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Applied History Network Newsletter

November 2025

The November 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.

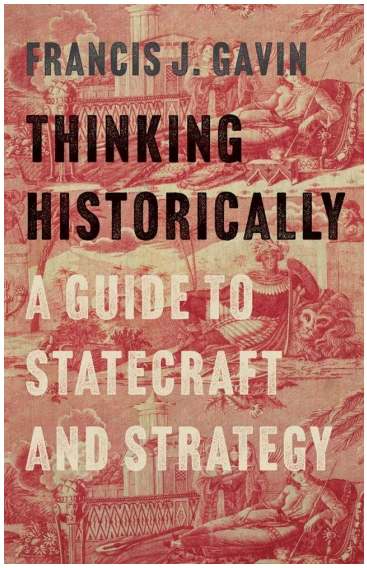
This newsletter is prepared by the Applied History Project at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center and edited by Jason Walter, Ivana Hoàng Giang, and Aristotle Vainikos.

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 "December Applied History Update" before January 8.

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

Gavin Advances the Applied History Discipline with Major Contribution

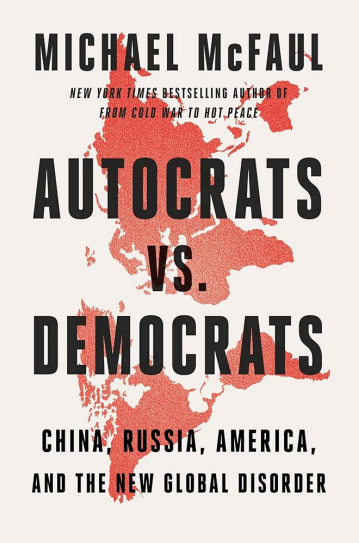
Thinking Historically: A Guide to Statecraft and Strategy by **Francis J. Gavin** (Distinguished Professor and Director, Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins' SAIS) takes its place next to **Ernest R. May** and **Richard E. Neustadt's** 1986 seminal work, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers*. Featuring the book in his *Chicago Tribune* column, **John T. Shaw** (Director,



Paul Simon Public Policy Institute, Southern Illinois University Carbondale) presents Gavin's argument that "the skills needed to understand history can translate into practical tools for aspiring statespeople to confront contemporary problems and craft future strategies," and, relatedly, "that grappling with consequential or contested historical questions is strikingly similar to making critical choices about governance." As an example, former Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke drew on his scholarship of the Great Depression to address the 2008 financial crisis with innovative policymaking. Throughout the book Gavin emphasizes the need for policymakers "to develop 'historical sensibility' – a temperament that appreciates and embraces life's unpredictable rhythms, baffling surprises and head-spinning coincidences." He also urges leaders "to think historically," requiring "a set of skills to interrogate the past by probing deeply, constructing and reconstructing chronologies, and contemplating counterfactuals in which different decisions might have significantly altered subsequent events." An examination of the Cold War anchors Gavin's methodology. In his words, "By upending the stylized narrative of the conflict, thinking historically does not just provide surprising thoughts about the past. The same way of thinking can be applied to contemporary events, phenomena, conceptual lenses, assumptions, and actors we believe we understand." Gavin's checklist for policymakers, in the form of questions, is designed to break through preconceptions and limitations. Shaw enumerates: "How did we get here, what else is going on, what are our unspoken assumptions, what is really important, what are the most likely outcomes, what else could happen, how rapid is the pace of events and is anything inevitable?" Commending Gavin's work as "nuanced and compelling," Shaw closes with a quotation from Winston Churchill: "'The longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward.'" Gavin provides policymakers with the means of engagement.

McFaul Draws on History to Bolster Democracy

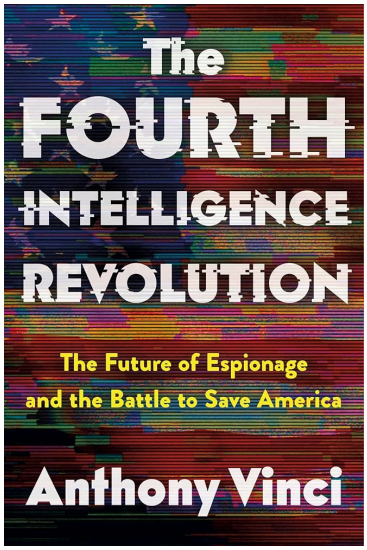
Autocrats vs. Democrats: China, Russia, America, and the New Global Disorder by **Michael McFaul** (Professor of Political Science and Director, Freeman Spogli Institute, Stanford University; former US Ambassador to Russia) "is at once a history, net assessment, and sermon." Reviewing the book in *Foreign Policy*, **Vivek Viswanathan** (Policy Fellow, Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research), takes issue with several of McFaul's assertions, including his plea to "double down" on



democracy promotion at a time when democratic ideals and liberalism have fallen out of favor, and his argument that "Americans are underrating Russia's power and overrating China." However, he commends other aspects of the book, including McFaul's analysis of Russian and Chinese motivations and behavior. Invoking Applied History, he writes, "As historians know, extracting lessons from the past is dicey business. Yet his careful and unvarnished chapters on what the United States got right and wrong in the Cold War illuminate the choices ahead by showing what is both similar and different." He continues, "McFaul makes hundreds of recommendations in this book, but none is more vital than the distinction he draws between China and Russia." He considers Russia "a lost cause as long as Putin is at the helm," advising a policy "to deter and defend actions to threaten his neighbors and destabilize global operation." While acknowledging that China and Russia "are much closer than they were during the Cold War… he declines to join the chorus of voices to suggest the die is cast. Lumping China with Russia is 'premature'… Quietly, persistently, and with low expectations for success, American leaders must remind their Chinese counterparts that China is better off as a major player in the existing global order than it would be as a rogue state like Russia." Both Viswanathan and McFaul resist the "'reverse Kissinger'" approach to Russia. "Aside from his nuclear weapons, Putin cannot threaten the United States at anywhere near the scale that China can." Viswanathan writes, "McFaul is correct that for now, if the United States is aiming for a diplomatic breakthrough, the original Kissinger is still the better bet." Despite his reservations, Viswanathan assesses the book as "ambitious, accessible, and incisive in its arguments."

Vinci Joins the Call for Public-Private Collaboration to Address Intelligence Threats

The Fourth Intelligence Revolution: The Future of Espionage and the Battle to Save America by **Anthony Vinci** (Adjunct Senior Fellow, Technology and National Security Program, Center for a New American Security) addresses "the confluence of increasingly complex geopolitical challenges and of global technology advances," concluding that "America's spy agencies must not merely adapt to but also dominate this dynamic if we are to blunt (if not defeat) our adversaries." So writes **Glenn S. Gerstell** (Principal, Cyber Initiatives Group; Senior Advisor, Center for Strategic and



International Studies) in *The Cipher Brief* . Vinci delineates three previous intelligence eras: the period during World War II and the creation of the Office of Strategic Services; the bipolar years of the Cold War with a dominant focus on military information; and the chaotic period after the 9/11 attacks centering on counterterrorism. In defining the "fourth intelligence revolution" Vinci focuses on the expansion of national security challenges that now encompass "commercial and economic information and scientific achievements in a variety of fields" as well as technological advances, globalization, the rise of China, and the fraying of the international order. He terms China "an existential threat" in intelligence and disinformation operations. Gerstell summarizes the book's central argument: "As the definition of national security broadens… the private sector is in the best position to collect and assess that data," which lies outside the weapons sphere and the government's expertise. Vinci points to the successful collaboration between the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency and satellite imagery companies as an example of a robust public-private response. Because of the pervasive intrusion of intelligence into the lives of private citizens, Vinci argues that "'to counter it, we must all become spies.'" Gerstell accepts the need for vigilance, but questions placing a national security burden on individual citizens and notes that the book's timing did not allow discussion of the implications of recent programmatic and personnel changes in the intelligence community. Nonetheless, he commends the book for its depth, its recounting of the history of the intelligence agencies, and its clear explanation of today's technological challenges.

**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

Niall Ferguson, "OpenAI's House of Cards," *The Free Press*, November 17, 2025.

As talk of an “AI bubble” swirls and analysts propose various historical analogies, **Niall Ferguson** (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) argues in favor of the bubble theory, with the 19th-century railroad buildout his preferred analogy. His claim: “Mild disappointment can cause a crash even when the technology is awesome, or even if the investment will ultimately be worth it for society as a whole.” His piece excels at blending economic history, analogical reasoning, and analysis of current events. Drawing on scholarship by noted historian **Charles Kindleberger** that looks across past financial crises to identify their main components, Ferguson classifies the current situation as a “mania or bubble.” Then, Ferguson examines the analogous railroad boom not to simply predict *whether* a bust is coming, but to ask *why* and *what* it will look like. The railroads teach, he argues, that bubbles pop when the pace of earnings lags expectations, even if the technology continues to diffuse and have impact. If true, the lesson encourages a new way of thinking about today’s debate: rather than reducing the question of “Will the bubble pop?” to an either-or analysis of whether AI will be transformative, Ferguson suggests that both are possible at once. To verify that the historical logic is relevant for today’s situation, Ferguson assesses the latest evidence about the finances of the AI titans, suggesting that, indeed, they will struggle to cover their expenditures, as the historical model would anticipate. For weaving together contemporary data and historical insights about the logic of technology bubbles, Ferguson’s piece is an Applied History Analysis of the Month.

Serhii Plokhy, “Putin’s Nuclear Threats Require a Careful Response,” *The Washington Post*, November 6, 2025.

In a timely response to declarations in early November of Russia’s tests of nuclear delivery vehicles and Trump’s announcement that the US would resume nuclear testing, **Serhii Plokhy** (Professor of Ukrainian History, Harvard University) asserts that “It is more important today than at any point in the previous 30-plus years to relearn the lessons of the first nuclear age.” He specifies that the most accurate analogy for today is the early Cold War, when “In absence of the arms reduction treaties of the 1970s, the world” needed “a balance of fear” to discourage nuclear adventurism. How did that work? Because “nuclear weapons have always possessed more diplomatic and psychological power than military power.” They were used “dozens, if not hundreds, of times” as “instruments of diplomacy, blackmail and psychological pressure.” Before arms control, after which there was some degree of trust and dialogue, deterrence rested on threats, discreet or otherwise, that signaled

each state's willingness to use their weapons. Emphasizing again that the nuclear threat today is more comparable to the arms race era of the 1950s-60s than to the arms control era of the 1970s-80s, Plokhy concludes that the world must revive the same deterrence tactics. He evaluates, therefore, that "Trump's pronouncement was a step in the right direction." Plokhy warns, however, that "counterthreats must be carefully considered, so as not to misfire and cause more confusion among adversaries and allies." By providing historically informed recommendations for policymakers in real-time, Plokhy's intervention is an Applied History Analysis of the Month.

Publications of Note

"The End of the Longest Peace?" by **Graham Allison** (Co-Chair, Harvard's Applied History Project; Professor of Government, Harvard Kennedy School) and **James A. Winnefeld, Jr.** (former Vice Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff) in *Foreign Affairs*

"The past eight decades have been the longest period without a war between great powers since the Roman Empire," Allison and Winnefeld write, emphasizing that "the absence of great-power wars since 1945 did not happen by accident." It was shaped by "architects of the postwar order" to achieve an "anomalous" long peace. "When American strategists crafted the Cold War strategy that was the foundation of the long peace, their vision lay far beyond the conventional wisdom of earlier eras," the authors conclude. "To sustain the exception that has allowed the world to experience an unprecedented period without a great-power war will require a similar surge of strategic imagination and national determination today."

"Why America Is a 'Creedal Nation'" by **Gordon Wood** (Professor of History Emeritus, Brown University) in *The Wall Street Journal*

Wood describes how the principles of equality embedded in the US Declaration of Independence regained currency in the 19th century as Americans grappled with defining "nationhood." Wood argues that "blood-and-soil" nationalism have

precedents in American history—even some Founders worried that the country lacked ethnic cohesion. But great American thinkers and leaders in the 1800s, especially Abraham Lincoln, "clinched" the view that "the Declaration [offers] us a set of beliefs" that can bind together "the most diverse nation history has ever known." Wood's article is adapted from his speech accepting the Irving Kristol Award at the American Enterprise Institute.

"Maga + AI is Not a Recipe for Stability" by **Adam Tooze (Professor of History, Columbia University) in *The Financial Times***

"At critical moments in history, technological change can produce not just economic growth," Tooze argues. "It can consolidate or disrupt political regimes." In the Cold War, for example, "the revolution in microelectronics and computing rang in the end of the Soviet bloc." In 2008, the excitement of smartphones and social media "did much to offset the toxic shock of the financial crisis." In the latest example, AI seems to have been able to "shield the US president from the pushback his more dysfunctional policies might otherwise be expected to provoke." Tooze warns, however, if the reality is that "Trump's disinhibited administration is the product of America's social and political tensions, there is nothing in the coincidence of Maga and AI to ease or alleviate any of those stresses."

"A New Age of US-Mexican Interdependence" by **Joseph Ledford (Fellow and Hoover History Lab Assistant Director, Stanford's Hoover Institution) in *Engelsberg Ideas***

Challenging the tendency to describe Trump's often-tense relationship with Claudia Sheinbaum's Mexico as unprovoked or unprecedented, Ledford reviews the history of US-Mexico security cooperation since Reagan to argue that it was Mexican President Lopez Obrador's tenure—and Biden's deal with him to salvage cooperation—that marked the true break from policy precedent. The Trump and Sheinbaum teams, Ledford contends, are productively focusing on "[waging] a 21st-century battle against cartels" to ensure both nations' prosperity.

The Arsenal of Democracy: Technology, Industry, and Deterrence in an Age of Hard Choices by **Eyck Freymann** (Fellow, Stanford's Hoover Institution) and **Harry Halem** (Senior Fellow, Yorktown Institute) published by Hoover Institution Press

In *The Arsenal of Democracy*, Freymann and Halem urge the US to rebuild, alongside its allies, the industrial capacity and innovation ecosystem that supported Allied victory in WWII and which, they contend, will be essential to deter China. In a discussion about the book with **Stephen Kotkin** (Visiting Scholar, Harvard's Applied History Project; Senior Fellow, Stanford's Hoover Institution), the authors emphasize that each chapter "begins with a historical framework" to put "questions about tradeoffs and hard choices" into context. "History is not a crystal ball," they add, "But it can give us a sense of why certain functions matter" in warfare, even as technology modifies them over time.

"'The History of the Peloponnesian War' Review: Warrior and Witness" by **Dominic Green** (Fellow, Royal Historical Society) in *The Wall Street Journal*

About his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides famously wrote: "I have written my work not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment but as a possession for all time." A new translation by **Robin Waterfield** (classicist, translator) provides the latest "sound and coherent interpretation" of this timeless "possession," Green argues. "In particular, [Waterfield] sharpens our image of the Hobbesian Thucydides, who founded the realist theory of international relations." Rather than repeat previous translations of the canonical phrase from the Melian Dialogue, "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must," Waterfield opts for a formula closer to Hobbes's: "the strong do what they can and the weak concede them that right."

"Tocqueville versus the Groypers" by **Samuel Gregg** (Chair in Economics and Economic History, American Institute for Economic Research) in *Law & Liberty*

Observing divisions within the American conservative movement over views on race and religion, Gregg looks to Alexis de Tocqueville for guidance on how mainstream conservatives might address the challenge from a radical right wing. He describes how the renowned French conservative-liberal established correspondence with leading right-wingers to understand their views, but consistently rebuffed them both in private and in public. Gregg concludes that de Tocqueville's "polite but unambiguous opposition" to analogous extremists in his time is "a model worthy of emulation."

Interviews and Speeches

Gaddis Emphasizes "We Have to Learn from History" for Hoover Institution

On the *Uncommon Knowledge* podcast, **John Lewis Gaddis** (Professor of Military and Naval History, Yale University) warns against framing the US-China competition as Cold War II. "We are going to have to coexist with China. China has been there for a very long time, much longer than we have." Compared to the Cold War, he says, "I don't see China as having global ambitions of any kind," so "They're not the Soviet Union in that regard." What the US should beware, however, "is a possible threat to at least controlling Eurasia. And that is the great bogeyman of Western thinking about geopolitics throughout the 20th century," says Gaddis—such as Germany ahead of WWI and WWII, or the Soviet Union and Communist China in the Cold War. "Now that vision is coming back, the possibility that a single power, whether friendly or hostile could wind up in control of all of Eurasia." What to do? "The successes in American foreign policy have come when we have warded that off partly by an offshore military presence, but partly also by diplomacy aimed at splitting those possible collaborators you see. And that is Kissinger in Beijing." In another example, "Kennan embraced Tito's Yugoslavia despite the fact that it was a communist country."

Westad Proposes "Missed Opportunities" by 1970s China for *U.S.-China Perception Monitor*

"I believe it would've been possible at that point [in the 1970s] to create a China that was much more pluralistic, where there were rights enshrined for people to speak much more openly and to organize much more openly," argues **Odd Arne Westad** (Professor of History, Yale University). "It would've been possible to do that without the leading role of the Communist Party necessarily suffering much from creating those kinds of freedoms." To counter those who would argue that "'China would've been too chaotic to create the kind of sustained economic growth that it's had,'" Westad presents evidence from Applied History: "look at other countries in the region that have had strong economic growth as they became more democratic: Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, you name it." Based on these analogous cases, he rejects the assumption "that China should forever be condemned to dictatorship simply because it serves economic purposes."

Mitter and Mearsheimer Debate the US-China Competition at Chicago Council on Global Affairs

On the question of "The US and China: Competition, Coexistence, or Collision?" **Rana Mitter** (Chair and Professor of US-Asia Relations, Harvard Kennedy School) points out a shift on the international stage. With the US now "rejecting much of the old order," China has stepped up its self-image as "in some ways a guardian or a preserver of that older order—at least from 1945 onward." Asked to project the US-China rivalry 10-15 years from now, **John Mearsheimer** (Professor of Political Science, University of Chicago) says the pre-WWI context—extensive economic cooperation with intense security competition—is a better analogy than the Cold War. "We're going to continue to live in an economically interdependent world," he argues, but "The one difference is you have this competition over cutting edge technologies which is a really intense and wicked competition. You didn't have that before World War I."

Bew Argues UK, EU Should Address Regional Order before Global Order for RUSI's *Global Security Briefing* Podcast

John Bew (Senior Fellow, Harvard's Belfer Center; Professor of History and Foreign Policy, King's College London) begins with "a core UK grand strategic lesson," in which the proposition that "other countries can willfully roll over the border into neighboring countries in an attempt to subjugate them… is one actually that poses a threat directly to the UK." On that basis and considering today's reality with the Ukraine War, he admits "it's tough for a Brit to protect or advocate for a particular version of a future Europe." However, "as a historian who has looked at international orders and a lot of European history and the period of the Congress of Vienna, do I think Europe is going to evolve significantly institutionally at a nation state level over the next 20, 30 years? Yeah, I really do. Do I think current structures will look fit for purpose in 10, 20, 30 years? No, I don't." The first step for refitting these structures may be "a renegotiation of the domestic social contract and the relationship between these different European states." Europe is a major player in the evolving international order, but Bew recommends that "before you begin to talk about the world order, you've got to get the regional order right."

Armitage Draws Inspiration from Declaration of Independence at Museum of the American Revolution

Delivering the first lecture in the Museum's 2025-26 "Read the Revolution" Speaker Series, **David Armitage** (Professor of History, Harvard University) highlights the Declaration of Independence's status as the first such document in history—though it went on to serve as a model for many other countries, he explains. Armitage argues that the Declaration of Independence was equally a "declaration of interdependence," meant to reassure France and the rest of Europe that the US planned to be a responsible and law-abiding member of the international community, a relevant lesson about America's original values as the US nears its 250th birthday, Armitage says.

Hitchcock Lectures on "American Democracy during the Rise of Fascism" at The American Academy in Berlin

As a Berlin Prize Fellow, **William Hitchcock** (Professor of History, University of Virginia) worked on his fifth book, *A Shadow over the World: American Democracy in the Age of Fascism, 1922-1941*. "Fascism has been with us for a century, and it isn't

going anywhere," Hitchcock asserts in a recent lecture. Analyzing how the US navigated fascism in the 1920s and 1930s illuminates connections between foreign and domestic politics that resonate today. Hitchcock shows that Franklin Roosevelt was initially "isolationist," "anti-militarist," and "anti-interventionist" but made anti-fascist ideas "his own because he's advancing his own political project of rescuing the New Deal and making American capitalism more democratic." His message became: "If you want to stop the economic royalists from taking over at home, we're going to have to take on fascism as a global threat."

Koehn Reminds Leaders to Look to Predecessors on *The Bending Steel Podcast*

The historical record reveals that there is no such thing as overcommunication by leaders in a crisis "because people are anxious—they want to hear from the people they trust," **Nancy Koehn** (Professor, Harvard Business School) argues. "This is why Franklin Delano Roosevelt instituted fireside chats in the depths of the Great Depression to calm people's anxiety about the economy," and especially to prevent bank runs. Koehn identifies John F. Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis as another good example of a leader appropriately increasing communication to manage public concerns. "A part of that is about allaying or dialing down people's anxieties enough that they can then become part of the solution to navigating the crisis."

Mansoor Warns US Military Should Be Widely Prepared on *At the Boundary*

In a podcast episode for the Global and National Security Institute at the University of South Florida, **Peter Mansoor** (Chair of Military History, Ohio State University) argues that "the sorts of conflicts that I think we need to be training for" are hybrid wars, involving both high-end combat as well as asymmetric conflict. To be prepared for counterinsurgency elements of such a war, "We need to at least have a course in the Command and General Staff College, in the War College on counterinsurgency warfare or hybrid warfare, so that the officer corps is not caught flat footed again." This was the case when, in the 1980s, instructors seeking to create such a course "went to the JFK School of Special Warfare in Fort Bragg to ask them for their files

on Vietnam, only to be told that they had been thrown away in the 1970s because the army staff said that we'll never fight that kind of war again. We can't go down that road again."

Rothschild Describes Enduring Appeal of Economic History with Institute for New Economic Thinking

In an interview with the Institute for New Economic Thinking, **Emma Rothschild** (Professor of History, Harvard University) asserts that history can enrich economics and policy by fact-checking commonly held assumptions (e.g., that Adam Smith was indifferent to industrialization's environmental effects) and offering perspective during crises, such as COVID. "Economists are like everybody," she maintains. "Looking for experience on the basis of which to try to understand the changes that are happening and the changes that are likely to happen." Rothschild also reflects on her students' interest in history and the successes over the past two decades of Harvard's Center for History and Economics, which she directs.

Roule and Dubowitz Discuss Trajectory of Iranian Politics and Rearmament on Iran International

Asked to reflect on whether June's US and Israeli airstrikes on Iran's nuclear program will reshape Iranian foreign policy, **Norman Roule** (political consultant; former National Intelligence Manager for Iran, Office of the Director of National Intelligence) and **Mark Dubowitz** (CEO, Foundation for Defense of Democracies) agree that Iran is biding its time. "This strategy is their history," Roule argues. For example, after halting a secret nuclear program in 2003 amid fears of a US invasion, Iran's Quds Force spent years "reconstituting its role in the region" and ramping up missile development. While noting differences between the USSR and Iran, Dubowitz suggests that Iran's current effort to retain political control while moderating its stance on social issues risks repeating Gorbachev's mistake during *perestroika*.

Schake and Kayyem Contextualize Trump's Insurrection Act Invocation for ClassACT HR73

For a panel discussion in honor of Veterans Day, **Kori Schake** (Senior Fellow and Director of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute) and **Juliette Kayyem** (Senior Lecturer, Harvard Kennedy School; former Assistant Secretary for Intergovernmental Affairs, Department of Homeland Security) reflect on Trump's recent federalization of the military. Analyzing George Washington's suppression of the Whiskey Rebellion, Schake notes his attempt to first negotiate with the farmers before seeking a Supreme Court Justice's certification that the rebellion legally constituted an insurrection. Washington "twice had to issue proclamations explaining to the American public the reasons that federal law enforcement was being abridged. None of those things have been in play even voluntarily by the Trump administration to help justify these domestic deployments. It's a very dangerous expansion of executive power." Kayyem presents an example from the opposite perspective: Hurricane Katrina was "complete public disorder" and still, Bush Jr.—"an aggressive president, a war-footing president"—chose not to invoke the Insurrection Act.

Toft Analyzes Reappearance of Spheres of Influence on *Metamorphosis* Podcast

Monica Toft (Professor of International Politics, Tufts' Fletcher School) speaks with host **Hamed al Ghaithi** about "spheres of influence" as an historical norm, evident as far back as Thucydides' account of Athens' and Sparta's rival leagues. Asked whether the borders tend to be "fixed" or "dynamic," Toft argues that war has often determined the boundaries between spheres—a warning against overestimating the stability of great power relations built upon spheres. The "wild card" in today's emerging order is the US, she claims, since Trump's "mercurial" decision-making leaves uncertainty about exactly what area the US perceives as core to its interests.

Applied History Quote of the Month

> “History does not repeat itself in the same way each time, but certain trends and consequences are constants.”

Lee Kuan Yew, Quoted in Allison, Blackwill, and Wyne, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master’s Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (2013).

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