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**Applied History Project Newsletter**

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The January 2025 issue of the Applied History Network Newsletter spotlights member-contributed news items for more than 400 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](mailto:igiang@hks.harvard.edu) with the subject "February Applied History Update" before Wednesday, March 5.

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

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### Brown Argues for Ambiguity in Taiwan

In *The Taiwan Story: How a Small Island Will Dictate the Global Future*, **Kerry Brown** (Professor of Chinese Studies and Director of the Lau China Institute, King's College, London) presents a case for preserving the geopolitical stalemate that has prevailed for more than 75 years. The book's final sentence asserts: "Anything else is insanity." To develop his argument, Brown explores the evolution of Taiwanese and Chinese thinking, including significant shifts since the 1972 communiqué issued by President Richard Nixon in which the United States acknowledged that all

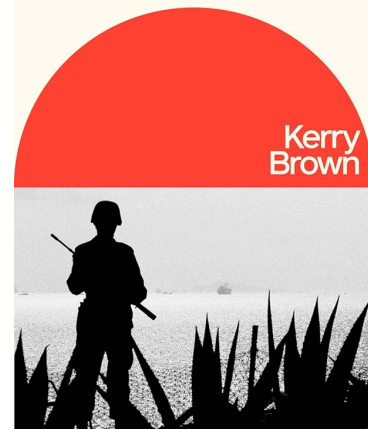
Chinese people in both Taiwan and China “maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is part of China.”

**Bill Emmott** (Former Editor, *The Economist* and Author)

[writes](#) in the *Financial Times*, “Contrary to the official Chinese line, Taiwan has not ‘been an inalienable part of China’s territory since ancient times.’” Imperial China first established control over an autonomous Taiwan in 1683, ceding it to Japan in the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895. Today, “A large majority of the 23.5mn [million] residents of what for three decades has been a flourishing democracy say they are Taiwanese, not Chinese, and that they have no desire for unification.” China has not only held to its views on Taiwan but has hardened its position. In 1972, “Mao Zedong could tell Nixon that China ‘can wait, maybe even 100 years’ for unification.” China’s current leaders, bolstered by far greater economic and military strength, “have come to express more impatience.” President Xi Jinping has stated that “this issue ‘should not be passed down generation after generation.’” Given the deeply held views on either side of the Taiwan Strait, “Brown concludes that there is simply no room for compromise as things stand.” His biggest concern “is not that either China or Taiwan will seek to force the issue, but that the vagaries of domestic American politics might do so.” Brown’s preferred diplomatic approach—that the US return to its posture of “strategic ambiguity” on whether it would intervene militarily to protect Taiwan—presents complications. “One difficulty is finding ways to restore doubt over American willingness to intervene could risk encouraging an invasion.” He concludes with a lesson familiar to Applied Historians: “Anyone who thinks the Taiwan problem can be easily solved probably hasn’t thought about it for long enough.”

## THE TAIWAN STORY

How a Small  
Island Will  
Dictate the  
Global Future



## Giles Sounds an Alarm on Post-Ukraine European Security

*Who Will Defend Europe? An Awakened Russia and a Sleeping Continent* by **Keir**

**Giles** (Senior Consulting Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Program, Chatham House)

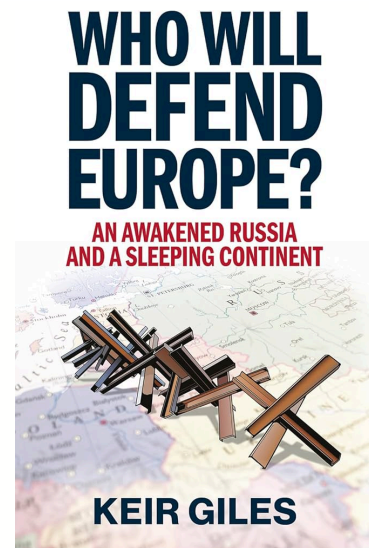
“weaves together isolationism in the United States, failures of Europe’s leadership, and the collective naivete of the West in understanding the imperialist threat of Putin’s Russia” to evaluate “the true risk of Russia to mainland Europe.” His assessment is stark. As **Luke McGee** (Former European Policy Editor, *CNN* and Journalist) [writes](#) in *Foreign Policy*, Western governments both overestimated Russia’s military strength before the conflict in Ukraine and have underestimated its residual strength since. As a result, they have not grasped the distinction between

“the immediate, unsophisticated war” in which Putin has willingly thrown “untrained and inexperienced soldiers forward to soak up Ukrainian bullets with ‘meat wave’ tactics” and his “methodical rebuilding of Russia’s armed forces to prepare the country for a war with NATO.” Further, Europe’s dependence on the US for both defense spending and for Article 5 assurances—an attack on one is an attack on all—is at risk. “As the world braces for the second Trump presidency, Europeans must now spin two calculations at once: how best to be self-sufficient in defending themselves, but also how to persuade Trump he must stay at the table and retain interest in Europe.” Giles argues that

insufficient political will among allies could cause Article 5 to “come unstuck.”

Quoting from the book, “Putin and Russia understand that they cannot defeat NATO militarily; but they may believe they can defeat NATO politically, by effectively making Article 5 redundant.” Although Giles believes “that it may not be too late for Europe,” he warns that political leaders “need to find ways to tell the public how desperate the global situation is and why commitments to allies in faraway lands matter to us all.”

McGee concludes, “The public deserves to know the truth about Russia’s threat, however uncomfortable it may be. And if voters’ response to Ukraine has told us anything, it’s that when the stakes are explained, they are disposed to do the right things, even at enormous cost to themselves.”



## Milani Probes a Weakened Iran

*Iran’s Rise and Rivalry with the US in the Middle East* by **Mohsen M. Milani** (Professor of Politics and Director, Center for Strategic and Diplomatic Studies, University of South Florida) assesses Iran’s geopolitical position in the aftermath of the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel. Now weaker than it has been since the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, “Tehran faces a strategic choice: does it go full speed for nuclear weapons, risking a pre-emptive US-Israeli military strike to destroy its underground nuclear facilities? Or does it seek a new deal with a Donald Trump-led America which would require the regime to recast its approach to regional power?” So [writes](#) **John Sawers** (Executive Chairman, Newbridge



Advisory; Former Chief, MI6; Former UK Ambassador to the UN) in the *Financial Times*. Of interest to Applied Historians, Milani both provides “a timely analysis of how Iran has built up its regional power over the last 70 years” and “gives us clues on how it might navigate” the future. Among the factors Milani considers are two alliances that date back to the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi: one with the Shias in the 1960s “as a counterforce against pan-Arabism in Lebanon;” and the other with the anti-Gamal Abdel Nasser loyalists in the North Yemen war—both of whom “the Islamic Republic turned to when it formed Hizbollah in response to Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon.” Later, “the brutal war waged by Iraq through the 1980s served to invigorate the revolution in Iran.” Although nearly half a million Iranians were killed, “Iran lost no territory and the people rallied around the regime,” leading to “the rise of the Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) which mobilized Shia militias in Iraq to engage Saddam’s forces in asymmetric warfare – a tactic they went on to use widely in the region.” Milani marks Iran’s rise to power and its sharp decline with two events, twenty years apart. The turn of the century brought the US invasion of Iraq, the prolonged war, and the “peak” of the Islamic Republic’s regional power. “Iraq was emasculated, the relationship with Syria was robust, Hizbollah was becoming a political as well as a military force in Lebanon and ideological ties were being forged with Palestinian militants.” With the October 7 attack on Israel, “the tables have been turned in Israel’s favour and Iran has paid the strategic price.” Sawers explains, “Israel is determined never again to allow a hostile militia to exist on its border and is willing to go beyond the usual rules of war to achieve that goal.” While Sawers praises Milani’s work, he expresses reservation about his assumption that “the defining issue for Iran is a power struggle with America.” Rather, in a lesson that will resonate with Applied Historians, he writes, “the highest priority of Iran’s leaders is to preserve the Islamic regime, despite the lack of consent for it among Iran’s people.” And, “Milani talks of the regime pursuing its regional strategy for ideological reasons, despite it not being in Iran’s national interests. It certainly is not in Iran’s national interest, but it has helped keep the regime in power.”

*\*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.’”*

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## Publications of Note

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### Ferguson Outlines “How to Win the New Cold War” in *Foreign Affairs*

**Niall Ferguson** (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Milbank Family Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution), adhering to his view that the US-China competition represents a Cold War II, [writes](#) that to win, Donald Trump should learn from Ronald Reagan, who “was not always a hawk.” Employing the strategy of balancing escalatory increases in defense spending and the use of force against Grenada and Libya with reducing arm sales to Taiwan and withdrawing US forces from Lebanon pressured Mikhail Gorbachev to negotiate and avoided all-out war. Ferguson’s recommendation to Trump is that he seek an agreement with Xi Jinping on nuclear disarmament and a return to the 1970s consensus on Taiwan—but “only after the United States has reestablished a position of strength. After ratcheting up frictions over trade in 2025 and 2026—which will hurt the Chinese economy more than it hurts the U.S. economy, as in 2018–19—Trump should adopt a more conciliatory stance toward China, just as Reagan dramatically softened his attitude toward the Soviet Union in his second term.”

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### Nye Asks, “What Are the BRICS Good For?” in *Project Syndicate*

**Joseph S. Nye, Jr.** (Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus, Harvard Kennedy School) [questions](#) the analogy of BRICS used by some historians “as the successor to the Cold War-era Non-Aligned Movement, whose members refused to choose between the United States and the Soviet Union.” One important distinction, according to Nye, is that “while NAM had a shared interest in resisting the US, it did not have Russia and China as founding members.” Originally comprised of Brazil,

Russia, India, and China in 2021 and becoming BRICS with the addition of South Africa, the group became BRICS+ last year, when Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) accepted invitations to join. Citing examples of internal division within another loose alliance, the UN's Group of 77, and past disputes between old and new BRICS+ member countries, Nye asks whether the expansion of the group and modest results to date "make it a new fulcrum of world politics? I think not."

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## **Inboden Reflects on Pearl Harbor as a "Shock That Shaped the American Century"**

In commemorating Pearl Harbor, **William Inboden** (Director, University of Florida's Hamilton Center) [argues](#) that Imperial Japan's 1941 attack not only ended US illusions about isolationism but also sparked a transformative era of American global leadership. Inboden notes that prewar notions of "fortress America" crumbled in the face of aggressive dictatorships abroad and that, by the end of World War II, the United States had built an unprecedented national security infrastructure—including the National Security Council, Department of Defense, and Central Intelligence Agency—and laid the groundwork for the "American Century." Pearl Harbor reminds us, Inboden writes, that alliances, a robust defense, and active global engagement remain essential to US security, even—and perhaps, especially—when weary Americans feel tempted to withdraw from the global stage.

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## **Zoellick Highlights Treasury's Past Lessons for Bessent's "Balancing Act"**

Writing for *The Wall Street Journal*, **Robert B. Zoellick** (Senior Fellow, Harvard's Belfer Center; Non-Executive Chairman, AllianceBernstein; Former President, World Bank) [draws](#) parallels between the 1985 Plaza Accord orchestrated by Treasury Secretary James Baker and today's high-stakes challenge facing Scott Bessent, Donald Trump's pick for Treasury Secretary. Zoellick underscores that Baker used targeted tariff threats and currency adjustments to defuse protectionist fervor in Congress, which enabled constructive trade deals while simultaneously demanding deficit reduction at home and growth-focused reforms abroad. Like Baker's reliance on International Monetary Fund assessments to manage global imbalances, Zoellick



urges Bessent to engage China through a credible, face-saving international forum rather than resorting to crippling tariffs. He also emphasizes that America's bloated budget deficit, if unchecked, will undermine Bessent's goal of rebalancing the US economy. Drawing on the success of the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Balanced Budget Act of 1985 and subsequent bipartisan budget caps, Zoellick advocates for a Baker-style approach: pick battles carefully, promote structural reforms, and acknowledge broader US interests in global stability to "shape events constructively."

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## **Radchenko Warns Against "The Use and Abuse of the Cuban Missile Crisis" in *Engelsberg Ideas***

"Are things worse or better today than they were during the Cuban Missile Crisis?" [asks](#) **Sergey Radchenko** (Wilson E. Schmidt Distinguished Professor, John Hopkins SAIS), who is skeptical of the common refrain that today the world is in as much danger of nuclear catastrophe as it was during the Cuban Missile Crisis. "Compared to 1962, today each side has much better command and control procedures," Radchenko argues. A consequential demonstration of the safeguards now in place occurred in the fall of 2022, when signs of Putin's potential preparation for nuclear use in Ukraine were immediately evident to the United States, enabling senior officials to react promptly and prevent miscommunication. Nevertheless, "the threat remains real, as it was in October 1962," Radchenko says, and the crisis still holds pertinent lessons for policymakers today. Nikita Khrushchev's "memorable misadventure entered history as an example of reckless policies that are best avoided among nuclear powers," and "These Cold War lessons help explain why Biden has been so cautious in handling Russia." In the end, "oddly," the Cuban Missile Crisis "made our dangerous world just a little safer and a little saner," Radchenko argues, and "That historical lesson also counts for something in our volatile world." Radchenko was also featured on a January episode of the *Engelsberg Ideas* podcast to [discuss](#) "what drives Vladimir Putin."

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## **Simms Unpacks AfD's Controversial Rhetoric Linking Hitler to "Communism"**

**Brendan Simms** (Professor of the History of International Relations, University of

Cambridge) [responds](#) in *The Telegraph* to an exchange between Elon Musk and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) leader Alice Weidel about Hitler's politics. While Weidel dismissed Hitler as "socialist" and "communist," Simms asserts this obscures the dictator's actual worldview—a brand of "national capitalism" steeped in antisemitic suspicion of global finance. He notes the irony that the AfD itself has evolved into a populist, anti-capitalist movement, echoing nationalist, anti-globalization sentiments that Hitler once deployed against the "international Jewish finance syndicate." Simms cautions that AfD figures—some of whom trivialize Nazi crimes—should not be confused with traditional conservative parties and urges Musk and other influential voices to be wary of legitimizing such far-right revisionism.

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### **Ehrhardt Proposes Concept of Civilization for Grand Strategy in *International Affairs***

"The way that certain British statesmen conceived of the term 'civilization' in the 1940s and how this shaped, in part, the thinking behind what would become NATO" is a key historical precedent for applying civilizational thinking to diplomacy and grand strategy, [writes Andrew Ehrhardt](#) (Former Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard's Belfer Center; Visiting Fellow, Kings College London's Centre for Grand Strategy ). Ehrhardt argues, "when those tasked with long-term planning look to construct organizing principles for the future, they might include, as one of several modes of thinking, considerations that tap into civilizational characteristics—in other words, reflections of a deep historical and philosophical nature." British consideration of the longer term "future of western civilization" at the beginning of the Cold War meant scrutinizing the "very purpose of Britain in Europe and the world," rather than jumping to short-term solutions. Today's policymakers can also make use of civilizational thinking: "Recognizing the weight of these ideas and values helps us, as it did British statesmen in the 1940s, to go beyond the simplistic, narrow and ultimately myopic notions of a generic national interest," Ehrhardt writes, "and towards an outlook that helps us to organize not only our own first-order principles of political and strategic thought, but also our ability to recognize these in other societies."

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## Morris Defends “Civilizational Thinking” in Reviewing *How the World Made the West*

In *How the World Made the West: A 4,000-Year History*, **Josephine Quinn** (Professor of Ancient History, Cambridge University) embarks “on a mission to take down what she calls civilizational thinking, which ‘embeds an assumption of enduring and meaningful difference between human societies that does real damage.’” Yet, **Ian Morris** (Jean and Rebecca Willard Professor of Classics, Stanford University) [writes](#), “Civilizational thinking is not a peculiarly Victorian or even Western European neurosis.” In fact, “Us-versus-them discourse” is common across all continents and eras—even as goods flowed across borders in ancient times, “pro- and anti-Babylonian factions argued over which gods to follow; in second-century B.C. Rome, Cato the Elder furiously resisted those who would import Greek culture; and in China there was a harsh Confucian backlash against Indian Buddhism.” Civilizational thinking is integral to understand “why different places are different and what to do about it”—important knowledge to have in both business and in foreign policy. Thus, while “Quinn is quite right that the rise of global perspectives has been one of the best developments in the study of premodern history in recent years” and “her core claims are largely convincing,” Morris concludes that “*How the World Made the West* is a timely reminder that globalization has been a driving force in history for at least 4,000 years. But parochialism is every bit as old as globalism, and policymakers forget that at their peril.”

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## Brands Warns of Authoritarian Alliances, Echoing Past Global Conflict Patterns, in *The Eurasian Century*

**Hal Brands** (Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins SAIS) [offers](#) a warning in *The Eurasian Century: Hot Wars, Cold Wars, and the Making of the Modern World* about what he terms the “next round” of major Eurasian conflict. Drawing on Halford Mackinder’s century-old logic of railroads shrinking the supercontinent and catalyzing imperial ambitions, Brands paints the convergence of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea as a modern analog to the alliances that fueled the world wars. Just as 20th-century empires—Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, the Soviet Union—sought Eurasian dominance only to be countered by US-anchored coalitions, Brands contends that today’s revisionist powers are forging a de facto autocratic bloc bent on undermining American-led order.

Surveying historic victories over hostile coalitions, he argues that the US must revive lessons from an earlier “long conflict”—from robust defense spending to aligned transoceanic alliances—to keep would-be conquerors from destabilizing the global system again. While the Atlantic and Pacific once insulated America’s homeland, Brands insists that only renewed vigilance, reminiscent of Cold War deterrence, can contain a new “arsenal of autocracy” taking root across the world’s pivotal landmass.

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## **Walton Delves into New Files on “Cambridge Five” Spies**

Writing in *The Cipher Brief*, **Calder Walton** (Assistant Director, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Director of Research, Harvard’s Intelligence Project) [details](#) findings from recently declassified MI5 files focused on the “Cambridge Five” group of spies —“the most notorious traitors in modern British history,” who worked their way into prominent positions in Britain’s intelligence services and funneled information to the Soviet Union. Describing the contents of these files, including a never-before-seen confession from one of the spies, Walton emphasizes that “The files lay bare how British intelligence failed to identify the ideologically motivated Soviet agents, but also how agonizingly close Britain’s services at times came to doing so.” When intelligence agencies today search for “a latter day Russian or Chinese Philby [one of the “Cambridge Five”] operating in their ranks,” Walton concludes, “history suggests the search for other missing agents can be as destructive, if not more, than the original penetration. A hostile foreign intelligence service will look on with glee as a penetrated western agency undermines itself. That is the true violence that foreign agent penetration can inflict on an intelligence community.”

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## **Bridges Explains “Infrastructure Power” in *Engelsberg Ideas***

Responding to growing concerns about the power exercised over global infrastructure by nonstate actors like Elon Musk, **Mary Bridges** (Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center) [explains](#) how this “infrastructure power” has become more “shadowy and distributed” over time. While banking power had been concentrated in the hands of individuals in the past—for example, JP Morgan’s ability to avert financial meltdown during the Panic of 1907 by summoning key players to his Manhattan brownstone—now BlackRock exercises influence through algorithms, partners, and its control of leading software platforms, making it

especially resistant to democratic or governmental oversight. An additional complicating factor in measuring “infrastructure power” today is “the knock-on effects of sustaining complex networks.” When US bankers expanded overseas in the early 1900s, “They didn’t have to be financial wizards; they just needed to be competent enough to both stave off bankruptcy and keep US government contracts.” This grew into the massive American banking structure that underlies today’s global financial order. China’s Belt and Road Initiative “could provide a similar foundation for reaping long-term advantages,” as the ports and networks Chinese firms are hired to build and the cultural exchange from the relocation of their workers create enduring ties whose effects have yet to become apparent.

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### **Cohen Warns History Shows How Trump’s Bluster Can Backfire in *The Atlantic***

In “Drop the Outrage Over Trump’s Foreign-Policy Bluster,” **Eliot A. Cohen** (Robert E. Osgood Professor, Johns Hopkins SAIS) [spotlights](#) historical American misadventures—like the failed 1775 and 1812 invasions of Canada—to show how even outrageous ideas, such as annexing Canada or buying Greenland, have echoes in US history. Cohen warns that outrage only fuels Donald Trump’s followers, who revel in his provocations. Instead, Cohen advocates another tactic: “The way to deal with the foreign-policy bombast is by turning it against a leader who leads a movement that is actually deeply divided.” Citing past fiascos, he argues that countering Trump’s unpredictability requires stressing both his record of impulsive deals and the Republican Party’s internal fractures—an approach guided by lessons from earlier American stumbles in expansionism and realpolitik.

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### **James Explores Old-World Mindsets in Reviewing Gavin’s *The Taming of Scarcity and the Problems of Plenty***

**Harold James** (Professor of History and International Affairs, Princeton University) [situates](#) **Francis Gavin’s** (Giovanni Agnelli Distinguished Professor, Johns Hopkins SAIS) *The Taming of Scarcity and the Problems of Plenty* in broader debates on grand strategy in his H-Diplo review. James highlights both the optimism of plenty and the persistent dangers of scarcity mindsets—evident, for example, in Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. James writes that Gavin contrasts an old, resource-

starved world with today's abundance-driven reality, arguing that "whereas the appropriate doctrine of the old world was realism, characteristically defined in Hobbesian terms, today's world requires a different vision of institutional adaptation and cooperation." This old-world model is "based on the dominance of scarcity, in which territorial conquest is a rational strategy to add otherwise unobtainable resources"—a worldview that precludes the cooperation necessary to manage problems on a planetary scale. Despite taking issue with some points in Gavin's argument, including his failure to recognize that today "humanity faces problems of scarcity which are not dissimilar to those of the past," James finds *The Taming of Scarcity and the Problems of Plenty* to be a "thoughtful and optimistic manifesto for our times."

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### **Schake Asks, "Has World War III Begun?" in *The Dispatch***

No, [answers](#) **Kori Schake** (Senior Fellow and Director of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute), while warning that "The international order is bifurcating into ideological spheres again, with one sphere consisting of the U.S. and countries attempting to preserve gains of freedom and prosperity from the last 35 years, and another sphere consisting of countries that consider those gains to have come at their expense or endanger their domestic control." China, Russia, and North Korea remain representative of the countries aggrieved by US-led international order since the Cold War. However, with Iran now aligned with this "axis," China and Russia have succeeded in "brutally clarifying the line between what countries the U.S. will defend and those we will not." Schake argues that finding loopholes to avoid taking up arms "ignores the strategic consequences of what would unquestionably be understood as the U.S. abandoning a commitment we had upheld for 75 years." Schake's solution? "The best, and cheapest, way to win wars is to prevent enemies from believing they could win." Specifically, reestablishing deterrence by dramatically raising defense spending, accelerating weapons production by invoking the Defense Production Act, and recruiting more troops. "If we are to prevent the corrosion of the international order, we will need to restore the credibility of our commitments." Schake also [contributed](#) to the January *H-Diplo* commentary on **Marc Trachtenberg's** ( Distinguished Research Professor and Emeriti Faculty, University of California, Los Angeles) "Is There Life after NATO?"

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## Press Places Trump's Greenland Purchase Quest in Historical Context in *The Wall Street Journal*

**Steven Press** (Associate Professor of History, Stanford University) [offers](#) a historical defense of Donald Trump's repeated interest in buying Greenland, showing that the practice of sovereignty purchases is neither unprecedented nor uniquely "Trumpian." From the 19th-century acquisitions of Florida and Alaska to Denmark's own transfers of territory to the British and Americans, Press argues that major real-estate deals—exchanging money for political control—have been recognized as legitimate under international law for centuries. Yet, Press cautions, such deals often ignored the wishes of the local population, as seen in past US land purchases where native or local voices were sidelined. Today, any negotiated sale would have to address the principle of Greenlandic self-determination. Highlighting examples such as Russia's sale of Alaska and Denmark's 1917 transfer of the Virgin Islands, Press suggests that a Trump-led deal might bring significant benefits to Greenlanders—strategic investment, economic assistance, and stronger defense ties—should they voluntarily accept such terms. Ultimately, Press concludes that the idea of buying Greenland shouldn't be dismissed as "ludicrous" but should be scrutinized with an awareness of history's cautionary tales.

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## Cave Draws Parallels Between Trumpian Expansionism and the 19th Century

As newly sworn-in president Donald Trump has made his territorial ambitions towards Greenland and Panama clear, **Damien Cave** (Global Affairs Correspondent, *The New York Times*) [underscores](#) the similarities between his rhetoric and America's global expansion in the 1800s. The 1880s and 1890s saw "a scramble for control and no single dominant nation," similar to the global environment today—especially as states in both periods faced and are facing "the threat of being locked out of territory with great economic and military importance." American expansionism led to the annexation of Guam and Puerto Rico in 1898 and more indirect rule over larger countries like the Philippines. Today's Latin American states, Cave writes, dread a return to that period, predicting a mix of the 1890s and the 1980s, "when the Cold War led Washington to meddle in many Latin American countries under the guise of fighting Communism." Ultimately, Cave concludes, the US "has less leverage than in the 1980s or the 1890s, not just because of China's rise, but because of what many nations see as America's own drift into dysfunction and debt,

coupled with the surge in development by other countries.” He notes that this expansionist period of history ended “when Germany and Italy sought a greater share of the world. The result was two world wars.”

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## **Patton Rogers and Kennedy-Pipe Assert “History Explains Trump’s Interest in Greenland” in *TIME***

Buying Greenland “would only be the latest chapter in a long history of the U.S.—and during its existence, the Soviet Union—purchasing land across the Arctic in moments of heightened tensions,” [write](#) **James Patton Rogers** (Executive Director, Brooks Tech Policy Institute, Cornell University) and **Caroline Kennedy-Pipe** (Professor of War Studies, Loughborough University) in *TIME* magazine’s *Made by History* series. “Today’s renewed interest signals that great powers are once again seeking to control vital sea routes, oceans, islands, and resources at the top of the world,” and historically, “buying territory in the Arctic has been a longstanding practice for geopolitical rivals struggling to gain an upper hand and ensure their own defense.” However, Patton Rogers and Kennedy-Pipe argue that the context that Trump faces today “make this different from 1867 with Alaska, or even the World War II moves by the U.S. to gain a defense foothold in Greenland.” Acknowledging that “Trump is no fan of” strong alliances and mutual agreements, the authors nevertheless maintain that they are key to defending the US and NATO allies.

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## **Interviews and Speeches**

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### **Kotkin Outlines Trump’s Options in Ukraine on *Uncommon Knowledge***

Speaking with **Peter Robinson** (Murdoch Distinguished Policy Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) on his *Uncommon Knowledge* series, **Stephen Kotkin** (Visiting Scholar, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Kleinheinz Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) [discusses](#) the reelection of Donald Trump and what his administration means for the war in Ukraine. While Trump is “not very invested in



Ukraine” and would “like it to go away,” he has a major problem: “Joe Biden fled in the middle of the night from Afghanistan, and his presidency never recovered.” Trump faces very different circumstances from Biden, but “if he leaves in the middle of the night, the way Biden did [in] Afghanistan, what does that do to his presidency?” Kotkin explains that Richard Nixon’s approach to the Vietnam War provides an alternate course of action. He ran into his own challenges: “He’s promising to get out [of Vietnam], and the other side says, screw you. Literally. So what does Nixon do? He decides to bomb the smithereens out of the North Vietnamese and the adjacent countries... Because he’s escalating to deescalate.” Forcing a resolution to the Ukraine War may come down to Trump following a similar strategy. Without putting sufficient pressure on Putin to “force a deal,” Kotkin concludes, it is unlikely he would want to deliver any kind of victory to the Trump administration.

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## **Burns Cites Cold War Lessons to Guide Sino-American Competition Strategy**

**Nicholas Burns** (Former US Ambassador to China; Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Politics, Harvard’s Kennedy School) [joins Dan Kurtz-Phelan](#) (Editor, *Foreign Affairs*) on *The Foreign Affairs Interview* to reflect on the historical underpinnings and future trajectory of Sino-American relations. Drawing on his extensive service, including a tenure as US Permanent Representative to NATO, Burns highlights how perceptions of American “decline” have emboldened Beijing’s assertiveness. Yet, he stresses that, much like when it confronted Soviet power, Washington has reclaimed a strategic edge—particularly through revitalized alliances in the Indo-Pacific and competitive technology policies. Burns also noted that while the Sino-Russian relationship is “as strong as it’s been probably since the 1950s,” it remains “an open question” whether it will last. Chinese academics and diplomats still remember “the unequal treaties between the Romanovs and the Qing empire... Or the division of Mongolia in the 1920s.” What distinguishes the US, Burns concludes, is that “being aligned with and allied with democratic countries” creates enduring ties—75 years long in the case of NATO—that can withstand much more than those “based on personality, as opposed to values and national interest.”

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## Tooze Assesses End of American Hegemony in *Verso Books* Interview

“I kind of think American hegemony is over—quite fundamentally so,” [says Adam Tooze](#) (Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of History, Columbia University) in a conversation with Verso Books. Tooze bases the evaluation on the “hegemonic stack in the classic period” following World War II—featuring American democracy, Hollywood cultural influence, American trade unionism backed by the Marshall Plan, its nuclear monopoly, air and sea superiority, and dominance in manufacturing, energy, oil, and the global financial system. The “big difference fundamentally” between the Biden and Trump administrations is that “the Biden people are still quite deeply attached to the vanity and the narcissism of that leadership,” rendering Biden’s administration “more out of touch with reality” compared to Trump’s. Reflecting on Biden’s legacy, Tooze says, “The very least we can say now is that we know what the dangers of the more coherent model are,” but that “We don’t yet know what dangers might come out of a second Trump administration.”

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## Goodwin Discusses Division in America in *Lunch With the FT*

In an interview with **Edward Luce** (Chief Editor, *The Financial Times*), **Doris Kearns Goodwin** (Presidential Historian) [discusses](#) parallels between the 1850s and today. After she recaps the 1856 Senate floor caning incident that made Charles Sumner out to be the north’s hero and Preston Brooks the south’s hero—which Goodwin says “makes me think of January 6”—Luce responds, “Comparing America’s wildly diverging takes on the January 2021 Capitol Hill assault to the bifurcated nation on the eve of the US civil war sounds ominous.” Goodwin replies, “My whole optimistic temperament depends on saying that we will get through it and emerge stronger.” Goodwin recalls another lesson from history’s breakthroughs in communication and technology and their significance for US presidents—Lincoln’s speeches printed in newspapers and turned into pamphlets, Roosevelt’s fireside chats broadcasted over radio, and Kennedy and Reagan’s use of television in recognition of its power. The takeaway is that “the leader who masters his day’s medium wins,” says Goodwin. “Then along comes social media and Trump has mastered that.” Goodwin also [spoke](#) with Anderson Cooper (Host, CNN) about her most recent book, *An Unfinished Love Story: A Personal History of the 1960s*.

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## Hemmer, Zelizer, and Barrett Situate Trump's Presidency in US History on *CBS News*

In an extended interview titled “Historians Discuss Trump’s Return and the Future of Politics,” **Tony Dokoupil** (Co-Anchor, CBS Mornings) [solicits](#) the best historical analogies to the current political moment for the United States. **Marsha E. Barrett** (Assistant Professor of History, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign) says Donald Trump “represents extremes in terms of how you can use presidential power. So, the same way we look to Richard Nixon, it’s sort of a measure of what a president would dare do, right?” Barrett predicts that “We’re going to think about Donald Trump in the same way.” **Julian E. Zelizer** (Malcolm Stevenson Forbes, Class of 1941 Professor of History and Public Affairs, Princeton School of Public & International Affairs) responds that, given that many believe “the pardon that President Ford did of Nixon didn’t actually heal the nation and we became divided after that pardon—not just over Ford, but over all the issues that Watergate embodied,” the analogy can be drawn to a similar conclusion with Trump: “I suspect that will be much the same.” **Nicole Hemmer** (Director, Vanderbilt University’s Rogers Center for the Study of the Presidency) agrees, asserting that, “if we are still kind of in the middle of an ongoing insurrection that is going to end with more violence and more democratic backsliding, then maybe January 6 and the pardons just look like a blip on the road to that much worse outcome.”

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## Burns Applies Friedman to Trump in Lex Fridman Interview

Speaking with **Lex Fridman** (Podcaster), **Jennifer Burns** (Associate Professor of History, Stanford University) [explains](#) findings from her recent book, *Milton Friedman: The Last Conservative*. When asked what Friedman would think of Donald Trump, Burns predicts that “He would be very alarmed by the idea of tariffs and very alarmed by the return to protectionism.” Friedman strongly believed that “part of what made the world peaceful in the second half of the 20th century” was that “the world was knit together more by trade.” Trump’s tariffs and his decision to block Nippon Steel’s investment in the US fly in the face of this principle. Additionally, “the spending plans of the Trump administration are not fiscally conservative in any way, and that was his concern, was not so much with debt but with the feeling that there’s no mechanism to stop the growth of government, that it just grows and grows

and grows.” However, Burns predicts that Friedman “would love DOGE. I think that goes without saying... he would be saying, ‘Look out for where private interests have used the state to protect themselves and clear away those types of barriers and let competition through prices guide outcomes.’”

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## **Schadlow Revisits Cold War Strategies to Inform Trump’s Foreign Policy on *The Asia Chessboard***

**Nadia Schadlow** (Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute) [sits](#) down with **Michael J. Green** (Henry A. Kissinger Chair, CSIS) for an episode of *The Asia Chessboard* podcast to dissect enduring strategic concepts shaping American grand strategy. Drawing on her experience at the Defense Department and the Smith Richardson Foundation, Schadlow explains how analysis of Soviet decision-making dynamics informed a shift from idealistic to pragmatic US policymaking, clarifying that “preeminence” is not about domination for domination’s sake but about maintaining a decisive military edge that deters rivals. Achieving this dynamic toward China, as it did toward the Soviet Union in the Cold War, she argues, remains vital for the US as it recalibrates its alliance management and threat response in Asia.

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## **Guelzo Considers “Did Trump Just Win a ‘Tectonic’ Election?” in *The Wall Street Journal***

**Allen C. Guelzo** (Thomas W. Smith Distinguished Research Scholar, Princeton University) [counts](#) three presidential elections as “tectonic”—Thomas Jefferson’s victory over John Adams in 1800, Lincoln’s election over John C. Breckinridge in 1860, and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s election over Herbert Hoover in 1932. For Donald Trump’s 2024 reelection to join this list, Guelzo defines a two-part test for his hypothesis, described in an interview with **James Taranto** (Editorial Features Editor, *The Wall Street Journal*). “First of all, there have to be repeated losses” for the Democratic party, which has not yet been the case. Second, Trump’s GOP must be “involved in some really large-scale event, which it succeeds in handling,” says Guelzo, “Maybe not elegantly, maybe not comprehensively, but at least gives the impression of having succeeded.” So far, Trump’s efforts have reminded Guelzo of Robert Taft and John Quincy Adams in their intent to disengage from foreign policy responsibilities, and of Woodrow Wilson in his attempts to dramatically reform the

federal government. While it will take years to begin testing his hypothesis, Guelzo concludes for now, “I’m still hoping for that—I’m hoping for Lincolnian charity” to bridge current political divides in the country.

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## **Rosenwald Traces Roots of “Conservative Infotainment” on *Boise State Public Radio***

Hearing “hallelujah” from attendees of Donald Trump’s campaign rallies in 2016, **Brian Rosenwald** (Scholar in Residence, Partnership for Effective Public Administration and Leadership Ethics, University of Pennsylvania) [says](#), “it sounded an awful lot to me, when I heard that, like what people said about Limbaugh in the late 80s. ‘Hey, we finally got this guy in politics who’s going to fight for us like these guys we’ve had in radio.’” Rosenwald’s historical research profiles the primary figure of Rush Limbaugh in the rise of conservative talk radio’s political influence over the last few decades. He especially notes Limbaugh’s capitalization on audiences’ appetite for entertainment, above all else, on AM radio—which is where conservative politicians dominated over liberals. Podcasts have entered the scene on top of radio, but the takeaway for Rosenwald remains that “this medium has come along and changed politics. All of those things we thought we knew about decorum and expertise and knowledge and experience, all of that goes out the window,” most vividly with Trump’s election. “Conservative infotainment,” Rosenwald concludes, and “the world that Rush Limbaugh created politically isn’t going to go anywhere.”

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## **Jobs and Opportunities**

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### **Notre Dame International Security Center (NDISC) Seeks Assistant Director and Senior Research Fellow**

The Notre Dame International Security Center (NDISC) [invites applications](#) for a unique combined administrative and research position. This appointment will be equally divided between assisting the Director and the principals with aspects of NDISC’s expanding administrative portfolio while pursuing a robust research agenda

on “Innovative Approaches to Grand Strategy.” Significant teaching opportunities may also be available. In addition to having first-rate scholarly credentials, the ideal candidate will also have an interest in applying their work to some aspect of the formulation and implementation of grand strategy. The initial appointment is for up to three years. Women and minority scholars are particularly encouraged to apply. Applications received by April 1, 2025 will receive full consideration. Please direct any further questions to Michael Desch at [mdesch@nd.edu](mailto:mdesch@nd.edu).

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## Applied History Articles of the Month

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“[Gramm and Summers: A Letter on Tariffs From Economists to Trump](#)” – Phil Gramm and Larry Summers, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 2025.

“Like our predecessors in 1930, we oppose the use of tariffs as a general tool for economic policy.” In this op-ed, **Larry Summers** (Charles W. Eliot University Professor and President Emeritus, Harvard University) and **Phil Gramm** (Nonresident Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute) [call](#) on professional economists to co-sign their letter urging Congress and the president against proposed tariffs. “In the long history of the country,” they argue, “there is little evidence to substantiate the claim that America prospers more when trade deficits fall than it does when they rise.” In fact, trade deficits often arise when foreign investment into the US increases, and the critique that foreign investment makes the country poorer “flies in the face of recorded history.” Ultimately, Summers and Gramm conclude that “A review of the economic history of our nation yields no credible evidence that broad-based tariffs have benefited the nation as a whole.”

“[Trump’s New Deal: 100 days to reverse the legacy of FDR](#)” – Niall Ferguson, *The Times*, January 31, 2025.

**Niall Ferguson** (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Milbank Family Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) [argues](#) that the best historical analog for the opening weeks of Trump’s second presidency is Franklin Delano Roosevelt. “If FDR began the vast expansion of federal agencies that continued in the 1960s and



1970s," he writes, "DJT is attempting to turn back the clock: to shrink the federal bureaucracy with a barrage of presidential decrees." Trump has long surpassed the 33 executive orders he signed in the first hundred days of his first term and is poised to beat the 99 signed by Roosevelt in 1933—the long-held record for most executive orders signed in the first hundred days of a presidency. As for where this exercise of executive power will lead the United States, however, Ferguson concludes that "The law of unintended consequences is a binding constraint, even on the most powerful man in the world."

["The Democrats' Trump Concussion"](#) – Matthew Hennessey, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 29, 2025.

"Democrats have never been so disoriented and demoralized," [writes Matthew Hennessey](#) (Deputy Editorial Features Editor, *The Wall Street Journal*), reflecting on a reversal after decades in which "the American left banked on a certain power to bend political reality." The reality is that "Resistance is futile" for the Democratic Party without sufficient votes in either chamber of Congress, according to Hennessey. Trump has accomplished "An unprecedented political comeback. Nixon, Napoleon, de Gaulle—we've rarely seen the like." Hennessey warns, though, that "Nobody rides high forever... remember how it ended for Nixon, Napoleon and de Gaulle."

["Five Great Political Comebacks"](#) – Tracy Grant, *Britannica*, January 21, 2025.

"Donald Trump's win in the 2024 U.S. presidential election has been heralded as one of the greatest political comebacks of all time," [writes Tracy Grant](#) (Senior Editor, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). "He's in good company: Richard Nixon, Winston Churchill, Napoleon, and Vladimir Lenin could all compete for that title." Trump, however, is only one of two US presidents to win nonconsecutive elections, "joining and overshadowing Grover Cleveland, who did not even make this list." In rounding up what she deems are the four other great political comebacks in history for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Grant leaves the final judgement up to readers: "Is Trump's comeback more or less jaw-dropping than those of these world leaders? You decide."

["America has an imperial presidency"](#) – *The Economist*, January 23, 2025.

*The Economist* [writes](#) that although Trump is not the only president who has sought to expand the power of the office, he “has proved adept at tearing down the old order” even if “it is unclear what will replace it.” In his second term campaign and inauguration, President Trump has venerated historical predecessor William McKinley—an “imperialist, who added Hawaii, Guam, the Philippines and Puerto Rico” to US territory; the leader and namesake of highly protectionist McKinley Tariffs of 1890; and the beneficiary of “commercial titans of the time,” such as J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller. So, “The new ‘golden age’ Mr Trump envisions thus resembles the Gilded Age, at least superficially. Mr Trump wants to be as unencumbered by 20th-century norms as McKinley was.” Yet, *The Economist* warns, “the 21st-century presidency is much more powerful” and “America’s remaining checks and balances are about to be tested.”

[“Stress Test: Can a Troubled Order Survive a Disruptive Leader?”](#) – Margaret MacMillan, *Foreign Affairs*, January 7, 2025.

Evoking historical analogues to underscore the impact Trump’s forthcoming foreign policy will have, **Margaret MacMillan** (Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Toronto and Emeritus Professor of International History, University of Oxford) [argues](#) that the safety the United States and other countries enjoy in the current international order depends on US engagement and leadership within it. “Although today’s order appears to be stronger and more resilient than its 1930s counterpart,” MacMillan writes, “in recent years, norms that were long considered inviolable have been flouted,” referring to poignant examples such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. MacMillan concludes with a grim lesson to not lose track of potential sparks for global conflict: “The danger that mistakes and misunderstandings can lead to confrontations, as they did in 1914, is always present, but today that risk appears to be growing.”

[“Trump’s Most Essential History Lesson”](#) – Stephen Sestanovich, *Foreign Policy*, January 2, 2025.

**Stephen Sestanovich** (George F. Kennan Senior Fellow for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Council on Foreign Relations) [argues](#) that to keep his promise about Ukraine, President Trump should learn from the closest moment in more than a century wherein a major war in Europe was ended by negotiation—the Balkan wars. To prevent repeating US diplomats’ “regret” of “the enfeebled state in which they had left Bosnia” following the 1995 peace conference, Trump must achieve an “even more solid deal” that “is not a mere breather between conflicts.” Before casting off

international responsibilities this term, Sestanovich writes, Trump should see that “By involving itself enough to resolve a major conflict, the United States enhanced its power and international standing.”

## Applied History Quote of the Month

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“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”

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– **Karl Marx**, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” (1852)

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