, and ensuring that his secretaries had removed redundancies.”

Applied History Quote of the Month

“There is little that is more important for an American citizen to know than the history and traditions of his country. Without such knowledge, he stands uncertain and defenseless before the world, knowing neither where he has come from nor where he is going. With such knowledge, he is no longer alone but

draws a strength far greater than his own
from the cumulative experience of the
past and a cumulative vision of the
future.”

John F. Kennedy, “JFK On Our Nation’s Memory,” *American Heritage*, 1962

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