



Applied History Project Newsletter

August 2025

The August 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, Ivana Hoàng Giang, and Aristotle Vainikos.

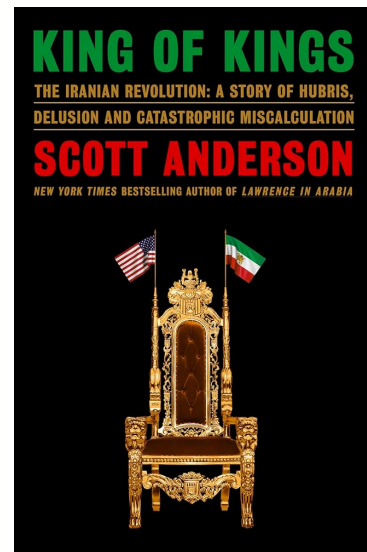
If you would like to submit an item for next month's issue, please email it to aristotle_vainikos@hks.harvard.edu with the subject "September Applied History Updates" before Tuesday, October 7.

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

Anderson Probes the Causal Links between the US-Iran Alliance and the 1979 Revolution

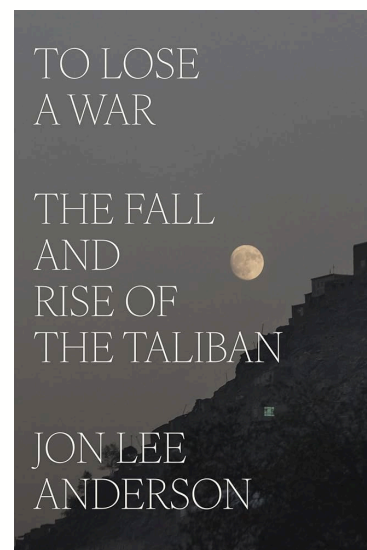
In his new book, *King of Kings: The Iranian Revolution: A Story of Hubris, Delusion and Catastrophic Miscalculation*, **Scott Anderson** (author, war correspondent) gives an account of the fall of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and the end of the US economic and military alliance that brought with it a "radically altered Middle Eastern chessboard," leading to "some of America's greatest missteps in the region over the

past four decades.” [Writing](#) in *The New York Times*, **Mark Bowden** (author, journalist) describes an initial Cold War alliance that devolved into a mutual dependency of US reliance on Iran’s oil supplies and Iran’s insatiable desire for advanced weapons systems. “Created and sustained by myths of royal legitimacy, the shah’s story also affords a timely lesson in the dangers of unmooring a society from reality, of rewriting its history and ignoring its laws.” As the US continued to support an “increasingly capricious autocrat,” the Shah became isolated in a circle of excess and enforced retribution against anyone who challenged him. US foreign policy and intelligence officials were blind to the early and sustained signs of the Islamic Revolution, and according to Anderson, reports that warned of a looming rebellion were suppressed. Apart from the enormous consequences of the 1979 Revolution, the story, Bowden states, “is another sad chapter in the long history of self-defeating, misguided US meddling in the internal affairs of less powerful nations—Cuba, Nicaragua and Vietnam already by 1978, and Iraq and Afghanistan still to come.” For Applied Historians, both the stories and the lessons are recurring. Bowden commends the book as “exceptional and important,” combining “scrupulous and enterprising reporting” with “superb storytelling.”



Anderson Portrays the Erosion of US Policy Goals in Afghanistan

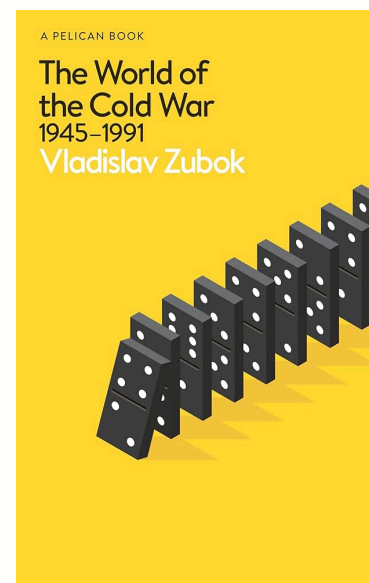
Jon Lee Anderson (author, war correspondent; staff writer, *The New Yorker*) has published *To Lose a War: The Fall and Rise of the Taliban*, a collection of two decades of his dispatches from Afghanistan—from 2001, when the US and its allies launched a war after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, to 2021, when the US military presence ended in a chaotic withdrawal. The book combines granular on-the-ground reporting with a twenty-year sweep of failed US policy. **Elliot Ackerman** (author, Afghan War Marine veteran) [reviews](#) the book in *The New York Times*, writing, “Anderson characterizes Afghanistan as ‘more of a battleground of history’ than ‘a nation.’” The arc of the story begins with “the rise of American power in Afghanistan in the aughts, as well as the Taliban’s precipitate fall



in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.” In what appeared to be an inflection point, “The Taliban were on the run. Osama bin Laden was on the loose. And the country stood on the cusp of a promising future unimaginable only weeks before.” Gradually, the war loses direction. “One of the remarkable aspects of Anderson’s reporting is its scope of perspective as well as time. In his telling, the war—and with it, Afghanistan’s promising future—deteriorates before our eyes, page by page.” Contrary to expectations of a quick American victory, Afghan and American casualties increase. Ackerman observes that “One of those casualties is the clarity of purpose with which the United States entered the war after 9/11. Afghanistan was supposed to be the ‘good’ war, fought for a righteous cause: the destruction of Al Qaeda and the dismantling of the Taliban regime that offered the group a haven.” As the United States lost its initial clarity, questions arose: “Five, 10, 15 years in, are we in Afghanistan to fight terrorists? To build a nation? Or as part of a geopolitical great game that has enmeshed Afghanistan since the days of Alexander the Great?” The country, its people, and the Taliban’s role, often for both good and ill, bedeviled American policymakers and the military—like so many who had preceded them. To illustrate the miasma of confusion, Anderson quotes an Army Lieutenant Colonel leading a failing counterinsurgency campaign in one of the provinces, who said of the war, “It’s just beyond us.” Ackerman concludes, “*To Lose a War* is a monument to both good intentions and folly, a humbling reminder that the ball keeps bouncing.”

Zubok Takes Aim at the US for the Cold War

The World of the Cold War, 1945-1991 by **Vladislav Zubok** (Professor of International History, London School of Economics), is a “monumental and still highly readable history of the US-USSR confrontation period,” which “explores how that conflict not only shaped the post-1945 world but also the parallels with the ‘new world disorder’ emerging today.” Reviewing the book in *The Financial Times*, **Charles Clover** (security and defense correspondent and former Moscow bureau chief) [states](#) that the strength of the book lies with its perspective from both sides of the conflict. That said, Zubok advances a clear argument: “I side with those who claim that the Cold War was caused by the American decision to build and maintain a global liberal order, not by the Soviet Union’s plans to spread communism in Europe.” Zubok “downplays the role of ideology in the struggle between east and west, instead



focusing on the international system of great power politics as the crux of the conflict.” The spheres of influence in the 1945 Yalta Agreement granted the Soviets “coveted recognition of their equal status” as a world power. Zubok writes, “For the rest of the Cold War, every successive Kremlin leader would strive to reach this benchmark again and again, each time coming up against their main detractor, the United States,” which sought to replace the failed European system of a balance of power “with an effort to allow Europeans to freely choose their destiny, including eastern Europe.” Amid his broader thesis, Zubok points to the effect that Henry Kissinger’s 1972 opening to China had on Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, “who feared being outflanked in the east and launched an ultimately shortlived détente” with US President Richard Nixon. Although Kissinger aimed to affect Soviet behavior with his China policy, “he also managed Soviet fears and employed a backchannel to the Kremlin for constructive negotiations.” Zubok rejects West-centric interpretations of the end of the Cold War. “Historians can endlessly argue about what came first, the economic and Cold War pressures that pushed [Mikhail] Gorbachev and his circle of reformers to dismantle the old Soviet system, or the idea of a revolution that led to the weakening of the Soviet Union. My own view is the latter but it is impossible to convince those who believe in the former.” It is “obvious,” he concludes, that “the main engine for the multiple endings of the Cold War was in the Kremlin.”

**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.’”*

Applied History Analysis of the Month

Sergey Radchenko, "[The Enduring Allure of the Summit](#)," *Engelsberg Ideas*, August 14, 2025

Last month's Alaska summit between President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin made headlines around the globe. Columnists in every major outlet speculated about how the two leaders would interact and, based on their discussions, what the prospects for peacemaking in Ukraine would be. In anticipation of the summit, **Sergey Radchenko** (Professor, Johns Hopkins SAIS) collected case studies from US-Soviet summits to illustrate the varying ways the Trump-Putin meeting could unfold. Noting at the outset that "The tortuous practice of Russian-Western summitry has, for all of its all-too-frequent failures, occasionally produced impressive results," Radchenko identifies three types of summits and their potential outcomes, each with their own historical analogs: "a nefarious deal," like the 1944 Moscow summit between Stalin and Churchill that divided up Europe; "a veritable fiasco," like the Paris summit of 1960 that nearly led to a shouting match between Khrushchev and Eisenhower; and "reconnaissance by fire," like JFK's June 1961 Vienna summit with Khrushchev that, despite lacking any direct takeaways, informed both leaders about each other's resolve.

What sets Radchenko's piece apart is its use of history to impose structure on our analysis of an important event, helping us frame uncertain outcomes. Radchenko also prompts us to stretch our conceptions about how the summit might end because he shows that history gives "existence proofs" for a range of possible outcomes—if Khrushchev and Eisenhower could get into a shouting match, we cannot immediately discount a similar scenario today. He also takes the next step and proposes how, hypothetically, the Trump-Putin summit could end in each of the three outcomes he identifies. And by arguing that a "reconnaissance by fire" summit is more likely than the two alternatives, Radchenko's historical insight about this type of meeting adjusts our expectations about whether to call the Trump-Putin summit a success or failure: while an outcome along the lines of the 1961 Kennedy-Khrushchev summit would involve few takeaways on paper, it could still add value by updating each leader's prior beliefs about the other's position.

Publications of Note

[“Is Donald Trump Right About Nukes?”](#) by Graham Allison (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Professor of Government, Harvard Kennedy School) in *The National Interest*

As Trump and Dmitry Medvedev traded nuclear threats last month, Allison urged readers to look past the window-dressing and take Trump seriously on nukes. After analyzing Trump’s previous comments on nuclear weapons, including his fears of “a third World War,” and the threat of “nuclear warming,” he concludes that this is indeed an issue that Trump takes seriously. Allison ends on an optimistic note, “betting that Trump will find his way to his own version of a strategic concept that combines Nixon-Kissinger’s ‘détente’ and JFK’s post-Cuban Missile Crisis vision of a ‘world safe for diversity.’”

[“The World at War and the Coming Peace,”](#) by Paul Kennedy (Professor of History, Yale University) in *The Free Beacon*

In a review of two new books on WWII—Paul Thomas Chamberlin’s *Scorched Earth* and James Holland’s and Al Murray’s *Victory ’45*—Kennedy emphasizes that understanding history is not simply about adding detail to key episodes but also synthesizing many sources and global perspectives into a coherent narrative about the most significant factors. Kennedy spotlights Chamberlin’s success in “describing and then summarizing the various parts of this gigantic war [WWII] that should command our attention” and in clearly stating “what the war meant for a vastly altered world.”

[“Pursuing Pole Position,”](#) by John Bew (Senior Fellow, Harvard’s Belfer Center; Professor in History and Foreign Policy, King’s College London) in *Times Literary Supplement*

Bew concludes from **Ashley Jackson's** and **Andrew Stewart's** new book *Superpower Britain*, which describes the postwar planning underway in Britain during WWII, that traditional accounts of Britain's postwar politics do “not do justice... to the sophistication of strategic thinking and decision-making” at the time. This period remains relevant to British policymakers, Bew argues, because “The struggle for national survival from 1939 to 1945 bequeaths us with brutalist realities that are harder to confront in more peaceful times,” hopefully sparking imaginative thinking that exceeds the normal “cautious managerialism” of policymaking.

[“Why the Trump Tariff Merry-Go-Round Won’t Stop,”](#) by Robert Zoellick (Senior Fellow, Harvard’s Belfer Center; former US Trade Representative, Deputy Secretary of State, and President of the World Bank) in *The Wall Street Journal*

Zoellick explains that the original intent of the 1934 Reciprocal Tariff Agreements Act, which “delegated authority to the executive to negotiate lower tariffs,” was to promote more open markets after the disastrous 1930 Smoot-Hawley tariffs revealed “Congress’s penchant to protect local producers” at the expense of the national interest. But Trump has overreached his authority, Zoellick writes, and uses tariffs for coercive purposes, not only hurting the US economy but also alienating “friends Washington will need for military, intelligence and technological cooperation.” Zoellick also [reflected](#) on lessons from the “Two-Plus-Four” negotiations surrounding German unification in 1989 for *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and delivered [remarks](#) on the history of the international political economy at the World Bank’s Stanley Fischer Memorial Lecture.

[“The American University is in Crisis. Not for the First Time.”](#) by Beverly Gage (Professor of History, Yale University) in *The New York Times*

Pointing to historian **Richard Hofstadter's** 1963 polemic on “anti-intellectualism” in America—to which Hofstadter attributed Dwight Eisenhower's defeat of Princeton alumnus Adlai Stevenson in the 1952 presidential election—Gage shows that dissatisfaction with America's academic elites long predates Republicans’ current efforts to remake US universities. Gage reiterates Hofstadter’s conclusion that the

pendulum will continue to swing because the public is ultimately “‘ambivalent’ about what they want from” the country’s experts, although the elites’ tendency to “‘maintain their sense of their own purity’” can be counterproductive.

“The Gerrymandering Battle Has a Historical Precedent. It’s a Warning We Should Heed.” by Alexander Keyssar (Professor of History and Social Policy, Harvard Kennedy School) in *The Boston Globe*

Keyssar warns that the redistricting battle unfolding between Republican- and Democrat-led states will leave neither party satisfied, just as the partisan decisions by state legislatures in the early 1800s to switch from district-based processes to winner-takes-all systems for selecting Presidential electors planted the seed for today’s dissatisfaction with the Electoral College. The lesson from the Founding Fathers, Keyssar argues, is that a constitutional amendment to standardize elections is the only way to stop a race-to-the-bottom—though he admits we are unlikely to succeed where even the Framers failed. Keyssar also [spoke](#) on a panel for New York University’s Brennan Center for Justice, where he explained that US civil and voting rights debates reached a fever pitch in the Cold War: “the Soviet Union was making very substantial, successful propaganda by pointing out that America’s racial minorities were denied the right to vote, and thus how could the United States claim to be the beacon of democracy in this global competition for allegiance?”

“Whiskey Rebellion,” by Kori Schake (Senior Fellow and Director of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute) in *AEIdeas*

To illuminate the dangers of President Trump using emergency authorities to call up the National Guard to fight crime—and to suggest a better approach—Schake highlights differences between Trump’s strategy and that of George Washington during the analogous Whiskey Rebellion in 1794. Schake notes that, unlike today, Washington was careful to seek judicial approval for declaring a state of rebellion, “engaged local figures with stature in the community as mediators,” and empowered state governments—steps that successfully reassured the public about the federal government’s “equanimity.” The article draws on Schake’s book *The State and the*

Soldier (forthcoming October 2025), which she also [previewed](#) in an episode of the podcast *This Means War*.

**[“This Isn’t How You Deal With Free Riders,”](#) by Hal Brands
(Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins SAIS) in
*Bloomberg***

“If Trump doesn’t holster his tariff weapon, allies might start to view US power as a danger to their security and well-being,” Brands warns. “Trump’s policies mark the close of a post-1945 era in which Washington bore unequal burdens in support of free-world allies,” because back then the “US could afford to be generous, given its unchallenged, unprecedented economic power,” which lasted several decades after World War II. “Superpowers don’t have to be endlessly generous to their allies,” Brands concludes. “But those that act too acquisitively, too consistently, risk squandering international legitimacy and consent.”

**[“What Trump Needs to Remember on His Way to Alaska,”](#)
by David Ignatius (columnist) in *The Washington Post***

Ahead of the August 15 US-Russia summit in Alaska, Ignatius argued that the Korean War offers the clearest parallel to the situation in Ukraine today: “a stalemated war, a recalcitrant [US] ally, a menacing superpower foe, the risk of nuclear conflict.” Ignatius acknowledges the importance of Dwight Eisenhower’s leverage over South Korean President Syngman Rhee (Ike threatened to withhold fuel supplies and even prepared to arrest Rhee), but he also highlights Eisenhower’s pressure on the adversary—as severe as issuing a nuclear threat to North Korea, the Soviet Union, and China. Like Ike, Trump must “squeeze the other side” (Russia) and back Ukraine’s postwar security in order to achieve a durable peace.

**[“The Iranian Revolution Almost Didn’t Happen,”](#) by Daniel
Immerwahr (Professor in the Humanities, Northwestern
University) in *The New Yorker***

As in Iran's 1979 revolution, the subject of **Scott Anderson's** book *King of Kings* (reviewed above), Immerwahr suggests that "consequential contingencies" can determine the course of history: untimely illnesses (including the Shah's own cancer diagnosis), the chaotic logic of protesting crowds, and the Ayatollah Khomeini's personality turned an unplanned reaction to a provocative op-ed into a "revolutionary deluge." Immerwahr notes that although this period lends evidence to those who claimed revolution was imminent after recent Israeli and American strikes on Iran, it must be balanced against another historical reality: the Iranian theocracy's firm 45-year grip on power.

[“Napoleon's Lessons for Trump,”](#) by **Walter Russell Mead (Distinguished Fellow in Strategy and Statesmanship, Hudson Institute) in *The Wall Street Journal***

After one of the greatest political comebacks of all time, Mead argues, President Trump has followed in Napoleon's footsteps on the global stage as well: conducting "foreign policy without looking over his shoulder at Congress," spinning "foreign policy triumphs" into popularity at home, and seeking "a big diplomatic deal with Russia." The lesson from history, however, is that the demands Napoleon "made on foreign countries were so severe, and he so frequently changed his priorities and broke old deals to strike new and better ones, that Napoleon's opponents ultimately refused to negotiate with him anymore." Mead warns: "This is the threat Mr. Trump faces as he reaches for the stars."

[“Warnings from Weimar: Why Bargaining With Authoritarians Fails,”](#) by **Daniel Ziblatt (Professor of Government, Harvard University) in *Foreign Affairs***

Tracing the series of "fateful decisions" by German opposition parties and political leaders that brought Hitler to power, Ziblatt argues that "political establishments" enable autocrats by mistakenly gambling that they can be contained by law or controlled from within the system. To arrest similar trends today in countries that he labels as backsliding democracies, such as Hungary, Turkey, and the US, Ziblatt

urges politicians to push back and remember that surrendering is not a strategy. Compromising with extremists is ultimately self-defeating.

[“The US Needs a Return to Realism,”](#) by Emma Ashford (Senior Fellow, Stimson Center) in *The Financial Times*

US foreign policy continues to suffer from the same “grandiose” thinking that animated Bill Clinton’s strategy of “engagement and enlargement” and George W. Bush’s “freedom agenda,” Ashford argues. She suggests that just as past “US presidents often return to their realist roots in times of international turmoil”—such as Eisenhower during the early Cold War and Nixon amid “political and financial upheavals” in the 1970s—Trump should continue to “shift to a more realist foreign policy” that would provide “a narrow set of achievable goals for policymakers to focus on.” Ashford [elaborates](#) in her new book, *First Among Equals: US Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World*.

[“Power and Peril in Reagan’s Last Cold War Chapter,”](#) by James Graham Wilson (Historian, Office of the Historian) for US Department of State

In a preview of the Office of the Historian’s latest installment of the *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Wilson recommends that, “Especially in the context of President Donald Trump’s commitment to build a ‘Golden Dome’ and modernize US strategic forces, grappling with the history of the Reagan era can help policymakers produce outcomes that keep America safe.” As editor of the volume covering national security policy from 1985-1988, Wilson identifies three historical actors who modeled lessons for nuclear arms control today: “Ultimately, both Reagan’s ambition and Nitze’s bureaucratic savvy—on top of Gorbachev’s aspirations to reduce or even eliminate nuclear weapons—proved to be essential toward negotiating the December 1987 Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and that same month a basic formula for what became the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty.”

[“Russia’s Recurring Policy Error: Why Putin Still Doesn’t Understand American Democracy,”](#) by **Jeremy Friedman (Associate Professor, Harvard Business School) in *JURIST***

In pointing out how Putin fails to understand the role of domestic politics in US foreign policy decision making as he meets with Trump, Friedman argues that this is a common trend in US-Russian relations throughout history. Looking back at Cold War misinterpretations of US foreign policy by the Soviets, he points out that “The one constant in all of these mistakes has been Moscow’s failure to understand and account for the vicissitudes of American domestic politics.” Following Putin’s meeting with Trump, Friedman recommends Putin keep in mind former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill’s famous line: “All politics is local.”

[“The New Deal Roots of America’s National Security Stance,”](#) by **Angus Reilly (Assistant Editor, *Engelsberg Ideas*) in *The Financial Times***

Reilly analyzes the origins of “national security” as a defining concept in US politics by linking two new books, one about the New Deal’s effect on foreign policy (**Andrew Preston**, *Total Defense*) and the other about “consequential” journalist Walter Lippmann (**Tom Arnold-Forster**, *Walter Lippmann*). Together, the books show how politicians and foreign policy thinkers within a rising superpower reframed “foreign events as threats to the American way of life” and “elevated the state from a reactive actor to a force committed to preventing economic collapse and global disorder.”

[“Waging War with Gold: National Security and the Finance Domain across the Ages,”](#) review by **Anand Toprani (Associate Professor of Strategy and Policy, US Naval War College; former Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center) for *Naval War College Review***

In a review of *Waging War with Gold: National Security and the Finance Domain across the Ages* by **Charles A. Dainoff**, **Robert M. Farley**, and **Geoffrey F.**

Williams , Toprani draws lessons from their account of “how nations use financial power to achieve their national interests.” For example, “regulation of [the] monetary and financial system constitutes one of the most important tasks of any state,” which “ultimately create[s] markets.” Toprani suggests specific historical cases that illuminate these lessons, such as “the formation of the Bank of England and how it supported British war making during the heyday of the ‘fiscal military’ state.”

“[Lessons From the 1920s and 30s on Tariffs and Markets](#),” by **Ian Harnett (Managing Director, Absolute Strategy Research) in *The Financial Times***

Harnett argues that Trump’s new tariffs have more in common with America’s oft-forgotten 1920s tariffs than they do with Nixon’s 10 percent tariffs that lasted only four months in 1971. “While the structure of the US economy has clearly changed since the early 20th century,” Harnett reminds us that US profit growth is still “closely linked” to global trade. If today’s tariffs produce the same recoil effect as in the 1920s, then expect global exports to fall and bring US earnings and stocks down with them.

“[What is a ‘Security Guarantee’?](#)” by **Michael O’Hanlon (Senior Fellow in Foreign Policy, Brookings Institution) in *The Wall Street Journal***

Contrasting Britain’s unsuccessful “‘security guarantee’” to France before WWI—vaguely worded and neglecting to place forces in France—with Washington’s decision in 1955 to permanently station forces in West Germany, O’Hanlon argues that “the physical presence of foreign military forces on Ukrainian soil is crucial to deterrence.” He recommends options that may be more politically realistic today than sending combat troops to Ukraine: embedding Western trainers in Ukraine’s military, or stationing US contractors in its cities to supervise air and missile defenses.

[“Brace For a Crash Before the Golden Age of AI,”](#) by John Thornhill (innovation editor) in *The Financial Times*

Thornhill gives a shoutout to *Technological Revolutions and Financial Capital: The Dynamics of Bubbles and Golden Ages*, in which author **Carlota Perez** identifies five historical cases of great technological revolutions. AI is the extension of the latest: the information technology revolution that began in the 1970s. These revolutions follow a “fairly predictable cycle,” according to Perez, and Thornhill deduces that “A bone-juddering crash—or several crashes—therefore seems likely before we reach any golden age of AI.” One important lesson from previous revolutions is that “To enter a golden age, civil society needs to shape the revolution to its own ends.”

[“A History That Needs to Be Retold,”](#) by Vivien Chang (Visiting Scholar, Dartmouth College; former Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center) for *Los Angeles Review of Books*

Reviewing **Howard W. French’s** (columnist, *Foreign Policy*) biography of Ghana’s first prime minister Kwame Nkrumah, Chang writes that amid a new round of US travel restrictions, “including Ghana, and an enduring proxy conflict in Sudan, French’s book reads as history told in the present tense, at once enthralling and devastating.” Nkrumah was a leader in a moment of Pan-Africanism, epitomized by “The Year of Africa” in 1960 when 17 African nations gained independence. “The moment,” however, “was fleeting, leaving in its wake whispers of a dream deferred.” Chang concludes that today, “The Africa of Nkrumah’s dreamworld—stable, prosperous, in charge of its own destiny—is still struggling to be born.”

Interviews and Speeches

Mitter Reflects on 80th Anniversary of End of WWII from China’s Perspective for *CGTN Europe*

“Many aspects of China’s identity and foreign policy are very heavily shaped by the experience of World War II,” **Rana Mitter** (Chair in US-China Relations, Harvard Kennedy School) [argues](#). From Japan’s 1931 invasion of Manchuria through the Second Sino-Japanese War, China thinks “of itself as a state which essentially has pushed back against foreign invasion.” Thus, “in terms of how the outside world and China have interacted,” World War II “still sits very centrally in what you might call the Chinese historical imagination.” Those outside of China, however, might ask, “Why, for instance, does China have one of the five permanent seats, the P5 seats, in New York today?” Mitter explains, “the answer is that China’s wartime contributions in fighting with the Allies and against the Axis powers earned it the right, given by the Allies together, by President Roosevelt in particular, to actually sit at that top table.” So, one of the legacies of what Mitter termed as China’s status as a “forgotten ally” of WWII is that “You will hear Chinese leaders fairly often actually in public statements talking about the way in which the world should remember that China was the first signatory to the United Nations Charter back in San Francisco in April 1945.” For the *South China Morning Post*, Mitter also [spoke](#) about how 80 years on from WWII, China finds itself with “an opportunity to influence the world order at a time when the United States is changing its role.”

Westad Emphasizes Importance of Historical Sensibility in *CGTN Podcast*

Speaking on an episode of *The Hub with Wang Guan*, **Odd Arne Westad** (Professor of History, Yale University) [assesses](#) that there are “many more similarities between the multipolar world that we have already moved into” and “the late 19th century in international affairs than what I see with the Cold War.” The number of great powers that were “competing internationally, conflicting against each other” in a “much more unruly, much more unstable world” provides an analog for international relations today, Westad observes, as well as an important “warning from the past” given that that period of international affairs “ended in 1914 in cataclysmic war.” This historical context is important, Westad argues, because when analysts only look to the recent past—as so many “both in the United States and in China and elsewhere tend to do”—they miss key parallels and fail “to draw on the broader human experience” in studying current events.

Bridges Makes Case for Infrastructure Building “as Mode of Power Projection” for 20th-century America on *Peoples and Things*

Mary Bridges (Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center) [speaks](#) with podcast host **Lee Vinsel** about her 2024 book, *Dollars and Dominion*, which chronicles the role of the US banking sector in establishing American power overseas during the early 20th century. Companies like the International Banking Corporation made investments abroad “hand in hand with Uncle Sam,” Bridges notes, focusing on countries, such as the Philippines and Cuba, that were also targets of US “imperial activities.” The financial infrastructure that they established persisted and expanded even as political changes occurred, such as a shift in US policy toward devolving authority to local populations. Bridges discusses the implications for students of history: “the power of momentum” can move events with little ability for intervention, and explaining moments of “rupture” remains the harder task for historians.

Brinkley Suggests US Still Hasn’t Learned Its Lesson in Disaster Preparedness on *PBS Newshour*

Reflecting on Hurricane Katrina’s 20th anniversary, **Douglas Brinkley** (Chair in Humanities and Professor of History, Rice University) [says](#) the disaster reminds him of the “history of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, when people fled Oklahoma, New Mexico [and the] Texas Panhandle for California.” Comparing the two historical analogs of natural disasters that displaced large numbers of American families, Brinkley notes that “Like the Dust Bowl, Katrina isn’t about one date, August 29. It’s really about years, decades that it’s taking to heal.” What did we get wrong? Not only was the city built in part below sea level and destined to drown in the first place, says Brinkley, but then “New Orleans utterly failed in how to get people out, particularly poor people or elderly people.” Yet, between “20 years ago and even now, we still turn to the Dutch [to look at] how to build better dams, better levee systems.” Failing to apply lessons from both our own past and other countries’ examples means that “at any hurricane season, the big one can hit, and it might be the one that knocks New Orleans off its feet.”

Keller Finds Rigidity in International Economic Organizations on *Business Scholarship Podcast*

Previewing his forthcoming paper, “The World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the Fall of the Global Neoliberal Economic Order,” **Kevin Keller** (Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center; Visiting Fellow in East Asian Legal Studies, Harvard Law School) [highlights](#) three historical cases demonstrating that these postwar international organizations actually “undermined neoliberal legal rules and institutions and supported the rise of neoliberalism’s greatest competitor, which today is state capitalism.” First, “the World Bank helped strengthen, but not privatize, Chinese state-owned enterprises” in the 1980s and 1990s. Then, “neither WTO rules nor the WTO dispute settlement mechanism put meaningful constraints on China’s use of state-owned enterprises” in the 1990s and 2000s. Finally, “when Chinese state-owned enterprises began to expand overseas” in the 2000s and 2010s, “it turned out that international organizations had already primed the legal systems of other countries for the entry of foreign capital.” Keller says the most useful policy takeaways today are for China. Just as these “organizations did not end up entirely supporting the US’s interests”—despite the fact that the United States helped build them “to pursue its larger economic goals” and “maintained significant power over” them—China should treat the institutions it has built itself over the last two decades “with a little caution, or at least an awareness that the work of the organizations might not end up aligning with China’s interests.”

Applied History Quote of the Month

“The very concept of history implies the scholar and the reader. Without a generation of civilized people to study history, to preserve records, to absorb its lessons and relate to our own problems, history, too, would lose its meaning.”

George F. Kennan, WNET TV program, “US Soviet Relations, the first 50 years,”
April 17, 1984.

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