



Applied History Project Newsletter

September 2025

The September 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.

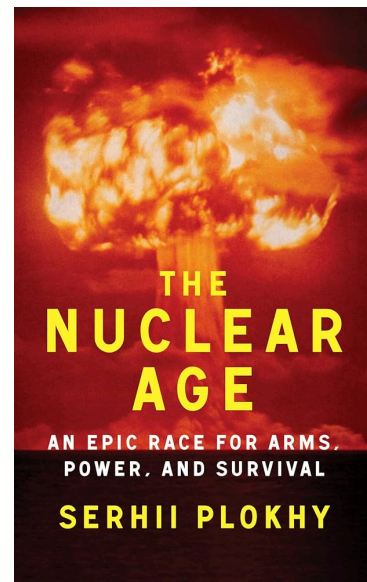
If you would like to submit an item for next month's issue, please email it to aristotle_vainikos@hks.harvard.edu with the subject "October Applied History Update" before Thursday, November 6.

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

Plokhly Sounds an Alarm on the Growing Nuclear Threat

The Nuclear Age: An Epic Race for Arms, Power, and Survival by **Serhii Plokhly** (Professor of Ukrainian History, Harvard University) "is both a history of nuclear armament and a homily to its dangers"—with insights for Applied History. Describing the book as "panoramic in scope and fastidious in detail" in *The Financial Times*, **David Patrikarakos** (author, journalist, and war correspondent) [states](#), "Its central argument, which goes against much mainstream proliferation theory, is that it is not

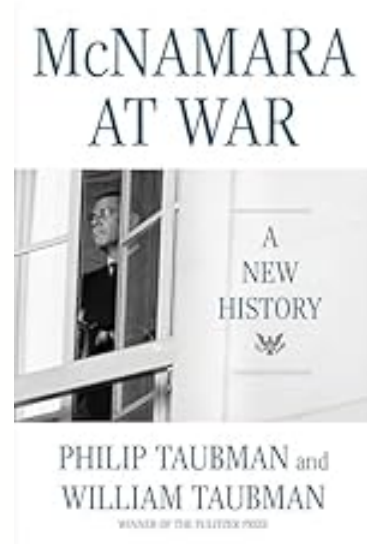
prestige, domestic politics, or even security, but fear – specifically ‘fear of nuclear attack by another state or of superior conventional forces possessed by an adversary’ – that is the most common reason states acquire nukes.” Plokhy writes with urgency, “We are... ‘in a more dangerous situation today than we have been since the Cuban Missile Crisis.’” He believes “the return of nuclear confrontation makes the subject newly pressing, and because previous accounts failed to capture the emotional, psychological, and moral dimension – especially fear – that drives nations to seek the bomb.” He supports his thesis with a chronology, starting with fear of a Nazi bomb as impetus for the Manhattan Project. Following the US nuclear strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, “the cold war transformed the bomb from an American monopoly into the organizing principle of international relations,” and the UK, China, and others responded to perceived threats. While public anxiety resulted in the regulation of nuclear testing, fear of destruction drove governments to expand their capabilities. Plokhy warns that the US introduction of “an international ‘non-proliferation regime,’” supported by treaties, “slowed the spread of nuclear weapons but never halted it,” and that non-proliferation is under pressure today. In the 20th century, fear acted as “a self-correcting force, propelling humanity to the brink and pulling us back again” through treaties and agreements to “slow the arms race and stabilise the balance. Today, it is far less clear that their successors have the imagination and discipline, or indeed the intent, to do the same.”



The Taubmans Detail McNamara’s Culpability

McNamara At War: A New History by brothers **Philip Taubman** (former Washington bureau chief, *The New York Times*) and **William Taubman** (Emeritus Professor of Political Science, Amherst College) is a personal and national tragedy. The Secretary of Defense under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson not only “ended up isolated, detested, and in fraught relationships with his children,” but he also “knew from the start of his tenure as secretary that the war in Vietnam was unwinnable.” **Julian E. Zelizer** (Professor of History and Public Affairs, Princeton University) [reviews](#) the book, which he terms “riveting,” in *Foreign Policy*. The Taubmans examine the influences on McNamara’s life and his patterns of behavior, including his mother’s ambitions for him, his drive to excel, his passion for quantitative analysis, and his “brutal” pace of work and “unyielding stubbornness” as

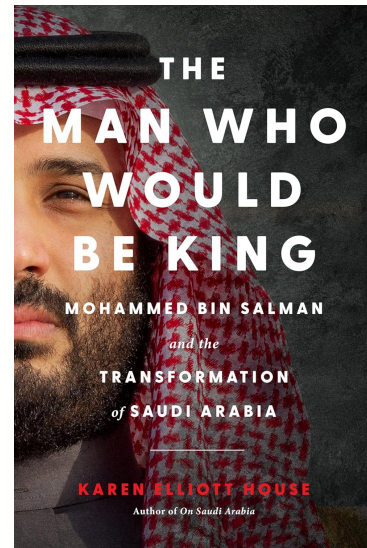
he rose in the executive ranks of the Ford Motor Company to become president, all of which emerge during his time as secretary. McNamara's assessment of the war came early. By November 1963, when Kennedy was assassinated, he "sensed that the United States needed to get out of Vietnam as soon as possible since the south was growing unstable." In the authors' account, McNamara's definition of loyalty to a "manic and depressive" president, who rejected doubts and warnings, combined with his "fear of being marginalized" for presenting his concerns, led him to support the administration's public position on the war's progress and to lash out against "intellectual skeptics, activists, journalists, and critics within the administration." Zelizer points to the chapter on the years 1964 and 1965, when American involvement escalated dramatically, as the "most devastating." Subsequently, "despite his doubts, despite the information available to him, and despite his private statements, McNamara spent most of 1966 protecting his boss and defending an operation that sent thousands of U.S. troops to their deaths." His tentative approaches to Johnson to present his beliefs failed. "In the end, McNamara never did anything about what he knew." Decades later, his admission that his decisions and the war itself were wrong "was too little and much too late." Zelizer concludes that "the book is a case study of how high-ranking officials who don't act on the information they have live with the illusory notion that their being on the inside is somehow better for the nation in the long run." So goes a recurring and fateful choice in *Applied History*.



Elliott House Explores the Future of Saudi Arabia

The Man Who Would Be King: Mohammed bin Salman and the Transformation of Saudi Arabia by **Karen Elliott House** (Senior Fellow, Harvard's Belfer Center; former editor and publisher, *The Wall Street Journal*) is a biography of Saudi Arabia's crown prince, known as MBS, who, with recent events having altered the Middle East's balance of power, "will play a critical and perhaps decisive role in shaping the new regional order." So [writes](#) **Walter Russell Mead** (Distinguished Fellow in Strategy and Statesmanship, Hudson Institute) in *The Wall Street Journal*. Elliott House compares her subject's objectives to those of Peter the Great, the 17th century Russian czar, both in the "vast and underreported changes" that MBS has

brought to the country and in the distinction between modernization and democratization, which were not equivalent for either autocrat. “MBS has no more interest in democracy than Peter the Great did more than three centuries ago, or than Vladimir Putin does today,” states Mead. Central to the book is “the paradox that drives MBS.” Despite the country’s global influence, measured by its oil reserves, its stature as the location of two Muslim holy sites, and its long-standing alliance with the US, Saudi society is “supremely self-confident and profoundly insecure.” Elliot House explains that in the past, the Saudi government could use the distribution of oil revenue among tribal leaders and urban dwellers to ensure political stability. With population growth and the increase in prosperity, domestic consumption has increased, reducing the level of oil available for export and raising the question of how the kingdom will ensure its political stability. MBS, like his predecessors, recognizes that Saudi Arabia cannot continue to rely on oil alone. Unlike his predecessors, he believes that half measures are insufficient and that “to lessen its dependence on oil, the social contract between Saudi citizens and their government has to change.” This means making big bets on alternative sources of revenue, including new industries with new or much larger cities to accommodate them. Elliot House compares the strategy to “playing roulette on a long-spinning wheel,” one that is “circling so slowly the winning bets won’t be truly paid for decades.” On MBS’ determination, she is unequivocal. While Peter the Great encountered huge obstacles creating St. Petersburg in the northern marshes, he persevered, and like Peter, “MBS is a formidable character bent on imposing his will.” For Applied Historians, Elliot House’s work will resonate in both her analysis of the complexities and tensions inherent in social change and in her portrayal of the motivations and contradictions of two autocrats.



This section, currently written by Anne Karalekas, was inspired by Paul Kennedy and his wide experience in writing book reviews.

Applied History Analyses of the Month

Hal Brands, “[Don’t Sweat the AGI Race](#),” *RAND*, September 30, 2025

As the global AI race accelerates, observers are warning that the pursuit of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) will destabilize global economic and geopolitical orders. **Hal Brands** (Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins SAIS) takes the opposite view. In a report for *RAND*, he lays out several historically-informed principles that guide his reasoning, ranging from “the security dilemma is the wrong way to think about AGI” to “AGI does not have to make crisis instability worse.” In his explanations, he dissects the historical thinking underpinning those on the other side of the debate—for example, by illustrating that they make incorrect assumptions about deterrence strategy during the Cold War—and offers his own historical arguments to make his point. Brands’s analysis stands out in its focus on the role of historical assumptions in informing contemporary debates, providing a much-needed reality check about the dangers of misusing history. And by defining several actionable propositions for readers, Brands clearly illustrates how the historical instances he refers to have implications for today’s world.

Adam Tooze, “[The End of Development](#),” *Foreign Policy*, September 8, 2025

Is development dead? The United States has declared it so, but **Adam Tooze** (Professor of History, Columbia University) [urges](#) the rest of the West to resist following suit. By Applying History, Tooze uncovers an alternative approach modeled by China’s own lessons learned from the West’s failures in development. Reviewing the movie that leads to the current snapshot, Tooze finds that Western development “was not born of geopolitical innocence” and that the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), for example, represented the US’s “final gasp of a unipolar, end-of-history fantasy.” China “really called America’s bluff” by demonstrating “the greatest success story in development history.” The US has been so affronted by China’s rise it has even denounced UN language promoting development as “a nod” to Xi Jinping’s Global Civilization Initiative. In place of disingenuous aspirations, argues Tooze, the CCP acknowledges explicitly that “material transformation is the key to legitimacy and peace.” So, “China’s strategic direction remains clear” in its foreign aid relations. US rejection of the SDGs “with no replacement is not realism—it’s nihilism,” whereas “China’s blend of realpolitik with ideology and national interest cannot help but seem rational and balanced.” Tooze’s historical reframing of Chinese

and American development aid, and its analysis of implications for the future of Western development policy, constitutes an insightful Applied History Analysis of the Month.

Graeme Thompson, “[The End of Pax Britannica](#),” *Engelsberg Ideas*, September 10, 2025

After distilling two distinctive trends from the current challenge of an unraveling international order—the rise of mercantilism and of multipolarity—**Graeme Thompson** (senior analyst, Eurasia Group; former Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center) identifies the decline of Britain’s “world-system” between 1870 and 1914 as analogous. Thompson compares Donald Trump’s “America First” policies with the British Empire’s growing skepticism about whether the system of free trade and global military power that it had built was truly enriching Britain more than her rivals. The eventual outcome of Britain’s retreat from the liberal order was war in 1914. The similarities that Thompson summarizes serve not just to warn that war is again possible, but also to illuminate why it might occur: a transitional system in which both “established and rising powers” seek “rival imperial spheres of influence” is “structurally unstable.” But as with all good Applied History, Thompson examines differences in addition to similarities, which in this case reduce the likelihood of conflict. For example, the US has fewer rivals than Britain did, and no modern nation is seriously chasing “economic autarky.” Thompson concludes by suggesting a few themes to monitor, based on the trajectory of Britain’s experience. Will Washington, he asks, pursue a rapid arms buildup in tandem with cutting trade, just as London did? For instructively breaking down a headline policy challenge and using history to project the risks if current trends hold, Thompson’s piece is an Analysis of the Month.

Publications of Note

“[Using History to Settle the Question of Presidential Tariff Powers](#)” by **Philip Zelikow (Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) in *Reason***

Zelikow reviews the history of emergency tariff authority and finds that, when it passed IEEPA in 1977, Congress “did not mean to empower a president to disregard” other existing legislation that protects Congress’s constitutional right to oversee tariffs. Predicting, therefore, that the US Supreme Court will rule against President Trump’s expansive levies, Zelikow instead advises the administration to revisit the arguments set forth by the bipartisan Tariff Commission in 1919 and by Republicans in the 1920s, which concluded that “if tariffs are to be good policy, they should be practical, predictable, and retain the principle of equal treatment.”

[“The Proliferation Problem Is Back”](#) by Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar (President, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), Ernest Moniz (Co-Chair and CEO, Nuclear Threat Initiative), and Meghan O’Sullivan (Director, Harvard’s Belfer Center) in *Foreign Affairs*

China’s nuclear buildup, Russia’s nuclear threats in Ukraine, and the developing Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs have caused global concern about whether we are entering a new age of nuclear proliferation. In an op-ed accompanying their recent report on this subject, Cuéllar, Moniz, and O’Sullivan [recall](#) that in the heights of the Cold War, the US successfully prevented allied proliferation by offering security guarantees—indeed, “These arrangements played a crucial role in preventing the wave of proliferation that appeared imminent in the 1960s and 1970s.” They argue that a new compact with our allies, retaining “the U.S. nuclear umbrella for strategic deterrence while strengthening the conventional defenses of allies,” would adapt this formula for today’s geopolitical environment.

[“We the People: A History of the U.S. Constitution”](#) by Jill Lepore (Professor of American History, Harvard University; Professor of Law, Harvard Law School) published by *Liveright*

In her new book, Lepore casts the Constitution as a document meant to be amended but whose “ineffective mechanism” for doing so permitted only 27 amendments (out of thousands of proposals) and “contributed to the country’s profound political polarization,” as [stated](#) in a review by Harvard Law School. Making a case for new

approaches in legal scholarship, Lepore argues that to truly put the Constitution in context, we must look beyond the limited writings of James Madison and his contemporaries to a wider set of essays, petitions, and attempted Constitutional conventions.

[“The Return of the ‘War Department’ Is More Than Nostalgia. It’s a Message”](#) by **David E. Sanger** (White House and National Security Correspondent) in *The New York Times*

Sanger argues that when Harry Truman signed the law creating the Defense Department out of the former War Department in August 1949, things seemed even worse than they are today: “Joseph Stalin was 16 days from proving the Soviets could detonate a nuclear weapon, and Mao Zedong was less than two months from declaring the creation of the People’s Republic of China.” Yet, calling it “Defense” was “intended to reflect an era in which deterrence was critical.” Today, “when deterrence is more critical than ever,” Trump’s argument “that the answer is to go back to the good old days” may, according to **Nicholas Burns** (former US Ambassador to China; Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Relations, Harvard Kennedy School), play right “into China’s narrative in its unrelenting contest for global influence with the U.S. Beijing will brand this unfairly as evidence the U.S. is a threat to the international order and China is a defender of the peace.”

[Foreign Relations of the United States, 1989-92, Volume 31, START I, 1989-1991](#) by **James Graham Wilson** (Supervisory Historian, US Department of State)

The newest volume in the Department of State’s *Foreign Relations of the United States* series was recently published, compiled, and edited by Wilson, covering START I negotiations under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush.

[“The Perils of Getting Too Personal in Foreign Policy”](#) by **Hillary Clinton (Former US Secretary of State; Professor of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University) and **Keren Yarhi-Milo** (Dean, Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs) in *The New York Times***

Highlighting Trump’s focus on personal connections with world leaders, Clinton and Yarhi-Milo review the role of personal diplomacy in key episodes of American history to contextualize this behavior. They argue that a reliance on personal impressions carries risks—Kennedy’s Vienna summit with Khrushchev, for example, left an uneasy impression that the Soviets read as weakness, and at the Yalta summit, FDR misjudged Stalin’s character, trusting his assurances that he would not seek domination of Eastern Europe. On the other hand, they note that Reagan’s “affinity with the new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, which was evident from their first encounter in Geneva, made nuclear arms control imaginable.” Ultimately Clinton and Yarhi-Milo assess that while personal engagement can break deadlocks impossible to move past otherwise, “the overpersonalization of foreign policy risks distorting judgment and magnifying volatility.”

[“The ‘Critical Minerals Crisis’ of 100 Years Ago”](#) by **Chris Miller (Professor of International History, Tufts’ Fletcher School) reposted by the American Enterprise Institute**

Concerns about overreliance on geopolitical rivals for critical minerals recur during periods of international competition, Miller shows, citing a dissertation by **Rob Konkell** (PhD in History, Princeton University ’22). Learning from their embarrassing dependence on German minerals processing ahead of WWI, combatant nations turned minerals access and stockpiling into priorities during the 1930s. “Germany’s near-monopoly on tungsten smelting in the 1910s has been replaced by China’s monopoly on rare earth processing today,” Miller writes.

[“We Need to Know History, Especially Now”](#) by **Peggy Noonan (columnist) in *The Wall Street Journal***

Noonan spotlights a new collection of posthumous essays, *History Matters*, by renowned historian **David McCullough**, whose core message was that history “imparts ‘a sense of navigation,’ a new realization of what we’ve been through and are made of.” For Noonan, who laments that politicians “now routinely say and do things in our public life that are at odds with our history, that are unlike us,” the past is an essential reminder of “what we don’t do” as a functioning Republic. “You don’t want to live in the past,” she writes, “but you do want to bring the best of the past into the present.”

“Russia’s Provocations are Menacing NATO. The Cold War Shows How It Needs to Respond” by **Sergey Radchenko (Distinguished Professor, Johns Hopkins SAIS) in *The Guardian***

Radchenko presents his case for how Europe should respond to Russian aircraft incursions. Drawing on lessons from the Cold War, Radchenko concludes that shooting down enemy aircraft violating airspace lays out clear red lines for an adversary and deters further aggression by “reinforcing the red lines.” At the same time, he cautions that during the Cold War, “even at its height, the two sides found ways to talk to each [other]”—something completely absent from Europe’s approach to Russia today.

“How Military Leaders Should Respond to Trump’s Norm-Busting” by **Peter Feaver (Professor of Political Science and Public Policy, Duke University) in *Foreign Policy***

Seeking to answer the Applied History question, “Is it unprecedented?” Feaver compares the Trump administration’s approach to firing US military officials with cases of civil-military conflict from recent decades. He concludes that Trump’s behavior is indeed “a marked departure from established practice.” After reviewing examples from recent history in which military leaders lodged protests while upholding their Constitutional duties, Feaver advises today’s generals to “not pick fights” and voice policy disagreements in private, while continuing to enforce professional standards in the junior ranks.

[“‘Warrior Ethos’ Mistakes Military Might for True Security – And Ignores the Wisdom of Eisenhower”](#) by **Monica Toft (Professor of International Politics and Director of the Center for Strategic Studies, Tufts University) in *The Conversation***

Writing about Pete Hegseth’s recent speech to a gathering of generals in Quantico, Toft argues that the Trump administration’s militaristic rhetoric and foreign policy stray from the example of a restrained—yet strategic—posture that defined the postwar era. “America,” Toft concludes, “doesn’t need a Department of War. It needs leaders who understand, as Eisenhower did, that living by the sword will doom us all in the end.”

[“The Fatal Flaw in the Transatlantic Alliance”](#) by **Jennifer Kavanagh (Senior Fellow and Director of Military Analysis, Defense Priorities) and **Peter Slezkine** (Senior Fellow and Russia Program Director, Stimson Center; Former Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center) in *Foreign Affairs***

Kavanagh and Slezkine argue that US overcommitment to Europe through NATO and the EU trade regime stems from three “fateful choices” at the alliance’s founding: privileging Europe over the Americas, militarizing rather than economizing transatlantic ties, and embedding them in universalist ideology. Recommending a “pivot home”—retrenchment from Europe and renewed hemispheric focus—they recall George Washington’s and James Monroe’s warnings against European entanglements. The authors note that, “The postwar pivot to Europe proved to be a rejection, rather than an extension, of the United States’ traditional hemispheric policy.”

[“From Colonialism to The Nuclear Age: Nuclear Tests in The Sahara and Lessons For Today”](#) by **Leyla Tiglay (Postdoctoral Research Associate, Brown University Watson School; Former**

Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard's Belfer Center) in *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*

Unlike other nuclear powers, France conducted its nuclear tests in its colonial territory—the Algerian Sahara in the midst of the Algerian War of Independence. Focusing on both the human and geopolitical costs of these tests, including the unprecedented strain they caused in the NATO alliance, Tiglay concludes that the episode “showed how rapidly nuclear know-how spreads when non-proliferation is treated as secondary and geopolitical aims outweigh the global risks of radiation.” As global pressures to obtain nuclear weapons begin to resemble those seen at the start of the nuclear age, she argues that the consequences of France’s nuclear breakout—and its complicity in that of Israel’s and India’s—highlight the risks of policymakers deprioritizing nonproliferation.

“[Europe’s Necessary Appeasement of Donald Trump](#)” by Janan Ganesh (associate editor) in *The Financial Times*

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Ganesh argues that Europe is making a necessary sacrifice by capitulating to the Trump administration on trade in exchange for continued security cooperation. “History tends to under-reward those leaders who suffer for their successors,” Ganesh states, but history is nonetheless full of examples of leaders who “blew up” their own reputations “to give [their] heirs a fighting chance”—from Joe Biden’s withdrawal from Kabul to permanently end US losses there, to Neville Chamberlain, who through “appeasement” bought Britain another year to prepare for war.

“[Is America Entering a New Era of McCarthyism?](#)” by Christopher Grimes (Los Angeles bureau chief) in *The Financial Times*

Grimes argues that actions by Trump and his team against political enemies “amount to a co-ordinated push to stifle critical voices — a process some have likened to the Red Scare of the 1950s led by Senator Joe McCarthy.” What does this analogy warn about the future? Grimes asks **Erwin Chemerinsky** (Dean and Distinguished Professor of Law, UC Berkeley School of Law), who “argues that in some ways the potential threats are more significant than in the 1950s because

McCarthy, for all the influence he once wielded, was only a junior senator from Wisconsin.”

Interviews and Speeches

Allison Reflects on “the Second Trump Administration and the International Security Order” with *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*

As the post-World War II international security order turns 80 years old, **John Mecklin** (Editor-in-Chief, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*) [sits down](#) with **Graham Allison** (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Professor of Government, Harvard Kennedy School) in a wide-ranging interview to discuss lessons from the Long Peace as well as the future of the non-proliferation order, America’s alliances, and how Donald Trump is managing relations with America’s number one great power rival: China. On the Long Peace, Allison reflects that “its architects—whom we now revere as the ‘wise men’—understood that if history continued in its natural course, the next generation would see a third world war as they had seen the second follow the first. And a third world war with nuclear weapons might indeed be the last.”

Ferguson Weighs Historical Templates for Ukraine’s Postwar Security at Conference in Kyiv

Asked “What will historians consider a Ukrainian victory?” during the 2025 Yalta European Strategy Annual Meeting, **Niall Ferguson** (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) [explained](#) that “Victory for historians is all about duration.” The conclusion to WWI ensured only a brief interlude of peace before WWII, and Britain’s military “victory” in 1945 proved Pyrrhic. By contrast, Ferguson relays Kissinger’s advice that durable peace requires “diplomatic security”—for Ukraine, that means legitimacy within the international order, recognized by all parties. Noting that the “South Korea model” is now unattainable for Ukraine, given that the US will not approve sending troops to

Ukraine, Kyiv may still look to Finland's experience. Ferguson was joined onstage by **Serhii Plokhyy**, **Timothy Snyder** (Chair in Modern European History, University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy), and **Yaroslav Hrytsak** (Professor of History, Ukrainian Catholic University).

Logevall and Mitter Share Examples of “How Historical Leaders’ Pivotal Choices Shape Modern Thinking” for Harvard Kennedy School Executive Education

In an Applied History faculty webinar which received more than 1,500 registrations from around the world, **Fredrik Logevall** (Faculty Mentor, Harvard's Applied History Project; Professor of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School) and **Rana Mitter** (Chair and Professor of US-Asia Relations, Harvard Kennedy School) [shared](#) hallmark cases of past world leaders applying lessons from history. From the failed Bay of Pigs incident, John F. Kennedy learned he had not “demanded enough of my advisers” and “had not consulted... with enough outsiders.” Logevall assesses that, applying those lessons to the Cuban Missile Crisis, “Kennedy’s management of the EXCOM was remarkably understated,” such that “when faced with a real prospect of nuclear war, he steered his advisers and the superpowers away from that outcome.” Mitter compares two earlier decision points in China—a success followed by “failure to learn from that decision just ten years later.” Mitter says, “Chiang Kai-shek chose to make sacrifices in 1938 that would win out for the longer term at the end of the war against Japan, and those turned out to be successful.” Then in 1948, “he played a zero-sum [game] in a civil war against the Communists and he lost everything other than the island of Taiwan.” That is a lesson, Mitter argues, in assessing “what are your end stakes and what are your realistic possibilities of actually getting to those endpoints.” Together, Logevall and Mitter packaged their cases as examples of “how leaders learn or fail to learn from history and what it means for leadership today.”

Gavin Publishes Long-Awaited Applied History Primer, *Thinking Historically: A Guide to Statecraft and Strategy*

In a book talk hosted by the Hoover History Lab's **Stephen Kotkin** (Visiting Scholar, Harvard's Applied History Project; Senior Fellow, Stanford's Hoover Institution),

Frank Gavin (Distinguished Professor, Johns Hopkins SAIS) [plants](#) history's flag firmly in the world of decision-making, following in the footsteps of Ernest May and Richard Neustadt's foundational Applied History volume, *Thinking in Time*. He warns that, generally, "the confidence you have in what happened in the past is actually perhaps unwarranted," and suggests sharpening the history behind the analogy before applying it. Gavin finds "a lot of people in Washington saying, 'We're in Cold War 2,'" for example, but argues that the original Cold War is often taken for granted. "When did the Cold War begin, and when did it end?" Demonstrating that "answers to simple questions about beginnings and endings may also reveal deeper truths about causes, trends, and processes that would interest policymakers," Gavin [writes](#) in the book that some "analysts who see the Cold War beginning in the winter of 1946 lay the responsibility largely at the feet of the new president, Harry S. Truman." They see "the Cold War not as inevitable but as due to unfortunate decision-making, [which] reflects a belief in the importance of individual leadership and statecraft," rather than structural factors. The lesson that these analysts draw from the Cold War will differ from those who interpret the past in other ways.

Zoellick Conveys Lessons from Bush Sr.'s Foreign Policy at Rice University's Baker Institute

Recalling the "measured" use of power by President George H.W. Bush's administration, **Robert Zoellick** (Senior Fellow, Harvard's Belfer Center; former US Trade Representative, Deputy Secretary of State, and President of the World Bank) [urges](#) US policymakers to remember that "trust is the currency of the realm" in international affairs. For example, US officials pushing for NAFTA as early as the 1980s understood that ensuring that our neighbors succeed is a strategic priority, not simply an economic benefit. Looking further into America's past, Zoellick underscores the significance of good credit for dealing with crises, including war—another lesson he says we are in danger of forgetting, as the US debt burden continues to grow.

Dalio Warns of Today's Parallels with the 1930s in *The Financial Times*

Pointing to “wealth and value gaps” that lead to “irreconcilable differences” which democracy can’t solve, **Ray Dalio** (founder, Bridgewater Associates) [argues](#) that populism on both the political right and left empowers autocratic leadership. Focusing on the US, Dalio [warns](#) policymakers that today, like in the 1930s, big debt problems, big political problems, and big geopolitical problems threaten to overturn democracy as “the willingness to compromise” and “trust in the system have dwindled.”

Freeman, Gage, and Blight Join Forces to Teach “One-Time-Only” Course at Yale on “America at 250: A History”

Exploring US political history “as a conversation across time between citizens about what the United States is, was, and was meant to be” timed “in advance of the nation’s semiquincentennial,” the course is jointly [taught](#) by Yale University faculty members **Joanne Freeman** (Professor of American History and of American Studies), **David Blight** (Professor of History and African American Studies), and **Beverly Gage** (Professor of History). In an episode from their podcast for students that accompanies the lectures, Blight [suggests](#) that “maybe a central theme of this whole bloody course is, ‘America is born in contradiction.’ It’s born in this paradox.” Agreeing, Freeman reinforces a point she made in her lecture, that “the Declaration itself testifies to these broad ideals” about equality, but that the founders thought “about them sincerely in a very limited way,” leaving their words and actions open to be challenged down the road—even up to today. So, “The contradiction is there from the very beginning.” Gage reflects that in her research she “was stunned by the number of people who set out writing their own declarations” in the 18th and 19th centuries. “We’re not only at the beginning of a historical story” about the American Revolution, Gage says, “but we’re at the beginning of a whole conversation, a tradition that many, many people are going to pick up, interpret, reuse, toss out, claim, disclaim.”

Kotkin Argues “Russia is a Near Eastern Country Too”

In an interview with **Mattias Hessérus** (Director, Ax:son Johnson Institute for Statecraft and Diplomacy), **Stephen Kotkin** [describes](#) Russia as mimicking “the Near Eastern hereditary monarchies much more” than European powers, principally

because of its patrimonialism. As Russia continually seeks to maintain its place among the great powers it has always been hindered by weakness, leading to “this massive overinvestment in the state, in repression, in the military” and ultimately “this conflation of the interests of the personal rule with the state and this patrimonialism where they take away or they reward businesses to people.” Similar regimes can be seen “in the Saudi case, in the Emirates, in Qatar and in Oman.” An optimistic outcome for Russia breaking out of this patrimonial system, Kotkin concludes, would be liberalizing in the model of Poland and undergoing “institutional transformation.”

MacMillan, Mitter, and Wertheim Review “The Postwar Order After 80 Years”

In an event hosted by **Erez Manela** (Professor of History, Harvard University) at Harvard’s Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, **Margaret MacMillan** (Emeritus Professor of History, University of Toronto), **Rana Mitter**, and **Stephen Wertheim** (Senior Fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) [discussed](#) how the postwar order was formed, evolved, and subsequently weakened. MacMillan observes that “We often see new orders emerging after great catastrophes,” such as the Thirty Years’ War “which produced the Westphalian system,” the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars which “produced the Concert of Europe,” and World Wars I and II which would “produce new calls for new international systems” that are “still with us” today. Different nations may have different conceptions of the same global order. Mitter explained China’s view and its recent evolution. In last month’s celebration commemorating the 80th anniversary of the end of WWII, Mitter noticed greater emphasis on China’s role in the UN’s founding. The UN has become “central to the way in which China sees its role as a new owner of the existing global order,” he says. “And clearly, although it’s not stated as such, this is a challenge to the United States as the traditional lead actor in the UN.”

Simms Traces Rise and Fall of Anglo-American “Condominium” at Ramsay Centre

In an appearance on a podcast from Australia's Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation, **Brendan Simms** (Director and Strand Leader, University of Cambridge's Centre for Geopolitics) [describes](#) the long history of international criticism of hegemony by the UK and, later, the US, with revisionist powers adopting similar language regarding "living room" or spheres of influence. The transition of hegemony from the British Empire to the US should be seen, he argues, less as a handoff and more as a shift between "shareholders" within a longstanding two-power "condominium."

Applied History Quote of the Month

"Study history, study history—in history
lie all the secrets of statecraft."

– **Winston Churchill**, Advice given to James Humes, 1953

BELFER CENTER FOR SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Harvard Kennedy School

79 John F. Kennedy Street, Cambridge, MA
02138 USA

© 2025 The President and Fellows of Harvard
College

belfercenter.org | belfer_center@hks.harvard.edu

[Unsubscribe or Manage Preferences](#) | [Privacy](#)

