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Applied History Project Newsletter

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The February 2025 issue of the Applied History Network Newsletter spotlights member-contributed news items for more than 500 leaders in the Applied History movement across 50 institutions.

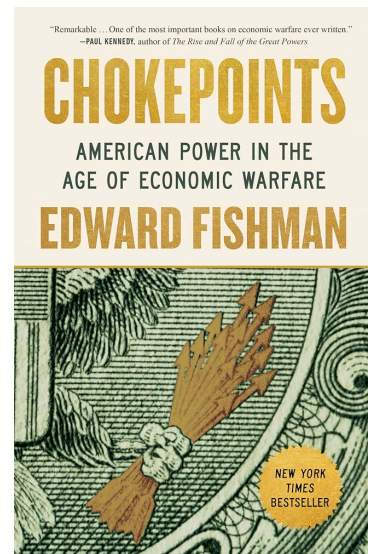
This newsletter is prepared by the Applied History Project at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center and edited by Jason Walter and Ivana Hoàng Giang. **If you would like to submit an item for next month's issue, please email it to igiang@hks.harvard.edu with the subject "March Applied History Update" before Tuesday, April 8.**

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

Fishman Examines US Economic Warfare in an Interdependent World

Chokepoints: American Power in the Age of Economic Warfare by **Edward Fishman** (Senior Research Scholar at Center on Global Policy and Adjunct Professor of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University) "is a compelling and dramatic narrative about the new shape of *geopolitics* – one in which the U.S. mobilizes its economic and financial pre-eminence for geopolitical objectives, especially in its clashes with China, Iran and Russia." So [writes](#) **Daniel Yergin** (Vice Chairman, S&P Global; Author) in *The Wall Street Journal*. While economic warfare dates back to

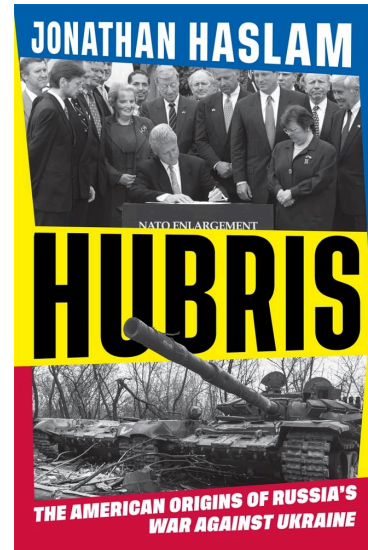
the competition between Athens and Sparta, Fishman asserts, “what makes today’s economic wars novel is the highly interdependent world economy.... Great powers once rose and survived by controlling geographic chokepoints like the Bosphorus. American power in the globalized economy relies on chokepoints of a different kind.” Foremost “is the primacy of the dollar – in global trade, investments and financial transactions – and the role in the global economy played by the major U.S. banks.” The second critical chokepoint: “The intellectual property and technical know-how that underpin a vast array of essential technologies, notably the advanced computer chips at the core of the digital economy.” These chokepoints constitute a “powerful ‘arsenal of economic weapons,’” enabling the US to deploy sanctions, export controls, and investment restrictions. With Iran as the catalyst, Fishman “dates the origin of this new age to the aftermath of 9/11 and the George W. Bush Administration’s drive to throttle terrorist funding.” His analysis contrasts the effectiveness of US economic and financial restrictions in bringing Iran to the negotiating table for a nuclear deal with the failure of US efforts to hobble the Russian economy and to end the war in Ukraine. Fishman attributes Russian resilience to three factors: the shift to a wartime economy after encountering resistance in Ukraine, which continued to generate economic growth, albeit creating a 20% inflation level; the turn to China to fill the breach with the West, for “everything from technology to civilian goods, to bullet-proof vests;” and the nature of the sanctions, which targeted finance and technology, but did not “disrupt Russia in its greatest vulnerability – oil exports.” Further, Russia evaded the imposition of a price cap per barrel by developing “a parallel trading system” outside the dollar-based system to “sell oil above the \$60 cap, most notably to China and India.” Turning to China and the US, “the most consequential battle of economic warfare,” Fishman traces the tightening in US policy from the first Trump administration to the Biden administration that resulted in a policy of denying advanced American computer chips to all Chinese companies. In a lesson for Applied Historians, Fishman points out “that, as countries seek to reduce their evident vulnerabilities, chokepoints can gradually lose their potency. China and Russia are trying to stick to rubles and yuan in their countries’ burgeoning bilateral trade. A global embrace of cryptocurrencies could further reduce the primacy of the dollar.” Yergin concludes with a sobering assessment: “We are already in the age of economic warfare; the question is whether we can avoid an era of escalation.”



Haslam Excoriates the United States on Russia

In writing *Hubris: The American Origins of Russia's War Against Ukraine*, **Jonathan Haslam** (Past George F. Kennan Professor, Institute of Advanced Studies, Princeton University; Professor Emeritus, History of International Relations, University of Cambridge) levies unqualified blame on the United States for an “unconstrained outburst of triumphalism” that recklessly ignored Russian interests and fears and helped to bring about the worst aspects of Russian nationalism and imperialism.” The expansion of NATO is the familiar, fundamental “folly.” Haslam’s telling of the underlying assumptions and misjudgments of four Presidential administrations animates the story and offers lessons for

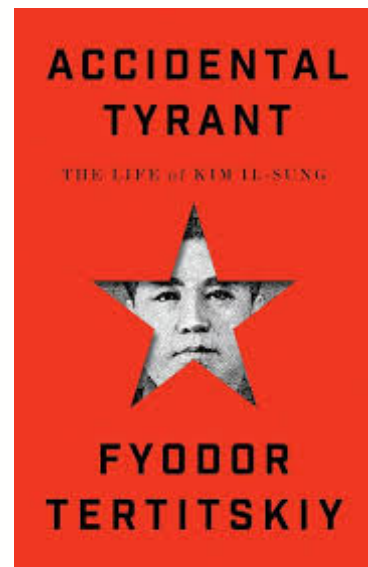
Applied Historians. **Francis P. Semper** (Assistant US Attorney, Middle District of Pennsylvania; Author) [writes](#) in the *New York Journal of Books*, “Haslam is scathing in his denunciation of Clinton’s amateurish foreign policy,” not only in his decision to move forward with the initial addition of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, despite the “best specialist advice within and outside government,” but also for “taking NATO to war in the Balkans for humanitarian purposes, a move that was sure to stoke more concern in Moscow.” Championing enlargement with seven more countries, George W. Bush “announced that NATO would soon be inviting Georgia and Ukraine to join, “a red line” for Russia’s leaders and people. “George Kennan had once written that Russia views Ukraine in the same way the United States views Pennsylvania.” Compounding the provocation, Bush was “waging a global war on terror and pledging to spread democracy throughout the Middle East and elsewhere.” Albania and Croatia joined NATO under Obama, who, according to Haslam, exacerbated Russian hostility by “embracing the so-called ‘Arab Spring’” and by joining the EU in the “Maiden Revolution” to help “Ukrainian opposition forces overthrow the elected pro-Russian Ukrainian government in 2014.” Putin then seized Crimea. Under Trump, Montenegro and North Macedonia joined the alliance. Semper also points to the alleged assurances from the West that proved hollow. “Over the course of three decades, after the Kremlin lost 14 Soviet republics, NATO doubled in size... despite repeated promises by U.S. and Western officials in the early 1990s that NATO would not move one inch closer to Russia.” Although Trump tried to improve relations with Russia, “the Russian collusion hoax... put an end to those efforts.” With Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, “the Biden administration deepened our involvement and NATO’s involvement.” In conclusion, Semper states, “Haslam is no Putin apologist, but he will undoubtedly be subjected to such claims by those



unwilling 'to see the plank' in their own eye.... But to ignore the missteps on America's part that led to Ukraine's tragedy would be to risk repeating the folly in the future. Haslam's book is a warning that we should have learned from the ancients: hubris often leads to nemesis."

Tertitskiy Portrays North Korea's First Despotic Leader

Accidental Tyrant: The Life of Kim Il-Sung by **Fyodor Tertitskiy** (Senior Research Fellow, Kookmin University, Seoul) depicts the grandfather of the current Supreme Leader, Kim Jong Un, as "the ultimate totalitarian leader of the postwar period" and "the darkest figure in Korean history," whose nearly 50-year rule provides insight into the riddle of North Korea today. In his *Financial Times* review, **Victor Mallet** (Former Asia Editor, *Financial Times*) [explains](#) that Kim Il-Sung's ascent to power was "accidental" because of improbable circumstances and "the timing of the US atomic bombs dropped on Japan." Stalin and the Soviet Communist Party engineered his installation in North Korea in 1945 after he had fought for the partisans in Manchuria and the Red Army. They helped him reinvent his past, including his leadership of "the 'Korean People's Revolutionary Army', a fictional force eventually mythologized into something so glorious that it was said to have defeated Japan in the second world war in 1945 with only minor help from the Allies." From the Soviet-led elections in 1948 when he was named Premier until he died in 1994, he and his regime changed facts about his life and North Korea "until the falsehoods reached the absolute, Orwellian levels of untruth we see today." Drawing on Korean, Russian, Chinese, and Japanese sources, Tertitskiy reconstructs a record of brutality in "one of the most repressive states in human history." The litany includes starvation, terror, the promotion of the "Juche" (driving force) ideology, and, over time, the systematic separation of his 20 million subjects "into 23 and then 71 different classes of citizens." In foreign policy, Kim launched the Korean war and "tried and failed to launch a second war in the 1960s," and "he and his descendants have sought to destabilise and defraud other countries with cyber attacks and the threat of nuclear war and conducted a foreign policy lacking even the pretense of morality." In Tertitskiy's formulation of North Korea, "Earth is a dog-eat-dog world where all relationships are of convenience and all diplomacy is about cheating your partner to maximize your profits.... Any tactical advantage gained should be immediately exploited; long-term consequences be damned." Mallet



concludes that “Kim Il Sung’s pernicious legacy persists, and not just in North Korea.”

**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

Ferguson Argues “Debt Has Always Been the Ruin of Great Powers”

Writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, **Niall Ferguson** (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Milbank Family Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) [explains](#) what he calls Ferguson’s Law: “Any great power that spends more on debt service than on defense risks ceasing to be a great power.... The crucial threshold is the point where debt service exceeds defense spending, after which the centripetal forces of the aggregate debt burden tend to pull apart the geopolitical grip of a great power.” Noting that the US reached this point last year, Ferguson warns what happened to historical great powers in similar scenarios: Habsburgian Spain defaulted on its debt several times in the 1600s and, in the span of a few decades, lost Portugal and the Netherlands; Bourbon France bankrupted itself by supporting the American Revolution, leading to its own; and the cost of the British Empire’s debt service in the early 20th century led it to put off the investment in rearmament,

providing an economic justification for the policy of appeasement. Concluding that it will take “a productivity miracle” for the US to avoid a similar fate, Ferguson points to AI as one possible way out: “The real contest of the second quarter of the 21st century may be between the much-vaunted economic promise of artificial intelligence—and history, in the form of Ferguson’s Law.”

Burns Advises Heeding Cold War Lessons on China in *The Economist*

Nicholas Burns (Former US Ambassador to China; Returning April 2025 as Roy and Barbara Goodman Family Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Relations, Harvard Kennedy School) [writes](#) in an essay for *The Economist* that the United States must heed the Cold War’s lessons for navigating its toughening contest with Xi Jinping’s China. “After three turbulent years as America’s ambassador to China, I’ve returned home reflecting on lessons that will be crucial for the future of relations between these countries—and for peace in Asia.” He underscores how Cold War-era alliances, like NATO, and domestic renewal, such as the post-1945 infrastructure boom, helped the US outcompete adversaries. Burns cautions that fixating on zero-sum competition risks repeating crises historically avoided by careful diplomacy and open communication channels, recalling how past leaders used persistent dialogue to prevent unintended conflict. Above all, he urges recommitting to proven pillars—alliances, domestic investment, and pragmatic engagement—so that today’s Sino-American rivalry stays intense but stops short of war.

Nye Contemplates “Does Globalization Have a Future?” in *Project Syndicate*

To answer this, **Joseph S. Nye, Jr.** (Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus, Harvard Kennedy School) [starts](#) with whether economic globalization can be reversed—“It has happened before,” he writes. “The nineteenth century was marked by a rapid increase in both trade and migration, but it came to a screeching halt with the outbreak of World War I. Trade as a share of total world product did not recover to its 1914 levels until nearly 1970.” The question now is whether it could happen again in the form of the United States’ decoupling from China. Nye bets, “While

security concerns may reduce bilateral trade, the sheer cost of abandoning a relationship worth more than a half-trillion dollars per year makes decoupling unlikely.” As for the future, “Long-distance interdependencies will remain a fact of life as long as humans are mobile and equipped with communication and transportation technologies.... World wars have reversed economic globalization, protectionist policies can slow it down, and international institutions have not kept pace with many of the changes now underway. But so long as we have the technologies, globalization will continue. It just may not be the beneficial kind.” Nye also [published](#) a *Newsweek* column titled “Why the U.S. Has a Better Hand Than China in the Great Power Game.”

Walt Argues “America Is Its Own Worst Enemy” in *Foreign Policy*

“It’s not unprecedented for a powerful country to simply shoot itself in the foot,” [writes](#) **Stephen M. Walt** (Robert and Renee Belfer Professor of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School). “States have good reasons to worry about foreign enemies,” he adds, “But misguided foreign or national security policies are not the only way that states can get into trouble.” Walt lists analogies from China under Mao Zedong’s “erratic and willful leadership” and “idiotic campaigns,” such as the 1958 Great Leap Forward and 1960s Cultural Revolution; the Soviet Union with Joseph Stalin’s collectivization program and Nikita Khrushchev’s 1950s “ill-conceived ‘Virgin Lands’” program; and Venezuela under the “incompetent leadership” of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro. “The blame rests almost entirely with the people in charge,” Walt writes. “Similarly, it is hard to argue that any foreign enemy has done as much harm to the United States as we have done to ourselves.” In the context of President Trump’s administration now, he asks, “What conditions make it more likely that U.S. leaders will shoot the country in the foot?” Drawing from historical lessons, one risk factor is when “leaders in these states were free to do whatever they wanted, and there were no strong institutions that could force them to correct their own mistakes.” The second condition is when these leaders also allowed “powerful ‘high modernist’ ideologies” to rule their decision-making. “The Marxism-Leninism that guided both Stalin and Mao is a perfect example, as it claimed to provide the One True Answer to society’s problems,” Walt observes. “Combine the two factors, and you get leaders who are sure of themselves, dismissive of details and disinterested in local conditions, and immune to countervailing pressures.” Walt was also [invited](#) to speak at the Boston launch of The Quincy Institute’s “Toward a Better Security Order” report.

Keyssar Weighs Current Moment Against Past US Constitutional Crises

“As a historian, I’m often asked whether such challenges to democracy, the Constitution, and the rule of law are unprecedented in U.S. history,” [writes](#) **Alex Keyssar** (Matthew W. Stirling, Jr. Professor of History and Social Policy, Harvard Kennedy School) in response to a question of whether the US is facing a constitutional crisis. “My usual answer is ‘yes’—but three revealing historical episodes come to mind” in evaluating the magnitude of the second Trump administration’s sweeping policy changes. First is the conflict over slavery and states’ rights that led to the Civil War; second is the 1930s Supreme Court declaration that the New Deal legislation was unconstitutional; and third is the failure of Congress in 1890 to pass the Federal Elections Bill to enforce key provisions of the Constitution protecting Black Americans in the South, demonstrating “the perils of Congress ignoring the Constitution.” Keyssar notes that “It is, of course, too early to offer definitive verdicts, but the first few weeks of the Trump administration may well constitute the most severe attack on the rule of law in the United States since confederate armed forces began lobbing artillery shells into Fort Sumter in 1861.”

Radchenko Asserts “China Doesn’t Want to Lead an Axis” in *Foreign Affairs*

If Chinese leaders are “looking for lessons from the last time the superpowers faced off,” **Sergey Radchenko** (Wilson E. Schmidt Distinguished Professor, Johns Hopkins SAIS) [offers](#) insight that the US pursued containment in reaction to “what it perceived as aggressive moves by Moscow” so as to prevent “underestimating Stalin’s expansionist ambitions.” Now, according to Radchenko, Beijing ought to figure out “how to reassure the United States that it is not seeking another cold war even as it actively prepares to wage one.” Today’s unprecedented economic interdependence between great powers is not enough to prevent war, Radchenko writes—“as the experience of the present and previous centuries have shown, economic ties do not preclude great-power conflict.” Chinese heads of state have long refused to rule out the use of force to unify China and Taiwan, but the “great sense of urgency” in Xi Jinping’s comments is new. “Here, too, Cold War lessons apply,” Radchenko says. Before Xi underestimates the US commitment to Taiwan,

just as Joseph Stalin miscalculated the US response to South Korea, and so long as China “does not want to proceed from learning about the Cold War to fighting a new one, the Chinese government should not act as if it does not want a dialogue with the United States.” On the other hand, “The United States should now channel Kissinger in its approach to China and refrain from lecturing Beijing about democratic values, which alarm China’s leaders and do little to improve human rights in China.” Radchenko concludes: “Just as the escalations of the Cold War were contingent and gradual, with moments of tension punctuated by efforts to set things right, the U.S.-Chinese relationship today is not beyond redemption, even if it is far along the road to confrontation.” Radchenko was also [interviewed](#) on the *Russian Roulette* podcast by CSIS in an episode titled “Lessons from Soviet Foreign Policy with Sergey Radchenko.”

Buono Sponsored by NASA to Publish “First Comprehensive Effort to Ground the Moon Treaty in History”

NASA sponsored original historical research by **Stephen Buono** (Former Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center; Assistant Professor, University of Chicago) “on the origins of the Moon Treaty in order to better explore and understand an emerging issue in space policy: future lunar governance.” Over five chapters, Buono [investigates](#) several questions with insights into contemporary debates over extraterrestrial policy, including, “What forces—legal, political, economic, and diplomatic—drove the international community to seek governance structures for the Moon?” In support of “the first comprehensive effort to ground the Moon Treaty in history” by Buono, **Charity Weeden** (Associate Administrator, Office of Technology, Policy, Strategy, NASA) writes that “Our current and future efforts to develop an optimal approach to lunar governance and coordination are informed by this” historical research. Buono’s central thesis is that these actors’ motivations were “steeped in the geopolitical and economic ideas animating the 1970s, including post-colonial movements in the Global South, the U.S.-Soviet rivalry in space, and the rise of powerful commercial space interests.” Buono concludes: “As NASA prepares to launch humans to the Moon once more, it is my humble wish that the narrative presented here proves meaningful to the administration’s continued work on space governance.”

Lepore Argues that Editorial Rigor Protects Creativity in Writing and Reporting

On the hundredth anniversary of *The New Yorker*, **Jill Lepore** (David Woods Kemper '41 Professor of American History, Harvard University) [dives](#) into the magazine's century-long tug-of-war between scribes and their gatekeepers, showing how founder Harold Wallace Ross's obsession with precise editing and a "don't-write-about-the-magazine" code shaped American literary standards. "Editing, though, is a dying art," Lepore writes, "And it's this decline that justifies breaking Harold Wallace Ross's rule about never writing about writers and never naming editors." Retracing the flamboyant battles among E.B. White, J.D. Salinger, and later *New Yorker* editors like William Shawn and Tina Brown, Lepore reveals that *The New Yorker's* famously exacting style was built by query-clutching perfectionists who balanced creative freedom with rigorous oversight. "If you were to look back to the year 1925 and read or listen to everything published on any given day—in books and magazines, in newspapers and newsletters and radio broadcasts—nearly all of it, with the heart-thumping exception of live sports broadcasts, would have gone through an editorial process," Lepore writes. "Editors, the good ones, anyway, would have considered whether what was being said was said clearly and stated fairly." Today, when social media outpaces editorial review, Lepore argues that these old-school edit wars remain a guiding precedent for preserving a writer's best voice—and keeping the wheels from falling off.

Simms Illuminates Waltz's Lasting Theoretical Impact Through Historical Examples

In his review of *Kenneth Waltz: An Intellectual Biography*, **Brendan Simms** (Professor of the History of International Relations, University of Cambridge) [highlights](#) how **Paul R. Viotti** (Professor, University of Denver) draws on archival materials, personal interviews, and historical case studies to illustrate Kenneth Waltz's lasting influence on international relations theory. By examining Waltz's emphasis on structural factors over individual agency—most famously in *Man, the State, and War* and *Theory of International Politics*—Simms highlights the tension between Waltz's broader theoretical claims and the real-world complexities revealed by historians. While Waltz "never claimed to do" a deep, archival "study of real world dilemmas and complexities faced by decision-makers," Simms argues that this would have strengthened, and perhaps changed, his arguments about nuclear

proliferation. Simms also underscores how Waltz's views on nuclear proliferation, bipolar stability, and the relative irrelevance of ideology in state behavior continue to animate contemporary debates on great-power competition, echoing timely concerns about how policymakers use theoretical frameworks when grappling with crises.

Rove Spotlights Inaccuracy of McKinley Tariff Analogy for Trump in *The Wall Street Journal*

Who is President Trump's "man crush"? **Karl Rove** (Former Deputy Chief of Staff and Senior Advisor to President George W. Bush) [writes](#) that it is not "Washington, Jefferson or Lincoln but William McKinley," and not for any other reason but tariffs. Trump claimed in his inaugural address that McKinley "made our country very rich through tariffs," but Rove argues that "the president gets McKinley wrong in important ways." The differences in economic realities then and now are the first red flags in misuse of the analogy, according to Rove. Federal spending in 1900 was only 3% of GDP versus 23% of GDP in 2024. Additionally, tariffs brought in 49% of the revenue for federal spending between 1863 and 1913. In 2024, only 1.9% of federal revenue came from tariffs. President Trump ought to note, Rove writes, that McKinley actually "told business leaders pleading for higher tariffs not to tell him what they wanted but what they needed," "returned to reciprocity after his inauguration as president," and "grabbed the chance to lower trade barriers." In his last speech before he was assassinated, McKinley said trade reciprocity agreements "are in harmony with the spirit of the times; measures of retaliation are not." Rove concludes that McKinley "recognized reciprocal low tariffs were important to U.S. prosperity. That's still true today. Let's hope his fan in the Oval Office realizes it."

Toft Warns Nuclear Risks Today Means Imperialist Ambition Carries Heavier Consequences in *The Conversation*

"From asserting that the U.S. will 'take over' the Gaza Strip, Greenland and the Panama Canal to apparently siding with Russia in its war on Ukraine, Trump's comments suggest a return to an old imperialist style of forcing foreign lands under American control," [asserts](#) **Monica Duffy Toft** (Academic Dean, Professor of International Politics, Tufts Fletcher School). The risk is that "Embracing traditional U.S. imperialism would upend the rules that have kept the globe relatively stable

since World War II.” According to Toft, this long peace can be attributed to the “decline of traditional imperialism after World War II,” which “led to a flourishing of independent nation-states.” After all, “Respect for national sovereignty has made the world more stable and less violent.” In applying this history from post-war peace, however, Toft notes that “A critical distinction between imperialism past and present is the presence of nuclear weapons.” Ultimately, “Rhetoric shapes perception, and perception influences behavior. When an American president floats acquiring foreign territories as a viable policy option, it signals to both allies and enemies that the U.S. is no longer committed to the international order that has achieved relative global stability for the past 75 years. With wars raging in the Middle East and Europe, this is a risky time for reckless rhetoric.” Toft was also [invited](#) to a panel conversation on “Achieving Durable Peace in Ukraine” hosted by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.

Brands Asserts “Trump Should Learn from Helsinki, Not Yalta” in *Bloomberg*

On the heels of the January publication of his book *The Eurasian Century: Hot Wars, Cold Wars, and the Making of the Modern World*, **Hal Brands** (Henry A. Kissinger Professor of Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins SAIS) [compares](#) the “Helsinki” versus “Yalta” models of global order in his column for *Bloomberg*. Tracing how the 1975 Helsinki Final Act underpinned a liberal international system that checked Moscow’s imperial ambitions, Brands argues that Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin are now seeking to revive a Yalta-style world of spheres of influence and unchecked authoritarian power. Brands cautions that Trump’s willingness to disregard alliances could effectively ratify this return to great power domination, recasting the globe into blocs carved out by major autocracies. Rather than revert to a Yalta-like arrangement—whose allowance of Soviet hegemony sowed conflict and repressive rule—Brands advocates renewing Helsinki’s principles. “The great successes of the liberal order — the global advance of democracy, the decline of aggression that endangers the survival of independent states, the creation of a balance of power that profoundly favors America and its allies — all resulted from a rejection of spheres-of-influence politics,” Brands writes. “They came from marrying Helsinki principles to the strength of a superpower and its friends.” Brands also [published](#) an op-ed, “History’s Revenge: America Faces the New Eurasian Threat,” with the American Enterprise Institute.

Maier Promotes “Project-State” Theory to Push Back Against Populism, Corporations, and Governance Today

In an H-Diplo Roundtable, **Anna Grzymala-Busse** (Michelle and Kevin Douglas Professor of International Studies, Stanford University), **Eric Helleiner** (Professor and University Research Chair, University of Waterloo), and **Lorenz Lüthi** (Professor of History of International Relations, McGill University) [praised](#) **Charles Maier’s** (Leverett Saltonstall Research Professor of History, Emeritus, Harvard University) recent book, *The Project-State and Its Rivals: A New History of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. Reviewers highlighted its wide-ranging reinterpretation of how four “collective agents”—the ambitious “project-state,” the “resource empire,” the “realm of governance” (foundations, think tanks, non-governmental actors), and the “web of capital”—have shaped modern politics since World War I. They also question how key factors like China’s repressive modernization efforts and non-Western state-building (e.g., Vietnam, India) fit Maier’s European- and American-centered framework. In reply, Maier clarifies that his categories are “provisional,” acknowledging that regimes such as Thatcher’s Britain or Xi’s China complicate any strict liberal-illiberal dichotomy. Emphasizing the interplay of capitalist globalization, post-1945 governance institutions, and evolving state ambitions, Maier ultimately proposes that any stable political order requires balancing the project-state’s transformative energy with the moderating power of expert-led governance and market forces—lest democracies cede ground to illiberal populism or authoritarian projects. “*The Project-State and its Rivals* thus represents more an ongoing progress report on the politics of our lifetime than a finished history,” Maier concludes in response. “But, of course, all written histories must count as provisional.”

Schadlow Suggests Trump Follow Nixon’s Footsteps in Seeking Peace in *The National Interest*

Revisiting Richard Nixon’s efforts to obtain durable peace upon taking office, **Nadia Schadlow** (Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute) [makes](#) her case for the Nixon analog to President Trump today—distinct from the “reverse-Nixon” discourse that has been popular in recent media. “The Cold War Sino-Soviet split created an opportunity for Nixon,” referring to the risk he took to engage diplomatically with China and build US

advantage over the Soviet Union. “Trump will have different opportunities—and, like Nixon, he will see opportunities where others do not.” Schadow suggests that “success in ensuring America’s enduring strengths is more likely if policies align with Nixon’s three efforts to obtain a durable peace in Vietnam,” those being “sharing responsibility”—a tenet that would become known as the Nixon Doctrine, “strength,” and “willingness to negotiate” with adversaries. “Like Richard Nixon, Donald Trump understands that periods of geopolitical reordering offer generational opportunities to update and reconfigure the world system.” Schadow concludes that “The key will be in also appreciating, like Nixon, that peace is not static and that other rivals, if given the opportunity and resources, will grow their power at the expense of ours.”

Cohen Urges a Distinctly American Lens to Understand Trump

In *The Atlantic*, **Eliot A. Cohen** (Robert E. Osgood Professor Emeritus, Johns Hopkins SAIS) [challenges](#) the tendency to cast President Donald Trump in a fascist or foreign authoritarian mold. Cohen argues that MAGA’s impulses—though erratic, cruel, and often deeply troubling—stem more from uniquely American historical trajectories than from direct analogies to Adolf Hitler or Benito Mussolini. Just as Andrew Jackson’s populism “administered cruelty” in the Trail of Tears or as Huey Long and Father Charles Coughlin harnessed demagoguery, Trump’s impulses, Cohen insists, are best explained by a long American tradition of flawed leadership and resilience, rather than by Europe’s 20th-century dictatorships. American history, Cohen concludes, offers an instructive mirror: by confronting our own past—where we have embraced both oppression and liberation—we can better understand Trump’s rise, the Republican Party’s complicity, and the pressing need to restore faith in government. “Historical analogies cause us to stare out the window,” Cohen writes, “when what we really need to do is look in the mirror.”

Clark Applies Historical Parallels to Merkel’s Post-Cold War Leadership

In his *London Review of Books* review of *Freedom: Memoirs 1954–2021* by **Angela Merkel** (Former Chancellor of Germany) and **Beate Baumann** (Office Manager, German Chancellor Angela Merkel), **Christopher Clark** (Regius Professor of History, University of Cambridge) [draws](#) on historical analogies—from Europe’s

19th-century great-power politics to the EU's modern "unfinished federalism"—to illuminate how Angela Merkel's East German upbringing and scientific pragmatism shaped her chancellorship. As Clark shows, Merkel's approach to the eurozone, refugee, and Russian crises echoes earlier eras of "balancing" statesmanship, even as today's multipolar and interlocking challenges force new forms of compromise and power-sharing. Clark's review thus frames Merkel's memoir not just as political reminiscence but also as a case study of how leaders navigate a post-Cold War Europe whose evolving structures mirror—yet depart from—historical precedents.

Hollenbeck Urges Military to Avoid Mistakes it Made with Tanks and Planes when Adopting Drones

In his article, "How to Transform the Army for Drone Warfare," Lieutenant Colonel **Neil Hollenbeck** (Army War College Fellow, Clements Center for National Security) [applies](#) historical lessons to modern military challenges, arguing that the US Army should establish provisional drone formations within existing branches rather than creating a separate Drone Corps. He argues that this approach would enable the rapid development and integration of drone capabilities, ensuring the Army effectively adapts to modern warfare. "With the airplane and the tank—the most disruptive weapons that were maturing during this same decade in the last century—the Army got it wrong in" two ways that should not be repeated with drones, according to Hollenbeck: "One would be to treat drones as an entirely new arm, to be developed and employed independently. The other would be to treat drones as tools to help other arms do what they already do better." Hollenbeck also recently [contributed](#) to a new commentary for CSIS, "Calculating the Cost-Effectiveness of Russia's Drone Strikes."

Ledford Uses History to Contextualize Trump's Hard Line on Panama Canal and China

In *Defining Ideas* for the Hoover Institution, **Joseph Ledford** (Hoover Fellow, Stanford's Hoover Institution) [situates](#) President Trump's 2025 stance on the Panama Canal within a longer arc of US hemispheric policy. Drawing parallels to Jimmy Carter-era neutrality treaties and recalling 20th-century precedents—such as Secretary of State Philander Knox's 1912 visit to Panama—Ledford argues that

Trump's "opening salvo" echoes a longstanding American desire to guard strategic chokepoints. Leveraging historical frameworks like the Monroe Doctrine and referencing the canal's earlier handover to Panama in 1999, Ledford shows how China's modern "Belt and Road" foothold resurrects concerns of foreign encroachment the US has grappled with for over a century. By examining these past treaties, diplomatic tours, and spheres-of-influence rivalries, Ledford illustrates the historical trends and beliefs guiding Trump and Secretary Marco Rubio's approach to safeguarding both canal sovereignty and US geopolitical clout. "Trump's approach may offend the sensibilities of quiet-diplomacy proponents," Ledford writes, "but his stern message registered with audiences in Beijing and within countries in Latin America and the Caribbean that court China at the expense of American interests."

Mansoor Analyzes US Attempts to Withdraw from Middle East

Peter Mansoor (Professor and General Raymond E. Mason Jr. Chair in Military History, The Ohio State University) [writes](#) about the challenges of pivoting away from the Middle East in "Vegas Rules Don't Apply: Why the United States is Continually Drawn to Engage in the Middle East" for George Washington University's *Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS)*. In analyzing the past three US presidents' attempts to "extricate itself" from the Middle East, Mansoor finds that "US engagement in the Middle East is not a bug but a feature of the state system in the region. The sooner Washington realizes this reality, the sooner it will be able to create a more enduring policy to deal with the region." By applying the history of US involvement and pivots away from the Middle East, policymakers today can learn the level of engagement, however unsavory, necessary to balance the dynamics of power in the region. "One thing, however, is clear from the last quarter century of U.S. engagement in the Middle East," Mansoor concludes. "Las Vegas rules don't apply: What happens in the region doesn't stay there."

Interviews and Speeches

Mitter Explains Greenland's Strategic Lessons Have Endured since WWII

On the *History Extra* podcast's monthly "History Behind the Headlines" edition, **Rana Mitter** (S.T. Lee Professor of US-Asia Relations, Harvard Kennedy School) [reminds](#) us that Washington's interest in Greenland long predates Donald Trump's attention-grabbing overtures. Even in World War II, US planners worried that Nazi-occupied Denmark could allow German forces a staging post in Greenland to threaten North America. Later, amid the early Cold War, President Harry Truman quietly explored purchasing the territory, spurred by fears of Soviet Arctic capabilities. Although the sale never materialized, the US did secure key footholds, such as the Thule Air Base. Mitter notes how Greenland's strategic location, once a Cold War battleground against the Soviets, now stokes concerns about China's expanding Arctic presence and valuable mineral resources. Lessons from those earlier debates—covert negotiations, worries over an adversary's polar reach, and the push for Arctic basing rights—still echo in modern discussions of great-power rivalry. "The idea that Greenland might be the sort of roof of the geopolitical world—the kind of point at which the Allied powers in World War II, and then the Western world in the Cold War, might essentially push back against the power of the Nazis and then the Soviets—has in a sense been carried over into the present day," Mitter says. "There's now this incipient, but very real fear in the Western world that perhaps China is going to get greater control of Greenland." Mitter also [presented](#) at an *Open to Debate* event co-presented with the *Council on Foreign Relations*, "Was Trump Right to Increase Tariffs on Chinese Imports?"

Bew Encourages Following Clement Attlee and Ernest Bevin's Pragmatism for British Foreign Policy

Delivering the inaugural lecture in Policy Exchange's "Future of the Left" series, **John Bew** (Professor of History and Foreign Policy, King's College London) [examines](#) how the postwar era shaped a British foreign-policy ethos that combined moral purpose with hard-nosed realism. Drawing on the legacies of Prime Minister Clement Attlee and his Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, Bew highlights how left-leaning governments once grappled with the stark realities of a world dominated by great-power competition and industrial mobilization. Bevin's anti-communist resolve, he explains, went hand-in-hand with the drive to harness Britain's industrial capacity and forge alliances—ultimately co-founding NATO and confronting early Cold War

challenges from the Berlin Airlift to economic reconstruction. Even as Britain confronted fiscal fragility and imperial contractions, Bevin and Attlee found ways to “build and do” rather than simply observe from the sidelines, balancing social-democratic ideals with the necessity of deterrence and global engagement. For today’s progressive politicians, Bew argues, the Bevin model offers a blueprint for countering authoritarian aggressors and recasting liberal internationalism as rooted in productive power, resilience, and broad-based prosperity. “Today we sometimes paint a picture of the world order built out of the Second World War as some sort of high ground reached in the arc towards natural justice from which we dare not fall,” Bew concludes, “but this would be to miss the major lesson of the construction of that order in the first place: that it required blood, sweat, tears, imagination, personality, decisiveness, productive power, hard power, and—as I put it in my opening remarks—the mobilization of ‘material and spiritual force.’” Bew also [published](#) a review of *The Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief, and the Future of the West* by **Alex Karp** (CEO, Palantir Technologies) and **Nicholas Zamiska** (Head of Corporate Affairs, Palantir Technologies) in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Kotkin Argues Trump Faces Choice between Afghanistan and Vietnam for Ending War in Ukraine

In an appearance on the *School of War* podcast, **Stephen Kotkin** (Visiting Scholar, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Kleinheinz Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) [argues](#) that President Donald Trump is faced with two choices for how to end the war in Ukraine. “Trump has the Afghanistan option in Ukraine,” where, left with a mess from a predecessor, he can hastily end the conflict but risk creating chaos in the process. In contrast, “the other side of the equation is Nixon in Vietnam.” This strategy entails winning the presidential election on a peace platform but then escalating to deescalate once assuming office. Kotkin concedes that “whether it’s cut and run or escalate to deescalate, those are not choices that any President would like to see as his main choices” and recognizes that in the meantime, “Trump’s got to look for another choice here—where he doesn’t absorb the blow, and yet he extricates the parties from this mutual disaster.” What might this look like in practice? Kotkin concludes with, perhaps, a third option: “We want an armistice, and we want an armistice that looks more like South Korea, one of the most successful countries in the world as an outcome for Ukraine rather than South Vietnam or rather than Afghanistan as we were alluding to earlier.”

Tooze Weighs Pros and Cons of Multipolar Reality in Transnational Institute's "State of Power 2025" Report

Nick Buxton (Knowledge Hub Coordinator, Transnational Institute) [asks Adam Tooze](#) (Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of History, Columbia University) and **Walden Bello** (International Adjunct Professor of Sociology, State University of New York at Binghamton) for implications they see from the current global "hegemonic vacuum"—in what Tooze argues has already been a multipolar world. "I don't think the twentieth century is going to be a good model for thinking about the twenty-first century, any more than the nineteenth century was a good model for thinking about the twentieth century," Tooze responds. "The future, for better and for worse is going to be more complex and more polycentric." The benefit of the world we are living in now is that "it realigns the balance of cultural, economic, technological weight with the distribution of humanity. It moves us out of the grotesque disproportion of those factors that dominated the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries towards a much more balanced and rational allocation of resources." The risks, on the other hand? "I'm most worried about war; I didn't think I would have to worry about war again," says Tooze, referring to the Cold War. "The truly terrifying thing about the current moment are the deep, powerful interests on the US side, and no doubt they're also deep and powerful on the Russian and the Chinese sides, which are increasingly committed to a tripolar nuclear arms race, as well as to control space, hypersonic [weaponry] and so on. It's not the old nuclear arms race in terms of the technologies and the fact that it's a three-player game."

Inboden Marks Ronald Reagan's Birthday and How He Shaped the GOP in *USA Today*

"When Reagan takes office, the country is very demoralized and kind of has a sense our country is broken, our best days are behind us, our economic system doesn't work anymore and the presidency itself is broken," [says William Inboden](#) (Director, University of Florida's Hamilton Center) in comments to *USA Today*. By the end of his first administration, "the economy had come 'roaring back,'" and "Reagan won reelection in 1984 in one of the biggest landslide victories in U.S. history." The 40th president's legacy, according to Inboden, is that "Almost every successful Republican politician for the next 20 or 30 years would want to say, 'I'm a

Reagan Republican.’ Even a lot of Democrats will pay tribute.” Inboden highlights Reagan’s “three-legged political stool,” consisting of “free-market trade, national security hawkishness and social conservatism,” and his introduction to the American people of the “art of the possible,” overcoming challenges to the country: “One need look only to Reagan’s role in the end of the Cold War.” The lesson for today, Inboden says, is that although “In our current era we sometimes do lose sight of the art of the possible,” it is important that “Wherever Americans are the political spectrum it’s certainly in our best interest... that we all remember the great possibilities of our country.”

Kennedy and Wilson Publish Edited Volume: *Planning for War at Sea: 400 Years of Great Power Competition*

Evan Wilson (Associate Professor, US Naval War College’s Hattendorf Historical Center) and **Paul Kennedy** (J. Richardson Dilworth Professor of History and Distinguished Fellow of the Brady-Johnson Program in Grand Strategy, Yale University) [gather](#) fifteen essays from historians and naval strategists analyzing four centuries of naval warfare, addressing questions such as, “How does this analysis inform today’s planning for future conflict?” and “Do very long periods of absence of major wars increase the likelihood of military and naval planning going badly awry when the next great conflicts occur?” The introductory chapter frames and caveats the goal of the volume: “At the end of the day, then, one wonders whether today’s U.S. planners will have gotten it right, and while that cannot be answered because the future is unknown, one can ask the same classic questions of this navy that were asked of the navies and admiralities in the past,” Kennedy writes. “And the more the answer to such questions turns out to have been yes, then, obviously, the less likely it would be that the best-laid plans will go badly awry.” Kennedy concludes: “There are lessons here, should contemporary naval planners wish to draw them. No navy should presume that, in its plans for the future, it has gotten things right.”

Westad Warns Against 1914-Style Escalation with China

In an interview with the *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, **Odd Arne Westad** (Elihu Professor of History, Yale University) [discusses](#) a second Trump administration through the lens of pre-1914 upheavals rather than a strict Cold War

redux. Drawing on parallels to early-20th-century Britain's wariness of German industrial rise, Westad warns that "the crisis in 1914 escalated into catastrophe in less than a month," underscoring how rapid, fear-driven moves can spark sweeping conflict. Rather than framing the current US-China rivalry as an inevitable bipolar standoff, he contends the world is headed toward messy multipolarity: the United States and China might still assert overarching interests, but other powers—like India and major Global South states—will forge independent paths. Reflecting on lessons from his 2017 book *The Cold War: A World History*, Westad stresses that deeply rooted domestic challenges, centralized leadership structures in Beijing, and the unpredictability of mid-level powers mirror earlier eras of flux, requiring careful crisis management if today's multipolar tilt is not to repeat past missteps. "As we move toward a more multipolar world, it is crucial to remain vigilant against the kind of existential fear that consumed nations in 1914," Westad says. "We have to ensure that when we see regional or global crises, we prioritize negotiation and dialogue to navigate a path out of conflict."

Plokhii Connects Putin's Aggression to Ukrainian Democracy for "History as it Happens"

Speaking with **Michael Kimmage** (Director, Wilson Center's Kennan Institute) and **Martin di Caro** (Host, "History as it Happens"), **Serhii Plokhii** (Mykhailo S. Hrushevs'kyi Professor of Ukrainian History, Harvard University) [analyzed](#) recent developments in Ukraine War negotiations and explained the conflict's origins. When asked why the war is happening now—instead of in the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union—Plokhii says he is not "surprised that this war is happening, and NATO has very little to do with that." He explains Russia's aggression as "a classic case of the disintegration of one of the largest world empires," as it behaved "like most of the old metropolis of the major empires" in attempting to keep its former possessions by force. "The fact that Ukraine developed a democratic form of government doesn't help Russia to achieve its goal." While it's easy for Russia to deal with other autocracies like Belarus, primarily through bribery, Ukraine's transition to democracy in 2014 meant Russia's investments in it—in terms of both money and influence—disappeared. And if Ukraine can become a successful democracy while Putin argues that Ukrainians and Russians are the same people, it "undermines the legitimacy of your autocratic regime in Russia." Speculating about when Russia would change course in Ukraine, Plokhii says that while he has "no doubt that the Russian course will be corrected," Putin's centralization of power means it can only happen once he leaves office. "That's how correction historically is

taking place in Russia... every next leader that comes to power, he and it's always he, not only corrects the course, but also tries to destroy his predecessor." Plokhii also [spoke](#) to Stanford's Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies about "the war in Ukraine through the eyes of an historian."

Goodwin Says "We Are Witnessing an Attempt to Return to the Old Spoils System" on *Morning Joe*

"There's a real echo to today and President Jackson," [says](#) **Doris Kearns Goodwin** (Presidential Historian) on *MSNBC*. As a historical analog for President Trump, Andrew Jackson arrived in "the populist movement against the elites. He decided that once he won the election: 'To the victor goes the spoils,' so he replaced many of the civil servants from there with his own people, party people, friends of them who were loyal to him." Over time, however, "the government became much more complex. They needed experts in what they were doing. They couldn't just have friends of the party, so there became a movement for civil service reform." Goodwin reflects that "In my lifetime, I really have not seen this kind of urge for changing things and changing them in such a way that is so hurtful to the people who are being involved." The predecessor President Trump ought to look up to instead is Theodore Roosevelt, who fought for civil service while rooting out corruption in the system. "He said that a central tenant of democracy—and we should remember this today—is that a merit system is there so the farmer's son and the mechanic's son have an equal chance to get a job as the friend of the president or the friend of the party in power." She concludes, "We need somebody—we need Teddy Roosevelt—to fight for that civil service today." Goodwin also recently [sold](#) the screen rights to her book *An Unfinished Love Story: A Personal History of the 1960s* to Tom Hanks and Gary Goetzman of Playtone and Barbara Broccoli of Eon Productions for a forthcoming film, which Goodwin will co-produce.

Leffler Enumerates Lessons from US post-9/11 for Israel post-10/7 in *Congregation Beth Israel* Lecture Series

Drawing from his research on the US response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, **Melvyn P. Leffler** (Edward Stettinius Professor of History, Emeritus, University of Virginia) [asks](#), "How do these lessons apply to Israel's reactions to the attack on

10/7?” The first lesson from 9/11 is that the Bush administration “allowed their fears, their hubris, their sense of victimhood, and their humiliation over what had happened on 9/11—on their watch—to overwhelm their prudence.” Leffler advises Israel to ask itself, “Is it correct to think that 10/7 constituted an existential threat to the survival of Israel, given the overwhelming military superiority and Israel’s nuclear arsenal? Fear must be measured even when it’s justifiable.” Second, “just as American officials mistakenly assumed that Iraq still had weapons of mass destruction, Israeli intelligence agencies and policymakers assumed that Hamas was deterred.” This lesson, according to Leffler, is about the importance of challenging basic assumptions. Third, “Just as Bush had difficulty resolving conflicting priorities and aspirations, Israeli officials have had a painfully hard time on agreeing on priorities... but still, making choices is critical.” Fourth, like the United States, “I would suggest that Israel has had a difficult time grasping the limits of its own power” and “linking means and ends.” That is, Leffler says, “If you wish to eliminate Hamas’s political control, you need to have alternative options to rule Gaza, just like the United States needed it to have alternative options to rule Iraq, which they could not agree on for a long time.” Leffler concludes: “My study of decision-making after 9/11 suggests that all of us need to grasp how agonizing and how difficult are the choices faced by policymakers. But much as we need to empathize... we also need to criticize, because the choices of our leaders, whether they be in Israel or in the United States, have huge dramatic consequences for all of us.”

Freeman Examines Presidential Power in American History on “We the People” Podcast

In a *National Constitution Center* conversation, historian **Joanne Freeman** (Class of 1954 Professor of American History and American Studies, Yale University) [joins](#) **Jeffrey Rosen** (President and CEO, National Constitution Center), **Melody Barnes** (Founding Executive Director, University of Virginia’s Karsh Institute of Democracy), **Charlie Cook** (Senior Writer, *National Review*), and **Yuval Levin** (Beth and Ravenel Curry Chair in Public Policy, American Enterprise Institute) to discuss whether President Donald Trump’s aggressive use of executive orders signals a break from—or a recurrence of—past assertions of presidential authority. Looking back to the antebellum era, Freeman stresses that intense polarization and struggles over power between Congress and the president are hardly new. Violent episodes on the Congressional floor in the decades before the Civil War reveal how institutional norms and checks can erode quickly under partisan pressures. Yet, as Freeman notes, earlier presidents like George Washington consciously studied the

Constitution's boundaries, seeking to respect institutional limits and customs—"norms"—as they shaped the executive office. Freeman and her co-panelists argue that modern Congresses' reluctance to assert their constitutional prerogatives has effectively expanded presidents' latitude. The lesson from history, Freeman suggests, is that the Constitution's separation of powers relies on deeply held norms—and that disregarding them can create contingency and conflict unseen since some of America's most fraught historical moments. "We as Americans are getting a sort of smack-in-the-face lesson about the power of those norms and the ways in which they're not legislated," Freeman concludes. "Have there been other presidents that have grabbed at power? Has there been pushing and pulling? Certainly, there has been—of all kinds. But I think this moment, and I say this as an early American historian, what feels distinctive about this moment is this administration isn't that interested in norms and isn't that interested in structures."

Brinkley Traces the Rise of Executive Orders from FDR to Today's "Shock and Awe" Tactics

For *The Brian Lehrer Show*, **Douglas Brinkley** (Katherine Tsanoff Brown Chair in Humanities and Professor of History, Rice University) [traces](#) how the American presidency evolved into its modern-day powerhouse—particularly through executive orders (EOs). Brinkley notes that while early presidents from George Washington to Abraham Lincoln only used this tool sparingly—Lincoln famously for the Emancipation Proclamation—Theodore Roosevelt pioneered more frequent employment of EOs to override congressional stalemates and protect resources such as the Grand Canyon. Franklin D. Roosevelt vastly expanded their scope, issuing thousands to meet Depression-era challenges and wage World War II. Brinkley argues that Donald Trump's aggressive, day-one barrage of EOs amid talk of "national security" crises mirrors past leaders who tested executive boundaries, such as Andrew Jackson's populism and Richard Nixon's theory that "It can't be illegal if the President does it." Yet Brinkley also warns of an unprecedented element: Trump's alignment with Elon Musk, whose technological influence could magnify the President's power to collect data and dominate policy. Pointing to the Supreme Court's conservative makeup and the rise of AI, Brinkley suggests that any expansion of presidential might must now be weighed against concerns over "autocracy"—an anxiety heightened by Trump's own claim that "he who saves his country does not violate any law."

Trachtenberg Grapples with NATO's Past and Future for Cato Institute

In a panel discussion with **Joshua Shiffrin** (Associate Professor, University of Maryland's School of Public Policy) and moderator **Justin Logan** (Director of Defense and Foreign Policy Studies, Cato Institute), **Marc Trachtenberg** (Distinguished Research Professor and Emeriti Faculty, University of California, Los Angeles) [reminds](#) listeners that the goal of US policy under Dwight Eisenhower was a "freestanding Europe." By investigating US strategic interests in initially creating and sustaining NATO in the wake of World War II, Trachtenberg challenges dominant narratives that the US should stay committed to Europe's defense today. He also questions the unwillingness of policymakers to consider, for example, Germany's rearmament or even nuclearization, stating that NATO "came into being... as a result of the peculiar condition of Berlin, of divided Germany. Those conditions no longer exist. Why should [the US] stay there? Why can't the Europeans defend themselves?" By comparing the history of NATO with its reality today, policymakers can exercise greater flexibility by scrutinizing what real strategic interests remain at stake now in shaping NATO's future. As Trachtenberg says, it is "perfectly legitimate to grapple with these issues, and you see how important they are only when you understand the historical story."

Spohr Distinguishes US Interest in Greenland Today from That in WWII with *Centre for Geopolitics*

Kristina Spohr (Professor of International History, London School of Economics and Political Science) [reminds](#) us that while the United States previously sought control over Greenland in World War II, "this had to do with extending security, from their perspective, vis-à-vis the Nazis—it was because the Nazis had occupied Denmark." She admits, "I agree this 'Buying Greenland' is not a new idea," however, compared to the WWII question of necessity, "it is a bit of a different thing if you want to buy something from an ally." It would be naïve, according to Spohr, to believe Trump's MAGA philosophy is isolationist. Taking together the administration's stated interests in Panama Canal, Greenland, and Canada, "suddenly it's about hemispheric thinking," harkening back to the Monroe Doctrine. "Unlike in the past where we have thought about America as a sort of beacon holding up the liberal order," Spohr

concludes, “When the president of the United States goes out and throws these comments out that put the whole rules-based order, if you so want, into disarray—in a situation where the Russians broke it in the first place—we have a sort of double whammy, and we have a real serious problem if we think about it from our perspective as European powers.” Spohr was also [interviewed](#) on the German news program *DW* about Germany’s role in a potential future for NATO without the US.

Ekbladh Argues for Return to Greater US Involvement in Global Security on *Newswise*

On the *Curious by Nature* podcast, **David Ekbladh** (Professor of History, Tufts University) [talks](#) about how the historical events covered in his latest book, *Look at the World: The Rise of an American Globalism in the 1930s*, continue shaping the world today. Ekbladh says, “I look at how a set of Americans, inside and outside the government—mostly outside the government—looked at the world differently because of the crisis they were going through and saw that their country, because of the position it was in the world—it had become a very powerful, important player in a lot of ways—needed to become the guarantor of global stability.” The lesson for today? “Basic assumptions change. They can change pretty profoundly, and they often change in long periods of tension and crisis.” More explicitly, Ekbladh explains that while the realization that “The chaos of the 1930s that eventually becomes World War II is going to affect us—it is affecting us—and we have to take a leading role in securing the globe” led to the creation of an “internationalist and globalist” Republican party, “What you’ve seen in the last decade or so is an interesting reverse in conservative circles. During the Cold War, it was, ‘We have to face down,’ be it communists then or, after 9/11, terrorists, ‘we have to use American power to right the world,’ whether that’s in Southeast Asia or in Afghanistan and Iraq. There’s been a rapid drawback from that, particularly on the right—even before Trump. But Trump has very much ridden that and accentuated that.”

Jobs and Opportunities

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.

Applied History Articles of the Month

["Samuel Huntington Is Getting His Revenge"](#) – Nils Gilman, *Foreign Policy*, February 21, 2025.

"We stand at the cusp of a reordering moment in international relations as significant as 1989, 1945, or 1919—a generational event," [writes Nils Gilman](#) (Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President, Berggruen Institute). He refers to the eves of the post-Cold War "rules-based" international order, the United Nations Security Council, and the League of Nations, respectively. At this fourth reordering moment, "2014 now appears to have been the pivotal year" when "emerging powers identifying themselves in the civilizational terms that Huntington had described two decades earlier began to dissent openly from the allegedly universal values underpinning the liberal international order." If Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" wins out over Francis Fukuyama's "End of History," what does the imminent future hold? Gilman warns that "we will enjoy the sanguinary excitements of an international system red in tooth and claw. Ruthlessness will be rewarded, toothlessness will be exploited."

[“Will Ukraine Be Trump’s Vietnam?”](#) – William McGurn, *The Wall Street Journal*, February 17, 2025.

Agreeing with Steve Bannon’s warning that “Trump’s Vietnam” may be unfolding in Ukraine, **William McGurn** (Opinion Columnist, *The Wall Street Journal*; Former Chief Speechwriter for President George W. Bush) [argues](#) “Mr. Trump might want to study a conversation between another Republican president and his secretary of state.” McGurn recalls Henry Kissinger’s comment to Richard Nixon in August 1972, estimating that “the odds were about 50/50” that he could reach an agreement with North Vietnam. The lesson of those negotiations was that for peace deals, “it all comes down to the credibility of its security guarantees.” Today, “there are sobering parallels between this week’s U.S.-Russia talks in Riyadh that exclude Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and the secret U.S.-North Vietnam negotiations conducted behind Thieu’s back.” McGurn concludes that “Mr. Trump would do well to remember: If this deal ends in catastrophe, he will own it.”

Applied History Quote of the Month

“Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour. These records of wars, intrigues, factions,

and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science, in the same manner as the physician or natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects, by the experiments which he forms concerning them.”

– David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748)

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