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**Applied History Project Newsletter**

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The March 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](mailto:igiang@hks.harvard.edu) with the subject "April Applied History Update" before Wednesday, May 7.

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

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### Nasr Plumbs the Origins of Iran's Geopolitical Objectives

In *Iran's Grand Strategy: A Political History*, **Vali Nasr** (Majid Khadduri Professor of International Affairs and Middle East Studies, Johns Hopkins SAIS) "sets out to make sense of the international statecraft that, over many decades, has led Iran to its current precarious position," arguing that "the regime's strategic vision is informed less by a revolutionary intent to spread Islamist ideology than by a concept of

national security rooted in regional rivalries, Iran's historical experience, and familiar anti-imperial and anticolonial currents of the late twentieth century." Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, **Christopher de Bellaigue** (journalist and historian) [summarizes](#) the dilemma facing Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, following the election of Donald Trump: either capitulate to Trump's avowed "maximum pressure" campaign or "pursue a nuclear weapon, inviting preemptive—and this time, potentially catastrophic—Israeli and American strikes." Offering a perspective in *Applied History*, he states, "In trying to fathom how Iran will react, it will be equally important for the West to abandon outmoded ways of seeing the regime in Tehran and to identify the true sources of conduct and outlook, many of which lie in the past." The eight-year Iran-Iraq war, launched by Iraq's invasion in 1980, lies at the center of Nasr's analysis as "the defining event of post-revolutionary Iran" that has since "engendered the strategic culture... that blends 'encirclement fears and outsized ambition.'" While Iraqi President Saddam Hussein saw the 1979 Iran Revolution and the overthrow of the US-backed shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi as an opportunity, his attack "had the unintended effect of strengthening Iran's new clerical regime." Support for Saddam by the West, the Soviet bloc, and much of the Arab world, out of fear that Khomeini's radicalism would spread, left Iran "forced to rely mostly on self-sufficiency, religious zeal, and patriotism," leading Khomeini to undertake a purge of liberals and leftists and to situate himself "at a contemptuous—and, to millions of Muslims across the world the greater Islamic world, inspiring—distance from both the Soviet Union and the United States." Nasr argues that the war drove two foundational elements of Iran's strategy. First, it "transformed Iran into a technological autarky" with capabilities of manufacturing roadside bombs, drones, ballistic missiles, and, over time, "the spinning centrifuges that have propelled the Islamic Republic... to the brink of becoming a nuclear weapons state." Second, the conflict "inspired Tehran's strategic doctrine of 'forward defense,' which it formally adopted in 2003. What Iran's rivals and adversaries see as aggression that sows chaos through sectarianism and dirty tricks is, in the regime's view, a defensive attempt to neutralize threats before they reach the country's borders." The strategy's leading exponent was General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps's Quds Force, who succeeded in leveraging Iran's relationships with proxy forces and clients across the Middle East and in persuading both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Hezbollah



## IRAN'S GRAND STRATEGY

A POLITICAL HISTORY

VALI NASR



leader Hassan Nasrallah to support the Assad regime in Syria, prolonging its survival for almost a decade. De Bellaigue observes, “In light of Iran’s recent missteps and the heavy blows that Israel has delivered to its regional prestige, it is tempting to regard Soleimani’s assassination in 2020 by a U.S. drone as a masterstroke by Trump, who authorized it near the end of his first term in office.” Further, “There is no straightforward way for Iran to recover from the setbacks of the last year,” which are made more fraught by the nuclear dilemma, the question of succession, and the new generation’s increasing impatience with clerical leadership. Looking ahead, Khamenei’s preferred successor is his second son, Mojtaba, who shares his father’s commitment to the nuclear program and who served “in a battalion of the IRGC that... wishes to ‘perpetuate the strategies of resistance and forward defense born during the war.’” In closing, de Bellaigue speculates, “If Mojtaba does indeed become supreme leader, not only will the Islamic Republic come closer to becoming a hereditary monarchy, but the forward defense may get a second wind.”

## Risen Explores McCarthyism’s Enduring Influences

*RED SCARE: Blacklists, McCarthyism, and the Making of Modern America* by **Clay Risen** (author, reporter, and editor, *The New York Times*) “makes clear” that “our own times are ringing with echoes of the clamorous battles of mid-20th century McCarthyism.” So [writes Kevin Peraino](#) (author and journalist) in *The New York Times*. Risen’s “meaty and powerfully relevant book” identifies the era’s sociopolitical characteristics that remain today, including white supremacy, campus activism, anti-elitism, cancel culture, virtue signaling, doxxing, book bans, and antisemitism, among others. Risen “portrays the Red Scare as a cultural battle fueled by the tensions of the deepening midcentury Cold War.

“It is a conflict... that never truly abated” and whose “destructive power... has been burning underground for the better part of the last century.” Both political parties share the blame. For example, “New Deal-era Democrats most interested in fighting right-wing extremism led early versions of the investigative committees, and it was the Democratic President Harry Truman who instituted the loyalty program that propelled the anti-Communist movement early on.” Although Risen’s book “is largely a synthesis of existing sources,” Peraino writes, it “resonates, nevertheless, because

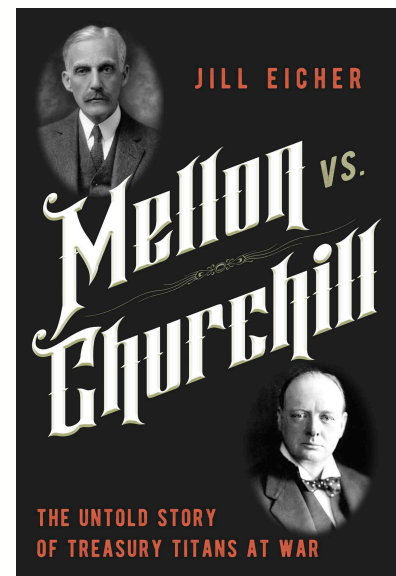


it speaks so directly to our current quandary. For Americans on the left, the despair that followed last November's elections was fueled partly by a sense that Trumpism is endemic, not an aberration." Quoting the author, "There is a lineage to the American hard right of today... and to understand it we need to understand its roots in the Red Scare." For Peraino, the lesson of Applied History goes to rejecting "cultural pessimism." He recalls broadcaster Edward R. Murrow's nationally televised program that not only challenged McCarthy's assertions but also "urged Americans to accept their own culpability in the tragedy of McCarthyism," quoting Shakespeare to emphasize his point: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves." Peraino concludes that, like Murrow and others of conscience in the period, "We, too, must find a way."

## Eicher Examines the Tensions and Politics of World War I War Debts

*Mellon vs. Churchill: The Untold Story of Treasury Titans at War*, by **Jill Eicher** (independent scholar and writer) is a study of the negotiations between US Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon and Winston Churchill, UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, over the World War I war debt owed by Great Britain to the United States. By focusing on the clashes between the main protagonists, the one "austere" and "soft spoken," the other "ever-prolific and voluble," Eicher brings to life an "otherwise... dull and difficult story of interlocking postwar financial tensions into a colorful and lucid one." In doing so, she also portrays the decade of the 1920s as a period "in which the geopolitical fortunes of the two nations begin to diverge."

So [writes Benn Steil](#) (Director of International Economics, Council on Foreign Relations) in *The Wall Street Journal*. The United States exited the war in 1918 with ten countries owing "more than \$10 billion (\$190 billion in today's money), most of which had been used to purchase U.S. goods and munitions during the conflict." Britain owed the largest amount, \$4.6 billion; France, \$4 billion. The economies of both countries had been shattered. Although President Woodrow Wilson "granted Britain a three-year moratorium on interest payments... Britain's ability to pay the U.S. was still limited by Germany's ability to pay reparations and France's ability to pay back loans to the British—which was also contingent on



reparations from Germany.” In foreign policy, Wilson had openly stated “his intention to use American lending... ‘as leverage to persuade the warring nations to adopt his administration’s plan for the peace process.” The British feared that “Washington was using war debts ‘as a club to force disarmament’ of rivals and achieve its own naval-dominance aims—in particular, over Britain.” For Churchill, maintaining British sea power was imperative, and despite an extended payment plan signed by President Warren Harding in 1923, he was determined “to see the debt cancelled. He framed it as a moral affront that Washington should treat the debt, incurred in a noble common cause, as a mere commercial obligation.” He also believed that “the debt would never, and could never, be repaid, dependent as it was on a chain of obligations whose success at each link was premised on a recovery rendered hopeless by the weight of that very debt.” Mellon, “one of the great bankers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries,” sought the middle ground “between hard-liners in Congress, who demanded repayment at a fair rate of interest and ‘cancellationists’ in the civil service, academia and the media who argued that such demands were shortsighted and counterproductive.” Nonetheless, America demanded repayment, and subsequent agreements served to perpetuate a circular structure of payments and reparations, made worse by tariffs, all of which concluded with Germany’s cancellation of reparations in 1933 amid the Great Depression and Britain, France, Belgium, and Italy defaulting in 1934. “Their debts, and those of seven other nations, remain on the books of the U.S. Treasury.” Steil casts the debt story as a “sorry tale” of the Presidential administrations of Harding and Calvin Coolidge. In a lesson of Applied History, he contrasts their actions with the Truman administration’s post-World War II “deliberate decision to place the rapid recovery of democratic capitalist allies, old and new, at the forefront of foreign policy, most notably with the grant-based Marshall Plan. German debts were extinguished” and “extraordinary and enduring economic and diplomatic success” followed. He states, “Today, it is difficult to detect either the will or the capacity, in any geopolitical circumstance, to make the sort of short-term national sacrifice such long-term success involved.” Further, in an echo of Britain’s position after World War I, the United States became a debtor nation in 1985 and has since accumulated \$8.5 trillion in international obligations, representing nearly one third of the total US public debt. Citing historian H.W. Brands—who observed that apart from the interests and ambitions countries may have, “they ultimately ‘get the foreign policies they can afford’”—Steil asks, “what kind of foreign policy can the U.S. afford? Unlike in the 1920s and ’40s, its lenders will have a say.” Following World War I, America used its financial power “to great effect—at times wisely, at times not. Now others—most notably, China—will play their hand.”

*\*The inspiration for this section of the Applied History Network Newsletter, currently written by Anne Karalekas, 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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### **Allison Recommends that "To End the Ukraine War, Trump Should Think Like Ike"**

As President Trump struggles to fulfill his campaign promise to bring an immediate end to the war in Ukraine, **Graham Allison** (Co-Chair, Harvard's Applied History Project; Douglas Dillon Professor of Government, Harvard Kennedy School) [argues](#) that he should look to Dwight Eisenhower for inspiration. At the time of his inauguration, the Korean War had been stuck in a stalemate for a year and a half. To break the impasse, "as soon as the election was over, Ike 'went to Korea' to talk directly and candidly with South Korean leader Rhee and his military commanders." While he imposed constraints on Rhee's freedom of action, Eisenhower also threatened China and North Korea by signaling that "in the absence of satisfactory progress, we intended to move decisively without inhibition in our use of weapons, and would no longer be responsible for confining hostilities to the Korean Peninsula." While Allison acknowledges several differences between the wars in



Korea and Ukraine, he highlights that “The key to Eisenhower’s success... will also be essential for Trump. Ike took the lead himself in a direct, focused effort to close the deal. If Trump can channel Eisenhower,” he writes, “he will be able to claim that he has achieved the peace ‘deal of the century.’”

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## **Ferguson Explains “A User’s Guide to Wrecking the Global Financial System”**

Writing in *The Free Press*, **Niall Ferguson** (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Milbank Family Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) [reacts](#) to the Trump administration’s attempts to remake the American economy. He characterizes the White House’s economic policies as “a radical project to turn back the economic clock that is in many ways more ambitious than Churchill’s” 1925 decision to return the British pound to the gold standard, which increased unemployment in an attempt to rein in spending after World War I. Ferguson cautions that Trump’s affection for tariffs could have the effect of transporting “U.S. trade policy back either to 1943 or 1937,” periods where “international trade had all but collapsed because of protectionism, depression, and war.” Yet he also notes that Reagan’s first term “started with a painful recession,” a sign that an economic downturn would not preclude progress on fiscal reform.

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## **Nye Considers “The Future of World Order” in *Project Syndicate***

“Are we entering a totally new period of American decline, or are the second Trump administration’s attacks on the institutions and alliances that defined the American Century just another cyclical disruption?” To answer this question, **Joseph S. Nye, Jr.** (Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus, Harvard Kennedy School) [reviews](#) the long history of relationships among states and other major international actors. “A given international order can evolve incrementally without leading to a clear paradigm shift,” such as the period “before the modern state system,” in which “order was often imposed by force and conquest, taking the form of regional empires.” Rather than issues of norms and institutions, wars were waged over forces such as geographic conflicts, dynastic considerations, and religious fervor. On the other

hand, Nye argues an important lesson from history is that “if the preeminent power’s domestic politics change too radically, all bets are off.” He concludes: “If the international order is eroding, America’s domestic politics are as much of a cause as China’s rise.” Nye [pursued](#) this point in a *Washington Post* column, asserting that “If Trump thinks he will easily beat China by completely forgoing soft power, he is likely to be disappointed.” Nye was also [featured](#) on Network 20/20’s virtual briefing series in an event titled, “Soft Power on the Line: U.S. Influence in a Changing Worlds.”

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## **Walt Argues Trump Is a Reactionary, Not a Revolutionary, in *Foreign Policy***

**Stephen M. Walt** (Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School) [writes](#) that despite appearances, Trump should not be considered a revolutionary leader. Drawing on his earlier work on revolutions and war, Walt explains that Trumpism lacks the grassroots mobilization and transformative ideology that characterize truly revolutionary movements. Instead, he compares Trumpism to a “‘revolution from above,’” more akin to the Turkish revolution led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk or the Egyptian revolution led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, in which disaffected elites seek to remake the political order. “‘Revolutions from above’ can also lead to conflict and war, but they tend to be less disruptive than mass revolutions ‘from below.’” Even then, Walt argues, Trump falls short: “Trump hasn’t invented a radically new revolutionary model; he’s just following the playbook for democratic backsliding and self-dealing perfected by leaders like Orban or Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdogan.” In Walt’s view, Trump’s vision looks backward, not forward: “The ‘MAGA’ slogan gives the game away: If you’re claiming to make the country great again, your gaze is firmly fixed in the rearview mirror and not on the future.” Walt concludes, “On the eve of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, it would be tragic indeed if what we end up celebrating next year is not the revolutionary principles contained in that document, but rather their demise.”

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## Tooze Argues “US Global Leadership Has Never Been Plain Sailing” in the *Financial Times*

While the “ambushing” of President Volodymyr Zelensky in the Oval Office in February shocked the world, **Adam Tooze** (Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of History, Columbia University) [asks](#): “Is it, in its consequences, worse than the push for the global war on terror under George W. Bush? Worse than Richard Nixon’s disruption of the Bretton Woods system? Or America’s outrageous bombing of Cambodia and Laos? More egregious than numerous cold war coups or the brutal bargaining that took place, admittedly behind closed doors, during the second world war?” Tooze argues that the United States’ global leadership has historically been inconsistent and often marked by retreat and contradiction. Reflecting on events from the rejection of the Treaty of Versailles to recent political developments demonstrating “that the elite coalition that favoured US global leadership has lost its political grip,” Tooze notes that the transatlantic lesson for today is that “If Europe wants something it likes to call a ‘rules-based order’, it will have to make it for itself.” Tooze expands on his recommendations in two recent *Chartbook* essays: [rebutting](#) fears of reviving “war economies” in Europe based on the stale appeasement analogy, and [reflecting](#) on an “historical account of how we got here, an account that is path-dependent and means that Trump is not just a shock but indicative of a deeper and longer-term trend.”

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## Toft Describes “The Return of Spheres of Influence” in *Foreign Affairs*

After the end of the Cold War, leaders found questions about balancing their relations with competing states, even warring ones, less central in their foreign affairs. Policymakers “hoped that multilateralism and new efforts toward collective security would diminish the relevance of zero-sum geopolitical rivalries for good.” However, as **Monica Duffy Toft** (Academic Dean and Professor of International Politics, Tufts Fletcher School) [writes](#), the rise of China and Putin’s consolidation of power in Russia reverted geopolitics “to a more ancient, hard power-based dynamic.” Toft draws a comparison between today’s balance of power and the geopolitical landscape after the end of World War II, when superpowers “sought to divide Europe into spheres of influence.” She points out that “Today’s major powers

are seeking to negotiate a new global order primarily with each other, much as Allied leaders did when they redrew the world map at the Yalta negotiations in 1945.” While the term has a long history dating back to the 1884-85 Berlin Conference, the concept of “spheres of influence” was a goal during the French Napoleonic Wars, in the British and Russian imperial competition over Central Asia, and with the United States’ Monroe Doctrine. “The reemergence of spheres of influence signals that the nature of the global order is being tested,” Toft says in conclusion: “Whether this transition ultimately returns to a predictable balance of power or inaugurates a prolonged period of instability and war will depend on how effectively spheres of influence are contested—and how far countries such as China, India, Iran, Russia, and the United States are willing to go to secure them.”

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## **Brands Warns of the Dangers Posed by Spheres of Influence in *Bloomberg***

Taking aim at the recent revival of the idea of dividing the world into spheres of influence controlled by various superpowers, **Hal Brands** (Henry A. Kissinger Professor of Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins SAIS) [points out](#) that while “Many of Trump’s gut instincts—his ambivalence about US alliances, his yearning for good relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping—are well suited to spheres-of-influence diplomacy,” a world defined by these arrangements “would be darker, and more dangerous, than its proponents believe.” Brands chronicles the history of spheres of influence, from the Delian League that empowered ancient Athens to the Cold War, highlighting the advantages of spheres of influence for the competing powers. The US, he notes, even embarked on its own imperialist ambitions in the late 1800s, carving out a sphere of influence in the Americas at the expense of its European rivals. Yet while a “spheres deal” to reduce tensions in Europe and Asia “would limit the near-term danger of escalation in Ukraine or the Taiwan Strait” today, Brands writes that “when the sphere in question is run by a violent, illiberal tyrant, it is simply a euphemism for the lethal suppression of freedom of choice.” That, he concludes, is what awaits most of the world in this hypothetical future.

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## Radchenko Looks Back at Yalta for Clues about Putin in Ukraine

In a recent op-ed in *The Globe and Mail*, **Sergey Radchenko** (Wilson E. Schmidt Distinguished Professor, Johns Hopkins SAIS) [draws](#) parallels between the 1945 Yalta conference and the attempts by President Donald Trump to end the war in Ukraine today. Like Stalin in 1945, what Putin wants is “American acceptance as an equal.” However, “unlike Stalin and Harry Truman, who assumed the presidency upon Roosevelt’s death, Mr. Putin and Mr. Trump have an alignment of values, which makes their entente more durable.” While a lasting peace still seems distant at this point, Radchenko argues that when a permanent ceasefire is achieved, Trump and Putin will try to impose their values on Europe just as Stalin did following Yalta. However, unlike Stalin, they will be “steering Europe not toward the far left... but toward the far right.” Radchenko’s recent book, *To Run the World: The Kremlin’s Cold War Bid for Global Power*, was also [reviewed](#) in the *London Review of Books* by **Sheila Fitzpatrick**, who praised it for demonstrating “exhaustive research in Russian archives” and his analysis of “the ways in which the presence of China affected relations between the superpowers.”

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## Posen Asserts Western Ties with Ukraine since 2008 Fueled Russia’s Anti-NATO Preventative Invasion

In a recent article in *International Security*, **Barry Posen** (Ford International Professor of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology) [examines](#) Putin’s decision-making in the leadup to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Contrary to most Western analysis that blames Putin’s “commitment to a nationalist or imperialist ideology,” Posen argues that the more important factor was Putin’s fear that Russia was facing a Ukraine increasingly integrated into NATO’s security infrastructure. From the perspective of Russian decision-makers, “‘war now,’ appeared to be better” than an alternative in which Ukraine was integrated into NATO. To support his claim, Posen offers a catalogue of historical instances of preventive war. He argues that “From 1650 to 1990, a great power initiated a conflict for preventive reasons in a third of the wars (twenty out of about sixty involving at least one great power),” and references conflicts from the Peloponnesian War to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. By examining the origins of the conflict in Ukraine through a preventive war lens, Posen gives credence to the notion that “The actors who pursued policies that would shift

the balance of power”—including “Ukraine’s own leaders, but more importantly U.S. and Western European policymakers”—are “at least partially *politically* responsible for the war.” Posen’s conclusion recommends that the United States learns this lesson about Russia and Ukraine before it is too late to prevent China’s preventative war in Taiwan. “When U.S. leaders consider themselves to be right, they are disinclined to what one might call strategic empathy. This has been particularly true in the post–Cold War period, when the United States has wielded much more power than other states. This power creates a kind of moral hazard for the United States,” Posen writes. “But international politics has a way of biting the careless.”

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## **Mulder Warns Trump’s Economic Aggression Could Erode US Power in *Foreign Affairs***

Offering an unorthodox assessment of President Donald Trump’s intended tariffs on American allies, **Nicholas Mulder** (Assistant Professor of Modern European History, Cornell University) [observes](#) that “Historically, directing economic coercion against allies—rather than adversaries—has been a remarkably successful policy.” The US took full advantage of this in the Cold War, frequently imposing “serious economic consequences on European imperial states whose policies diverged from its wishes.” The Truman administration threatened to exclude the Netherlands from the Marshall Plan if the Dutch did not abandon their war against Indonesian independence, for example, and American economic pressure on the UK was vital in resolving the Suez Crisis. Yet, Mulder writes, “conditions that made threats against allies so effective after World War II have changed.” As the US has become less dependent on trade, its commercial influence in the world has decreased. Determining that a relationship with the US is too risky, trade partners have taken the opportunity to form larger trading zones on their own. Trump, therefore, is in danger of overplaying his hand: “Instead of regaining U.S. dominance, there is a significant possibility that his actions will further accelerate the decline of American global influence, both in the economy and in other realms.”

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## MacMillan Warns US Foreign Policy Needs More History, Less Wishful Thinking in *Financial Times*

**Margaret MacMillan** (Emeritus Professor of International History, University of Oxford) [argues](#) that making peace is often more difficult than nations expect. Discussing historical examples from the Versailles Peace Conference to the Conference of Europe and Nixon's opening to China, MacMillan observes that there are several conditions that must be met before negotiations have a chance at success. For example, the length of World War I shows that attitudes toward peacemaking can shift quickly, and opportunities to close a deal can be lost just as quickly. "Both the Allies and the Central Powers floated the idea of ending their conflict but never at the same time." Commenting on the Trump administration's attempts to negotiate peace in Ukraine, MacMillan urges the US not "to sacrifice Ukraine as Britain and France did Czechoslovakia in 1938." Doing so in an attempt to split Russia from China would only spell disaster: "Credibility, that intangible but valuable asset, helps to deter enemies and keep allies. Alliances, like peace itself, need work—and trust, once destroyed, is hard to build back up." MacMillan also [spoke](#) at a Council on Foreign Relations event about "Common Sense and Strategy in Foreign Policy," offering a historical perspective on current shifts in global power.

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## Armitage Reflects on Civil War's Enduring Legacy and Hope of "Un-Invention" in *Teaching History*

In his latest article, "Putting Civil War Behind Us?" for the *Journal of the History Teachers' Association of NSW*, **David Armitage** (Lloyd C. Blankfein Professor of History, Harvard University) [writes](#) about how current global armed conflicts overwhelmingly manifest as civil wars rather than conflicts between states. Tracing the Roman linguistic roots of terming internal struggles as "civil," Armitage shows how this paradoxically designates fellow citizens as enemies. He examines attempts from antiquity to the modern era to codify and "civilize" civil wars—"Deciding whether what we see is indeed a civil war (or a 'non-international armed conflict') can have political, military, legal, and economic consequences for those outside the war-torn country as well as for those within it." Although many of today's wars, from Afghanistan to Sudan, remain seemingly endless, Armitage highlights that a handful, like those in Sri Lanka and Colombia, have been settled through negotiated

agreements. As for the future, he holds a tempered optimism: “Perhaps, just perhaps, humanity is at last within sight of un-inventing what the Romans first invented just over two thousand years ago,” Armitage concludes. “Until we do, we still need history – and a very long view of history – to assess the future prospects for escaping one of humanity’s most destructive discontents.”

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## **Mukharji Argues Trump is Learning the Wrong Lessons from McKinley in *Foreign Affairs***

**Aroop Mukharji** (Assistant Professor of National Security Affairs, US Naval War College; Former Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center) [revisits](#) the legacy of William McKinley. “President Donald Trump has brought McKinley back into the spotlight,” starting with his second inaugural address. “The problem for Trump is not a lack of precedent; his policies’ connection to American history is clear,” Mukharji argues. “The problem is that McKinley’s tariff approach does not suit today’s world.” For example, “whereas McKinley used tariffs primarily to accomplish a domestic goal—to expand U.S. industry, Trump’s primary goal is external.” Mukharji adds that William McKinley serves as a “cautionary tale for Trump” in national security more broadly. “McKinley lost sight of his domestic economic vision” as “he got more and more involved in conflicts abroad” with Spain, the Philippines, and China during the Boxer Rebellion. “This cycle of insecurity is something that the war-averse Trump should desperately want to avoid,” Mukharji cautions. “Trump, of course, has long been skeptical of U.S. intervention abroad. But then again, so was McKinley.”

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## **Simms Highlights the Strategic Stakes of Ukrainian Defiance in *Engelsberg Ideas***

“What have the Ukrainians done to deserve Trump and us?” [asks](#) **Brendan Simms** (Professor of the History of International Relations, University of Cambridge). For Simms, Ukraine’s ongoing resistance is not simply about survival, but about the fact that “Security has become increasingly indivisible” across the globe—from the US to Europe and Asia. Acknowledging that the US has “contributed the lion’s share of



military aid in defence of what is after all our, not their continent,” he says, “We helped to create Trump, at least in part.” Simms argues, nonetheless, that the US president’s “treatment of a brave embattled people has been shameful,” even if he “is no Hitler, to be sure, and probably no Chamberlain.” Comparing the Ukraine war to WWII, Simms says, “There is another way in which the 1938 analogy breaks down: the Ukrainians are no Czechs. They have valiantly resisted the Russian onslaught for three years at considerable financial expense to us, certainly, but without costing the life of a single European soldier.” His conclusion is a call to action for the European security establishment. In a complementary *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, Simms [argues](#) that despite internal divisions, Europe still has the economic and institutional capacity to lead: “As the U.S. appears to be heading away from its longstanding commitment to the defense of security and democracy on the other side of the Atlantic, Europe could be poised to take up its mantle as a force for good in the world.”

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## **Mead Argues Trump Critics Need to “Think More and Rail Less” to Disrupt His Plans for Historical Legacy on Expansionism**

“American history gives the president and his allies reason to believe that the public will ultimately come around,” **Walter Russell Mead** (Ravenel B. Curry III Distinguished Fellow in Strategy and Statesmanship, Hudson Institute) [asserts](#) in *The Wall Street Journal* : “Three of the four men on Mount Rushmore promoted territorial expansion.” Adding to the list of precedents are Abraham Lincoln’s use of a possible US attack on Canada as “implicit leverage to keep Britain neutral during the Civil War” and Woodrow Wilson’s purchase of the US Virgin Islands. “Lightly populated but strategically significant, Greenland is the kind of territory that, historically, Americans have liked to annex.” In fact, Franklin Roosevelt had declared the island a protectorate during WWII, and Harry Truman later offered Denmark \$100 million to buy it. But “from the standpoint of both Trump supporters and swing voters, the case against annexation isn’t a slam dunk.” Mead suggests voters should agree that threatening a “NATO ally with invasion is a radical step whose consequences will reverberate for decades” and that “the Kremlin would inevitably view the annexation as a hostile step, undercutting Mr. Trump’s hopes to pry Vladimir Putin away from his colleagues in Beijing.”

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## Walton Argues the West Should Learn from Munich in Resolving Ukraine War

The “Munich” analogy, **Calder Walton** (Director of Research, Harvard’s Intelligence Project) [writes](#), “is one of the most used historical analogies—and almost always, it is used inappropriately to justify force.” Yet it is “sadly relevant for present-day circumstances over the war in Ukraine.” While the broad contours of the Munich Conference and its results are well known, Walton focuses on the diverging streams of intelligence that British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain received as he negotiated Germany’s takeover of the Sudetenland. While Britain’s foreign intelligence service, MI6, recommended appeasement at Munich, the domestic security agency, MI5, presciently warned that Adolf Hitler’s aggression towards Czechoslovakia was a precursor to his larger designs on Europe. Pointing out that MI5 was able to accurately predict Nazi policy because “it studied, and took seriously, Hitler’s own words,” Walton argues that “The same applies to [Vladimir] Putin today.” Putin has repeatedly declared his intention to take all of Ukraine and declared, like Hitler’s accusations about Czechoslovakia, that Ukraine is a made-up country. His comments praising the days of Catherine the Great and Joseph Stalin make clear “it would be logical for him to incorporate areas like Georgia, Moldova, and even the Baltic states ‘back’ into Russia’s sphere of influence.” The West should learn from the “chilling warning” of Munich, Walton concludes: “Putin cannot be trusted any more than Hitler could.”

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## Ledford Advocates for Renewal of Monroe Doctrine in Senate Testimony

In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, **Joseph Ledford** (Hoover Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) [argues](#) that the Trump administration should look back to the Monroe Doctrine in pursuing its goals in the Western Hemisphere. “During the first quarter of the 21st century,” Ledford writes, “the United States gradually became estranged from its neighbors, and America’s enemies noticed the neglect.” While China has increased commercial investment and intelligence collection, issues like the transnational drug trade and mass immigration

have worsened exponentially. Highlighting that “the principles enshrined in the Monroe Doctrine have functioned as *the* enduring bipartisan consensus throughout American history,” Ledford identifies several steps for policymakers—such as developing a framework for hemispheric defense—to ensure the US can sustainably protect its interests in the region.

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## **Wolfowitz Cautions Trump to Emulate Eisenhower, not Chamberlain in *The Wall Street Journal***

“History never repeats exactly—Ukraine today is different from Czechoslovakia in 1938, and Chamberlain was trying to prevent a war, whereas Ike was trying to stop one,” [writes Paul Wolfowitz](#) (Distinguished Visiting Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution). “But the Chamberlain pattern remains relevant.” President Trump is not wrong to seek an end to bloodshed, but neither is President Zelensky wrong to “warn against paper agreements with a tyrant who has a record of breaking them.” Wolfowitz recommends that Trump’s advisors “should remind him of two contrasting patterns for ending or preventing a brutal war. One leads to lasting peace; the other, to disaster. For shorthand, they might be called Eisenhower 1953 and Chamberlain 1938.” Wolfowitz supports the “Eisenhower 1953” pattern, which he describes as “effective diplomacy backed by the credible threat of force, followed by a strong deterrence posture,” which—when “combined with a change in the attitude of the Soviet Union following Stalin’s death”—ultimately concluded the Korean War with “an armistice that ended the bloodbath and has held for more than 70 years.”

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## **Interviews and Speeches**

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### **Kotkin Maintains that America’s Enduring Strength Outlasts Authoritarian Ambitions**

In a *New Yorker Radio Hour* interview with **David Remnick** (Editor, The New Yorker), **Stephen Kotkin** (Visiting Scholar, Harvard's Applied History Project; Kleinheinz Senior Fellow, Stanford's Hoover Institution) [contends](#) that US power—across its society, economy, and institutions—remains uniquely resilient, even amid disruptive leaders and social-media-fueled polarization. He stresses that previous crises, from the Civil War to the Vietnam era, proved America's capacity for self-correction. “You can say that Trump is wrong in his analysis of the world. You can say that Trump's methods are abominable,” Kotkin argues, “but you can't say that American power is sufficient to meet its current commitments on the trajectory that we're on.” While authoritarians like Putin and Xi exploit Western discord, Kotkin believes effective deterrence and exposing these regimes' internal vulnerabilities can constrain their ambitions. The critical lesson, he insists, is that long-term American strengths—rule of law, vibrant alliances, and innovative dynamism—can outlast short-term political turbulence and reassert leadership on the global stage. “The Civil War, Andrew Jackson—there's a lot in American history that is not necessarily optimistic for the future,” Kotkin concludes, “and yet we made it through to the other side, and it's quite possible we'll make it through the current epoch that we're in.”

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## **Faust Illustrates “What the Civil War Can Teach us About American Grief”**

Speaking on the *To the Best of Our Knowledge* podcast, **Drew Gilpin Faust** (President Emerita and Arthur Kingsley Porter University Research Professor, Harvard University) [draws](#) lessons from her research into the Civil War for how the US can grapple with the lives lost to Covid-19, five years after the initial outbreak. Despite the time that has passed, “we have not really taken a step of thinking it [the effect of Covid on our daily lives] through and reflecting on it.... It was the overwhelming event that affected our lives for several years, and yet it's sort of like, okay, that ended.” She noted that presidential remarks after tragedies—the Gettysburg Address and speeches after the Challenger disaster, 9/11, and the Charleston church shooting—are about unity, but “so much of the response to Covid was politicized from the start,” complicating efforts towards national healing. What may be helpful, she concludes, is to follow the example of the post-Civil War era in “how the country decides to acknowledge and honor the dead and their sacrifices

through public rituals,” recommending that the country build a memorial to victims of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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## **Mitter Examines China’s Political Trajectories from Sun Yat-sen to Xi Jinping in Cambridge Tanner Lecture**

Delivering the 2025 Clare Hall Tanner and Tanner Founder’s Lecture at the University of Cambridge, **Rana Mitter** (S.T. Lee Professor of US-Asia Relations, Harvard Kennedy School) [asserts](#) that “the present day is probably the first time in history ... in which China has had both the aspiration and the economic capacity to achieve” what it calls the ideal state of “comprehensive national strength.” The Chinese term that embodies its current national goals, “*zonghe guoli*,” Mitter says, “is a direct intellectual descendant of that Qing dynasty *fuguo qiangbing*,” which translates more directly into “rich country, strong army.” However, Mitter argues, “today’s global context has changed immeasurably.” He asserts that “the rich country and the strong army’ may not be compatible in the mid-21st century in a way that was viable or even desirable in the mid-19th.” According to Mitter, “China can either engage in irredentist adventurism, to use a good Marxist phrase, or it can pursue economic growth. It cannot sustain both.” This is because “more of China’s economic presence in the future is likely to be linked to its overseas presence. Its geoeconomic model demands more supply chains, more export of foreign direct investment, and embedding in new markets. Of course, this will give China more influence ... but it will also make China less autarkic and also more vulnerable to its connections with the outside world.” China’s well-known territorial claims are “potentially globally disruptive,” which Mitter asserts would meaningfully jeopardize its economic growth. In March, Mitter also [participated](#) in a roundtable panel titled “Authoritarianism in Hong Kong,” hosted by the Rajawali Foundation Institute for Asia at Harvard and [reflected](#) on the legacy of Sun Yat-sen a century after his death in an episode of *The Spectator’s Chinese Whispers* podcast.

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## **Kurtz-Phelan Interviews Hill on What Trump Sees in Putin**

Discussing President Donald Trump's words and actions favoring Vladimir Putin over Volodymyr Zelenskyy just seven weeks into his second administration, **Daniel Kurtz-Phelan** (Editor, *Foreign Affairs*) [asks](#) **Fiona Hill** (Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution), "Can you imagine this being a really durable change in how we think about global order?" Hill responds, "Next year is the 250th anniversary of the U.S. revolution and independence," emphasizing the historical magnitude of the fact that "Trump is using—and the people around him—this idea of unitary executive to kind of recreate something that the United States cast off 250 years ago." Hill argues, "It's not just the strongman, the spheres of influence, the sort of old-style imperialism," but "he's going back to sort of an eighteenth-century style of governance, too." Given Trump's expectation for US foreign policy to operate through personal relationships with Putin and Xi Jinping, Hill asserts that "basically what he's proposing here is a kind of tripartite carving up of the world. It's certainly what the rest of the world is assuming is what they want." Kurtz-Phelan also made an appearance on the *Bloomberg Surveillance* podcast, in which he [declares](#) globalism to be dead in the United States: "I think what's really interesting right now is that you see much of the rest of the world continuing with something that looks fairly familiar to those of us who would have been looking at some of these dynamics a decade or two ago."

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## **Zoellick Underlines Importance of History in Diplomacy for *Global Times***

In an interview to commemorate the publication of *America in the World: A History of U.S. Diplomacy and Foreign Policy* in Chinese, **Robert Zoellick** (Senior Fellow, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs; Former President, World Bank) [explained](#) his reasons for writing the book and the importance of history in understanding politics today. During his time in government, Zoellick said, "I often reflected on history as I tried to deal with the problems of the day. Many foreign policy courses are taught using international relations theory, which are fun to debate and argue about. However, I didn't find these theories very useful in dealing with problems I faced." *America in the World* was an attempt to help younger generations "have a sense on how they can draw upon history in diplomacy." Turning to US-China relations, Zoellick identified three key themes that characterize their 200-year history: commercial ties, China as a potential or great power, and tensions over American missionaries attempting to spread Christianity and



capitalism. The convergence of these factors can cause the relationship to improve or deteriorate—and while “Right now, we are in a difficult phase, where all factors are swinging in a negative direction,” Zoellick hopes that someday “the pendulum will swing back in a positive direction again.”

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## **Miller and Plokhii Analyze “War Through Historian’s Eyes”**

On March 3, Harvard’s Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies hosted **Serhii Plokhii** (Mykhailo S. Hrushevs’kyi Professor of Ukrainian History and Director of the Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University) and **Christopher Miller** (Professor of International History, Tufts Fletcher School) for a [conversation](#) about the Ukraine War. Miller noted that the war is unique in the presence of “types of warfare that would’ve looked familiar to soldiers in World War I” alongside a “high tech warfare” that is not one-sided to the degree that recent conflicts have been. Yet both scholars still see echoes of history, particularly in the institutional legacy of the Russian Army. The high Soviet casualty rate in World War II was partly about equipment restraints: “They didn’t have nearly as much mechanization” as other armies, so they had to “substitute” personnel for equipment. Today, Miller said, “If you look at Prigozhin’s decision-making, I think in 2022 and 2023, I think there was a similar dynamic at play.” When asked whether the Yalta Conference provides any hints for how the Ukraine War might end, Plokhii said that while “it looks like we are back to some form of the diplomacy between the great powers” that led to World War II and decided how it was resolved, at Yalta Franklin Roosevelt “did everything in his power to actually preclude the division of the world into the spheres of influence.” Today, “it looks like no one is hiding these words from the American president,” who seems like he may accept the geopolitical compromises that spheres of influence entail. Separately, Plokhii also [spoke](#) to *NPR* about Russia’s pattern of broken promises to Ukraine.

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## **Gage Explains History of Hoover’s FBI Amid Today’s Fears of Weaponization**

In an episode of the *Why Is This Happening?* podcast with **Chris Hayes** (Host, MSNBC), Beverly Gage (John Lewis Gaddis Professor of History, Yale University) [addresses](#) fears of Kash Patel's leadership of the FBI by illustrating how the bureau has been politicized in the past. She recounts how after World War I Hoover, then working at the Department of Justice, helped the Attorney General "to use immigration and deportation law as ways to go after people whose opinions they didn't like," planning the Palmer Raids against anarchists and communists. While these set the stage for Hoover to use the FBI to target political enemies when he became its director, Gage notes that "There's a reason that the ACLU was born out of this period... the Palmer Raids, the World War I repression—they are signs that this kind of repression has happened at a pretty mass scale in U.S. history before, but they are also a story about the ways that people organized through the law and through protest." Bringing the conversation to the present, Gage argues that while Patel emulates Hoover in his willingness to use state power to go after political enemies, he may in fact be more dangerous because of his loyalty to the president. "Kash Patel is so open about being loyal to Donald Trump in particular—he calls him King Donald. And Hoover was a very different creature. He was sort of the ultimate autonomous bureaucrat" who on several occasions refused to carry out orders he believed to be illegal. Gage also [reviewed](#) **Clay Risen's** (Author and Reporter and Editor, the *New York Times*) *Red Scare* in *The New Yorker*, examining how the early-20th-century crackdown on dissent resonates in today's political climate.

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## **Brinkley and Hemmer Reassess Trump's Legacy in Carnegie Panel on the Future of the Presidency**

On an episode of the *Carnegie Connects* podcast hosted by **Aaron David Miller** (Senior Fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), **Douglas Brinkley** (Katherine Tsanoff Brown Chair in Humanities and Professor of History, Rice University) and **Nicole Hemmer** (Director, Carolyn T. and Robert M. Rogers Center for the Study of the Presidency, Vanderbilt University) [discuss](#) President Donald Trump's sense of history and whether he operates with meaningful precedents. Reflecting on a meeting with Trump before his first inauguration, Brinkley said that Trump told him he "knew nothing about past history, he never read a book about Abe Lincoln"—rather, "he was a visual guy." He had preferences, as Brinkley notes ("Nixon was his guy"), but ultimately Trump is "a bizarre 'one-off'-er that you cannot

really honestly connect to any of our previous presidents.” Hemmer adds some caveats. Trump’s emphasis on vengeance in his second term is similar to Andrew Jackson and Richard Nixon, and his “embrace of insurrection” echoes Andrew Johnson’s, as he pardoned Confederate officers after the Civil War and “really wanted to welcome those insurrectionists and traitors back into the US body politic in the way that Donald Trump has done with the January 6th rioters.” Hemmer argues that this historical context is vital to understanding what is without precedent: Trump’s consolidation of power in the executive.

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## Applied History Articles of the Month

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[“Europe Should Dust Off Multilateral Nuclear Plans”](#) – Michael John Williams, *Foreign Policy*, March 26, 2025.

“Just as the United States used nuclear sharing to manage proliferation in early Cold War Europe, Brussels would do well to manage this situation proactively via a shared European nuclear project,” **Michael John Williams** (Associate Professor of International Affairs, Syracuse University’s Maxwell School) [recommends](#) to NATO allies at risk of losing the US nuclear umbrella. “The best way to do this would be to dust off early Cold War plans for the MLF.” That is, the Multilateral Force (MLF) originally proposed by the John F. Kennedy administration for a pan-continental nuclear deterrent. A 21st-century European MLF would start with an Anglo-French core, according to Williams, with steps to train and integrate European officers onto existing French and British platforms, and then the “second order of business would be for the new European Nuclear Weapons Agency to create a tactical nuclear capability.” The modern MLF would manage the continent’s security dilemma, deter aggression, and strengthen the EU’s position to negotiate potential future nuclear arms control agreements, Williams argues. “In a best-case scenario, a European nuclear deterrent will strengthen NATO, and in the worst-case scenario, if the United States abandons Europe, the continent will not be defenseless.”

[“The Dark Heart of Trump’s Foreign Policy”](#) – Ezra Klein, *The New York Times*, March 1, 2025.

“I think Trump and the people around him believe the norms of the world turned against territorial expansion in a way that was bad for America,” **Ezra Klein** (Columnist and *The Ezra Klein Show* Host, *New York Times*) [asserts](#) in an interview of **Fareed Zakaria** (Host, *CNN’s Global Public Square* ; Columnist, *Washington Post*). “In the 19th century, America expanded; other countries did, too. ‘We are still powerful, and there are things we should want,’” Klein says, referring to President Trump’s territorial ambitions—Canada, Greenland—and other inflated visions about international relations. Applying the analogy of “Dreikaiserbund”—the alliance between Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia’s “three conservative monarchs holding back the tide of liberalism” in the late 19th century—Zakaria considers that perhaps for the Trump administration, “that is the way they’re thinking about it: ‘We and Putin — and maybe even Orban and Erdogan and Xi — we need to hold back all this godless, reckless liberty and liberalism that is engulfing the world.’” Citing Thucydides, Zakaria describes Trump’s worldview as “The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must,” along with “a kind of fascination, I think, not just with America in the 19th century but also in the geopolitics of the 19th century.” Trump ignores “the central point about the transformation of the international system after World War II, which is that you don’t need territory to become rich, powerful and incredibly effective in the world”—just look at South Korea and Israel, Zakaria says. Ultimately, he argues that the president’s desire for physical expansion is a “bizarre, anachronistic way to look at the world.”

## Applied History Quote of the Month

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“Mankind possesses no better guide to conduct than the knowledge of the past...  
The study of history is at once an education in the truest sense and a training for a political career, and that the

most infallible, indeed the only method of  
learning how to bear with dignity the  
vicissitudes of Fortune is to be reminded  
of the disasters suffered by others.”

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**Polybius**, *Rise of the Roman Empire*, Book 1, Introduction [Scott-Kilvert, trans.]  
(Around 120 BC)

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