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Applied History Project Newsletter

January 2026

The January 2026 issue of the Applied History Network Newsletter spotlights member-contributed news items for more than 600 leaders in the Applied History movement across 70 institutions.

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

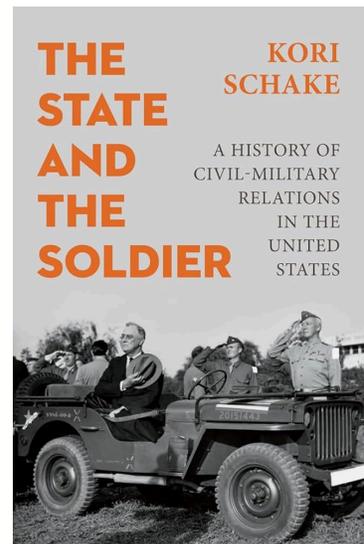
If you would like to submit an item for next month's issue, please email it to aristotle_vainikos@hks.harvard.edu with the subject "February Applied History Update" before March 4.

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

Schake Analyzes Civilian Control of the Military and its Centrality in Democratic Governance

With the title of her new book, *The State and the Soldier: A History of Civil-Military Relations in the United States*, **Kori Schake** (Senior Fellow and Director of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute) reverses the title of political scientist **Samuel Huntington's** classic work, *The Soldier and the State*, and signals her rejection of his argument "that the liberality of American society is incompatible with an effective military" and that the military and political spheres

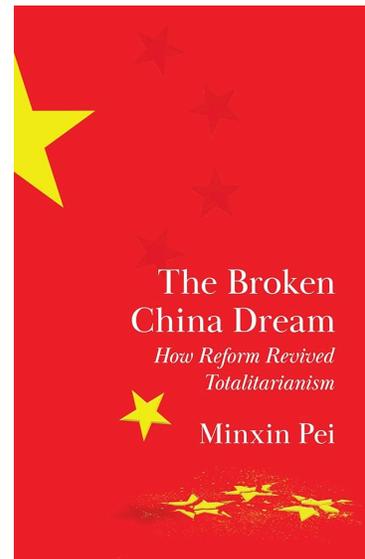
need to operate independently. **Shay Khatiri** (Vice President and Senior Fellow, Yorktown Institute) [reviews](#) Schake's counterargument, developed through an examination of 250 years of civilian control, in *The Wall Street Journal*. Although the Founding Fathers feared that a powerful army could "subvert republican government," George Washington set the foundational example of subordinating the military to civilian leadership during the War of Independence, when, confronting an incipient mutiny, he "agreed with his officers' discontent with Congress but equated rebellion against Congress with treason." Since then, Schake argues, the military's professionalism and their loyalty to the Constitution have ensured both the strength of America's armed forces and their public standing. Furthermore, history has demonstrated that "Civilian control need not undermine strategy." Two examples, among others, illustrate her point: the civilian-directed Allied strategy that won World War II and President John F. Kennedy's decision to overrule his military advisors during the Cuban Missile Crisis. She warns about today's threat. As Khatiri explains, "Politicians increasingly seek policy legitimacy through the military." Retired military officers have become frequent appointees in traditional civilian roles, including Secretary of State, National Security Adviser, and Secretary of Defense—a civilian-designated position by law. It has also become more common for retired officers to make political endorsements. "Over time, politicians have become too weak to defend their own prerogatives against military advice because Americans, against the wisdom of their forefathers, view a standing military not as a potential threat but 'as a bulwark of democracy.'" Seemingly "uninterested in making political and prudential arguments to the American people," Congress and the Executive Branch "rely on both active-duty and retired officers to do it for them." Schake's analysis of the dynamic of civilian military control, its significance in the country's history, and its politicization is a timely contribution to Applied History.



Pei Sees Historical Continuity not Disruption in Xi's Leadership

The Broken China Dream: How Reform Revived Totalitarianism by **Minxin Pei** (Professor of Government and Fellow, Claremont McKenna College) examines China from the reform era in the late 1970s under Deng Xiaoping to today. While Xi is often portrayed as "a great disrupter, someone who has tossed out the rules of the game to maintain power at home and challenge the west head-on abroad," Pei

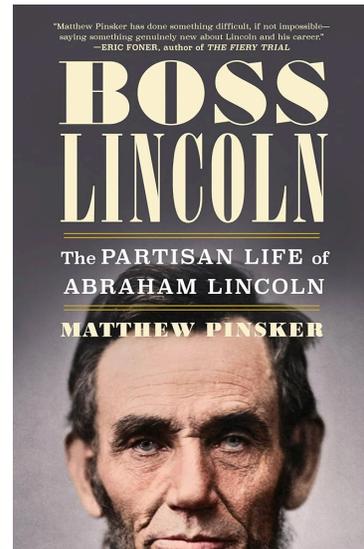
argues that “it is more accurate to see Xi as part of a communist continuum.” Importantly, as **Richard McGregor** (Senior Fellow for East Asia, Lowy Institute) [writes](#) in *The Financial Times*, “the focus on change in China distracted attention from what stayed the same—the ruling party’s absolute determination to remain in power, and the fact that it never relinquished the tools to do so.” Although Deng is often regarded as solely an economic reformer, he also introduced rules for political reforms, including limits on terms in office and on the concentration of power at the top, directed at Mao Zedong’s excesses. His reforms “relied entirely on the force of his political personality. But as a good communist, he refused to put in place any institutions independent of the party to enforce them,” making the reforms vulnerable to removal. Although Deng and Xi are often regarded as very different leaders, Pei argues, “the discontinuities are superficial and the continuities between the two are fundamental... Both are hardcore Leninists who regard preservation of the party’s monopoly of power as the overriding objective of their rule.” Pei further develops his argument, describing the passage from Deng to the Xi era “as one from neo-authoritarianism to ‘neo-Stalinism,’ a kind of digital totalitarianism with Chinese characteristics.” McGregor questions the formulation, especially related to private companies, which, despite Xi’s crackdown on entrepreneurs, have enjoyed subsidies and protection. These entities are highly competitive and innovative; dominate economic frontiers, including vehicles, batteries, and solar power; and are useful to Xi’s agenda. “Stalinism never enjoyed anything like it.” McGregor concludes, “whether”—as Pei suggests—“Xi ‘is failing more than he is succeeding’ in building China into a global superpower is far from clear, and, in any case, can only be judged in relative terms, in comparison to Donald Trump’s America. On that score, Xi is doing exceedingly well.”



Pinsker Celebrates Lincoln’s Political Mastery

Boss Lincoln: The Partisan Life of Abraham Lincoln by **Matthew Pinsker** (Professor of History, Dickinson College) portrays the Great Emancipator as “first and foremost a party leader, tirelessly committed to grassroots organizing, retail campaigning, lobbying, dealmaking, rewarding loyalists and erasing opponents.” So [writes Harold Holzer](#) (Director, Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute, Hunter College) in *The Wall Street Journal*. Although others have focused on Lincoln’s political skills and activities, Pinsker “offers the deepest dive yet into Lincoln’s relentless focus ‘on an

interest greater' than his own political ambition," covering 35 years of state and national political activity. As a Whig, Lincoln gathered support for "infrastructure-building and upward mobility" and later, as a Republican, devoted his efforts to preventing slavery from spreading into the West and eventually, to abolishing it. "He embraces important causes but understands that principles cannot be advanced without power." A dominant theme in the book is Lincoln's use of "fusion and coalition-building to broaden his political base—working quietly, for example, to include nativists under his political tent once their independent organization fizzled." Despite many personal political setbacks, including the loss of two elections for the US Senate, "Lincoln organizes supporters between elections, recruits local politicians and newspapermen to his side, settles internecine political disputes that threaten his coalition, and throws his weight around, sometimes in surprisingly sharp language to compel political obedience and attract new voters." Lincoln's continuing ambitions were "as much organizational as personal." Later, "When victory came his way, Lincoln was not averse to dispensing the spoils. As the nation's first Republican president, he upended the federal bureaucracy, replacing much of the workforce with political 'friends.' Yet as commander in chief... Lincoln sought out Democrats to help battle secession. Dispensing patronage remained a partisan pleasure, recruitment a multipartisan necessity." In his assessment of the book, Holzer writes, "Boss Lincoln' is emphatically not a political-science tract; Mr. Pinsker makes his points within a gripping chronological narrative that consistently animates Lincoln's inexhaustible quest... It is hard to imagine that the year will bring forth a Lincoln book of more originality or consequence." For Applied Historians, the book's lessons in the exercise of personal political power to achieve policy aims will be familiar.



**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

[“How Venezuela Becomes a Quagmire”](#) by Meghan L. O’Sullivan (Director, Harvard’s Belfer Center; Professor of the Practice of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School) in *Foreign Affairs*

“Venezuela is not Iraq,” but the “painful experience in Iraq has more lessons for Venezuela than observers might think,” O’Sullivan writes. “Then, as now,” locals “initially appeared elated” that the dictator was deposed, US decisionmakers presumed that state bureaucracy and security forces “would continue to function,” and the US believed “a lightning-quick, successful military operation would impress its allies and intimidate its adversaries.” But she identifies several key differences: “Operation Absolute Resolve” was swift and much smaller than Bush’s invasion, Trump did not seek Congressional authorization, the US is not the superpower it once was, and there are clear leaders of the Venezuelan opposition.

Warning about the “lack of adequate preparation for the ‘day after,’” O’Sullivan highlights “five hard-earned lessons” from Iraq: the US should “not presume that a regime will survive after its top leader is removed,” enlist “the help and support of regional actors,” anticipate “the narrative that the United States is after oil alone,” “appreciate that the promotion of democracy might be needed,” and “allocate resources to secure a better outcome.” O’Sullivan’s article is a model for seriously analyzing an historical analogy and distilling actionable lessons to inform clear policy recommendations. For identifying risks and opportunities unique to Venezuela today while drawing insights from a balanced analysis of similarities and differences with Iraq, O’Sullivan’s piece is an Applied History Analysis of the Month.

[“Greenland, America and the End of Atlanticism”](#) by Odd Arne Westad (Professor of History, Yale University) in *The Financial Times*

Westad notes that the transatlantic alliance has consistently beaten predictions about its impending demise (e.g., after the Suez Crisis). But he argues that the danger is greater today due to the world’s accelerating transition into multipolarity and divergent views on either side of the Atlantic about how to act in such a world. Westad claims that present conditions are most similar to those that preceded World War I: intense nationalism, protectionism, and antipathy between states. Additionally, the US has made errors comparable to those of pre-WWI Britain, such as waging unnecessary wars. To improve the transatlantic relationship in this new world,

Westad argues, Europe must strengthen itself while the US should stop “parodying the past” with unpopular land-grabs.

Westad’s structured Applied History analysis is noteworthy. Drawing on the alliance’s history of resilience, he first establishes a baseline hypothesis that the future is likely to resemble the past. He then argues that a salient difference between past and present—multipolarity—indicates that the future will be different. Finally, to illuminate these new circumstances, he assesses two possible historical analogies—the Cold War and the early 20th century—and derives insights from the latter, which he considers most similar. For rigorously flowing from hypothesis, to argument, to evidence, to insights, all derived from historical observations, the piece is an Applied History Analysis of the Month.

This month, Westad also [spoke](#) with *Foreign Affairs* editor **Dan Kurtz-Phelan** about the influence of history on China’s foreign policy.

Publications of Note

“[The Myth of Revolution of Iran](#)” by **Niall Ferguson (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) in *The Free Press***

Reminding readers that the Ayatollah took control of Iran via revolution in 1979, Ferguson argues that January’s protests across Iran constitute an attempt at “counterrevolution” to restore the royalist regime. But, he warns, counterrevolutions have a poor track record of success: ruling revolutionary regimes are effective at using force to repress dissent, restoration is often short-lived (e.g., Britain’s Stuart Restoration), or a new authoritarianism takes hold (e.g., Napoleon’s rise). Ferguson also [wrote](#) about the parallels between Trump and Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt following the US operation in Venezuela.

[“The Age of Invasion”](#) by **John Bew (Senior Fellow, Harvard’s Belfer Center; Professor of History and Foreign Policy, King’s College London) in *The New Statesman***

Examining the similarities between Trump’s attack on Iran over the summer and his decision to capture Nicolás Maduro in January, Bew asserts that the world has entered a “raw power” era, decisively moving on from 80 years in which “rule-of-law” formed a bedrock for international relations. Trump, Bew claims, is imitating William McKinley, the president who launched the Spanish-American War. In response, the UK and Europe must leverage their remaining “assets, including financial and cultural power, to have a considerable say in the shaping of international outcomes.” Bew also [gave](#) an in-depth interview to **Sam Freedman** and **Sir Lawrence Freedman** about his experience advising four British Prime Ministers and [reviewed](#) *Inside the Situation Room*, edited by **Hillary Clinton** and **Keren Yarhi-Milo**.

[“The Weakness of the Strongmen”](#) by **Stephen Kotkin (Visiting Scholar, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) in *Foreign Affairs***

Contrary to those heralding an “age of autocracy,” Kotkin argues that democracies retain the upper hand. Surveying 20th- and 21st-century autocracies, Kotkin observes that they have major weaknesses, but counsels against pursuing a policy of regime change. Domestically, Kotkin writes, fundamental challenges of good government hold the US back from marshalling the “robust national renewal” it needs for the long fight against authoritarianism. Kotkin concludes that “neither the US nor China is going to vanish. Therefore, they must share the planet.” He also [spoke](#) with *The Bulwark* about the strengths and weaknesses of authoritarian regimes.

[“Is There a US Strategy for the ‘Western Hemisphere?’”](#) by **Philip Zelikow (Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) in *Freedom Frequency***

Zelikow stresses the differences between Trump's conduct in Latin America and the policies of Teddy Roosevelt and William McKinley, who often used military intervention as a last resort and to solve real problems, like foreign governments defaulting on debt or struggling with civil strife. In contrast, he writes, Trump has failed to articulate a coherent plan for fixing the bigger problem of transnational crime in the Americas or of maintaining tight relations with Mexico, which should be "the top US interest" in the region.

[“Has a Nazi Theorist’s Vision of a World Divided Into ‘Great Spaces’ Found a New Advocate in Trump?”](#) by **Brendan Simms** (Professor of International Relations and Director of the Centre for Geopolitics, University of Cambridge) in *The Guardian*

Simms considers whether or not Trump's foreign policy reflects the ideas of Carl Schmitt, who advocated "great spaces" dominated by empires such as Germany. Although he acknowledges that Trump prioritizes America's neighborhood, Simms argues that Trump departs from Schmitt in refusing to respect other nations' "spheres of influence." Instead, his operations in Iran and Venezuela, and his willingness to confront Russian tankers in European waters, send a different message: that "what's yours is mine... and what is mine is my own," Simms writes. Simms also [reflected](#) in *The New Statesman* on the history of US-UK involvement in Venezuela.

[“The World Is in Chaos. What Comes Next?”](#) by **Adam Tooze** (Professor of History, Columbia University), **Monica Duffy Toft** (Professor of International Politics, Tufts' Fletcher School), **Margaret MacMillan** (Emeritus Professor, Universities of Toronto and Oxford) in *The New York Times*

This collection of opinion essays features Tooze describing China today as "a classic example of a power state"—just like when the 20th-century US was the world's largest oil producer—and Toft arguing that, compared to the landscape of Yalta in 1945, today's world is ruled by "sphere logic without sphere discipline." MacMillan writes that "if history is any guide," we should "brace ourselves for a prolonged period of volatility." She suggests, for example, that "Smaller powers may scramble

to find shelter under one aegis or another, but, as happened before 1914, shift allegiance if they can see a better deal.”

[“America Revived: A Grand Strategy of Resolute Global Leadership”](#) by **Robert Blackwill (Senior Fellow for US Foreign Policy) for the Council on Foreign Relations**

Arguing that the US faces the most dangerous international environment since WWII, Blackwill summarizes the history of US grand strategy and recommends a new strategic concept suitable for today’s complexity: resolute global leadership. Blackwill’s proposal “affirms the importance of American military might” and “emphasizes the requirement to underwrite international institutions” but does not use force to pursue ideological goals and sees institutions as instrumental to US power.

[“The World Order is Becoming More Cutthroat”](#) by **Hal Brands (Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins SAIS) for the American Enterprise Institute**

As he observes “symptoms” of an unraveling liberal international order, such as Trump’s threats against Greenland and boat strikes in the Caribbean, Brands proposes that “historians will see the post-World War II era as a golden age of peace, prosperity, and expanding freedom.” Trump, though, has long been ready for America to lead the transition away from liberal order, Brands argues: “Trump’s central strategic insight has always been that America is better prepared than any other country to thrive in a cutthroat arena.”

[“The Balance-of-Power Theory Strikes Again”](#) by **Stephen Walt (Professor of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School) in *Foreign Policy***

Citing his “balance-of-threat” theory, Walt argues that American threats against its allies are dangerous. Looking to history for illuminating analogies, Walt notes that despite the US’s economic and military superiority, the greater threat that the Soviets posed to their neighbors encouraged states to ally with a comparatively more powerful America. As Walt laments about today’s situation, “when the prime minister of Canada flies to Beijing and outlines the pillars of a new strategic partnership, you know the tectonic plates are shifting.” Walt also [wrote](#) about the Cold War division of Europe in *Foreign Policy*, concluding that “spheres of influence will be both an unavoidable feature of the international landscape and an unreliable method for promoting peace.”

[“Can the US ‘Run’ Venezuela? Military Force Can Topple a Dictator, But It Cannot Create Political Authority or Legitimacy”](#) by **Monica Duffy Toft in *The Conversation***

Toft reminds those in the administration deliberating next steps in Venezuela of a hard-learned lesson from Afghanistan: “No amount of reconstruction spending could compensate for the absence of a political order rooted in domestic consent.” In Iraq, the US “ignored key cultural, social and historical conditions,” and in Libya, the US’s intervening actions “were not followed by governance at all.” Toft concludes that “If Washington governs by force in Venezuela, it will repeat the failures from Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya: Power can topple regimes, but it cannot create political authority. Outside rule invites resistance, not stability.”

[“The World Order After 2025”](#) by **Yuen Yuen Ang (Chair Professor of Political Economy, Johns Hopkins University) in *Project Syndicate***

[Yuen Yuen Ang](#) makes the case that the postwar order, despite delivering “real achievements,” also “carried the seeds of its demise.” The US, she argues, overreached, starting a “generation of wars” and concentrating authority in Western-led institutions. She also claims globalization hollowed out communities and made it easier for the wealthy and powerful to enrich themselves “without delivering social value.” But instead of calling the collapse of that order a crisis, Ang frames the

current moment as a “polytunity”: opportunities for the global order to be more representative of the “global majority.”

“[How Trump Can Begin an Iran Transition After the Bloodbath](#)” by David Ignatius (columnist) in *The Washington Post*

Assessing the impact of Trump’s threats to strike Iran in support of protestors, Ignatius claims that the lesson from the Soviet Union’s dissolution, the fall of Slobodan Milosevic, and similar historical cases is that the US’s best strategy for regime change is not violence, but patient subversion and a readiness to work with elites who defect. In other columns this month, Ignatius wrote about the [pitfalls](#) of hubris following successful military operations such as the US kidnapping of Maduro, and about the [history](#) of the US’s interest in Greenland in the 1950s.

“[Trump is Falling for a Trap We Could All See Coming](#)” by Ben Rhodes (contributing Opinion writer; former Deputy National Security Adviser) in *The New York Times*

Warning that Trump’s approach to Venezuela is following the same script as ill-fated American interventions in other countries during the late 20th- and early 21st-centuries, Rhodes argues that Cold War operations in Latin America made Americans less safe over the long run, contributing to the problems of mass migration and leftist politics abroad that Trump decries today. He notes that Grenada and Panama offer counterexamples, but argues that these countries are imperfect analogies to Venezuela because they are much smaller.

“[Been There, Done That: Lessons From Past Interventions](#)” by Nadia Schadlow (Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute) in *RealClear Defense*

Drawing lessons from 15 cases of US military intervention overseas, Schadlow argues that achieving stability and a successful leadership transition typically require

a unified command structure for participating US agencies, US troops acting in police roles, and efforts to not just prevent economic collapse but also to “jumpstart” the country’s economy. For Venezuela, Schadlow recommends that the US involve “credible experts” who would help rebuild the country’s economy and that humanitarian aid may help signal American goodwill.

[“America’s 250th Isn’t Just a Birthday”](#) by Yuval Levin (Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute; Editor in Chief, *National Affairs*) in *The Free Press*

Assessing Americans’ relationship with their history, Levin argues that “American identity” is not just about believing in the “universal ideals” espoused by the Declaration of Independence, but also experiencing the joys and challenges of life in a “vast, diverse, complicated society” organized around those ideals. To observe America’s political tradition is neither to assume that the past was perfect nor to disregard it as irrelevant, Levin contends. Instead, he says that true “traditionalism” recognizes “that the core human challenges are the same in every generation and what makes this time distinct is not that the basic work to be done is different but that it is our turn to do that hard work.”

[“The New Imperial Age”](#) by Aroop Mukharji (Assistant Professor of National Security Affairs, US Naval War College; former Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center) in *Foreign Affairs*

Mukharji argues that Trump’s foreign policy is “not just using an old playbook,” one written by Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt at the turn of the 20th century, but also reviving a “worldview” that measures American progress by “wealth, geography, and civilization.” The problem with making the US “a growing nation” again is that foreign intervention tends to be self-perpetuating, Mukharji writes. For example, after taking Manila from Spain in 1898, McKinley “inflated” how much the Philippines mattered to US interests and decided to annex the entire archipelago.

[Prophecy in Politics: Or, the Wigram Aspect](#) by **Kenneth Weisbrode (Assistant Professor of History, Bilkent University) published by Haus Publishing**

Weisbrode analyzes historical examples of successful “prophecy,” or forecasting, in foreign policy and economics, including Ralph Wigram’s warnings about Nazism and predictions within the Soviet Union that Germany would invade in 1941. He argues that decision-makers often disregard these warnings for similar reasons of “complacency and neglect,” and he offers recommendations for improvement.

[The Problem of China in the British Foreign Office Mind: Understanding a Rising Superpower, 1922-1985](#) by **Oliver Yule-Smith (Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center) published by Bloomsbury**

Challenging claims that recognition of China as a rising power began only in the 1980s, Yule-Smith argues that a group of officials in the British Foreign Office foresaw China’s importance to global affairs as early as the 1920s. While their interest in China was not always shared by political decision-makers, Yule-Smith writes, their accumulated knowledge and analysis helped shape Britain’s long-term approach of engagement with China and London’s response to crises in East Asia.

[“Always Beware a Declining Superpower”](#) by **Janan Ganesh (associate editor) in *The Financial Times***

Ganesh disagrees that America’s more combative foreign policy can be solely attributed to Trump, despite his role as a proverbial “Great Man.” He argues instead that America, similar to other historical great powers such as Britain after WWII, is experiencing “status anxiety” about the country’s decline relative to China—an anxiety that is spurring “Suez-style attempts to recover lost prestige.”

[“How Steep is Trump’s Democratic Backsliding?”](#) by **John Burn-Murdoch (chief data reporter) in *The Financial Times***

Compiling a dataset of 139 instances of “democratic backsliding” according to metrics of judicial independence, use of state force, and political prosecution, Burn-Murdoch argues that violations during Trump’s second term have occurred faster and more frequently than in other notable cases, such as Erdogan’s Turkey or Orban’s Hungary. But Burn-Murdoch notes that, unlike in other cases, most of Trump’s actions have relied on showy executive authorities rather than more durable changes to legislation. The midterm elections, too, give US voters a chance to voice dissatisfaction that citizens in autocracies do not have.

[“Rebirth of the Madman Theory? Unpredictability Isn’t What It Was When It Comes to Foreign Policy”](#) by **Andrew Latham (Professor of Political Science, Macalester College) in *The Conversation***

Comparing Trump’s unpredictability in foreign policy to Nixon’s “madman” strategy, Latham cautions that the three conditions that made Nixon’s gambits successful no longer hold: information was scarce, the USSR was risk-averse and stable, and Nixon selectively paired unpredictability with restraint. Today, Latham argues, the volume and speed of information floating online prevent leaders from carefully crafting signals over time, America’s enemies are unsurprised by volatility, and Trump has acted unpredictably too often for his threats to retain credibility.

[“Can the U.S. Legally ‘Run’ Venezuela After Maduro’s Capture? Here’s What to Know”](#) by **Charlie Savage (journalist) in *The New York Times***

As foreign policy analysts continue to digest and debate the US military’s successful extraction of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, Savage revisits insights from the US’s analogous invasion of Panama in 1989 to propose answers to outstanding questions like “Is it legal for the US to ‘run’ Venezuela,” “Does the UN prohibition matter under US law?”, and “Does Maduro have immunity as a head of state?” In 1989, President Bush’s Justice Department and US courts ruled that the US

government could deploy federal agents abroad to arrest “fugitives from US criminal charges” and that Noriega did not enjoy immunity, since he was an illegitimate head of state.

Interviews and Speeches

Allison Reminds US-China Watchers to Start with the Structure of Thucydidean Rivalries at World Economic Forum in Davos

“I would say Thucydides nailed it,” **Graham Allison** (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Professor of Government, Harvard Kennedy School) [says](#). The “rapid shift in the see-saw of power is discombobulating.” The resulting imbalances, “as Thucydides explained very well, magnify misunderstandings and multiply miscalculations and amplify accidents—that would otherwise be inconsequential—that often end in a war. So, I would say his picture is still right. These are structural realities that Xi now and Trump have to grapple with.” On the upside, Allison argues Trump understands that “nuclear war is really, really, really bad, and that’s a good thing for a president to understand.” Looking ahead to the two leaders’ summit in April, he concludes: “that’s a promising start.” Allison was joined by **Christopher Coons** (US Senator, Delaware); **Kevin Rudd** (former Prime Minister of Australia and Australian Ambassador to US); **Angela Zhang Huyue** (Professor of Law, University of Southern California); and **Zhao Hai** (Director of International Politics Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ National Institute for Global Strategy).

CFR Panel Evaluates “The Best and Worst US Foreign Policy Decisions”

Moderated by **David Rubenstein** (Chairman, Council on Foreign Relations; Cofounder and Co-Chairman, The Carlyle Group), a panel of historians [examined](#) the results of a recent CFR poll that asked professional historians to rank America’s best and worst foreign policy decisions. The Marshall Plan, creation of the UN, and Treaty of Alliance with France emerged as America’s three best decisions; the

invasion of Iraq, deployment of combat forces to Vietnam, and Indian Removal Act were ranked as the three worst. **James Lindsay** (Distinguished Senior Fellow in US Foreign Policy, CFR), **Mary Dudziak** (Professor of Law, Emory University), and **Christopher McKnight Nichols** (Chair in National Security Studies and Professor of History, The Ohio State University) observed that the effort to construct a stable liberal order after WWII produced many of the top-ranked US decisions.

Mitter Describes “Competitive Anti-Liberalism” at 2026 Asian Visions and Voices Conference

Delivering a keynote address, **Rana Mitter** (Chair and Professor of US-Asia Relations, Harvard Kennedy School) [calls](#) the “new phase” of world order into which we are entering “competitive anti-liberalism.” He argues: “For the first time in over a hundred years we have two global hegemons... neither of which has a leadership which is liberal and which in both cases explicitly identifies liberal values as the problem with the world and seeks instead a new non-liberal order.” “That is not new for the PRC,” he adds. “It is new for the United States.” One dimension of power in which China continues to lag, Mitter says, is soft power. Even there, China is “becoming slowly and surely stronger.” This month, Mitter also [wrote](#) in *UnHerd* about China’s reaction to Trump’s corollary to the Monroe Doctrine.

Tooze Identifies West’s Failure to Apply WWII Lessons in Cooperation to Climate Crisis Today on *The Ezra Klein Show*

If East and West joined forces to achieve an Allied victory in WWII, **Ezra Klein** (columnist and *The Ezra Klein Show* host, *The New York Times*) [asks](#), would analogous international cooperation be required to tackle today’s greatest challenges? “The good world that we built — that is, the West built and we think good — after ’45 depended critically on a war fought with huge sacrifice by both Stalin’s Soviet Union and the Chinese,” **Adam Tooze** explains. Today, “The Chinese have created the industrial capacity to actually get a key component... of climate stabilization on track for the entire planet. The fundamental failure of Western politics in the face of that is to say: No, thank you very much.”

Ploky Bets on Russia's Collapse in *United24* Interview

"Russia is currently trying to stop the process of its imperial decline," **Serhii Ploky** (Professor of Ukrainian History, Harvard University) [argues](#). "This is not a one-act play; it is a multifaceted process that can span not just decades, but centuries." For example, "The British Empire collapsed after World War II, but in fact, the process began with the declaration of American independence in the 18th century."

Considering that "the British Empire collapsed after winning World War II—because it failed to recover from an extremely exhausting conflict at the expense of its colonies," Ploky concludes that now "much depends on how this war ends and in what condition Russia emerges afterward."

Glasser and Co-Hosts Ask, "Is Donald Trump Creating the Conditions for Another World War?" on *The Political Scene* Podcast

Scrapping "the work of generations of people who have tried to stop us from getting into another world war," **Jane Mayer** (Chief Washington Correspondent, *The New Yorker*) [argues](#), "is how world wars start." **Susan Glasser** (Staff Writer, *The New Yorker*) adds: "The United States, Russia, China, spheres of influence—that's where Donald Trump is leaning in." That thinking "basically jettisons... the institutions and ideas that were created to prevent another World War," she says. Glasser describes an unraveling of "the fabric of international cooperation... that was established in part as a bulwark against future world wars and in part in the context of this Cold War competition after World War II" that "people were desperate not to become a hot war between the great powers. Now, Trump is just saying, let's just get rid of that framework."

Immerwahr Sees Historical Continuity in Trump's Greenland Ambitions on *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*

Daniel Immerwahr (Professor in the Humanities, Northwestern University) [speaks](#) with host **Ralph Nader** about the US's underacknowledged history of expansionism amid Trump's renewed threats to acquire Greenland. Immerwahr argues that the "economics of empire" remain relevant, with states striving to secure essential resources and markets, even as "chemistry" has replaced some colonies by making homegrown substitutes for natural goods viable. Asked by Nader about a line from the Democratic Party's platform in the 1900 election—"imperialism abroad will lead quickly and inevitably to despotism at home"—Immerwahr argues that, indeed, Americans should beware foreign interventions, lest the "Imperial Presidency" aggrandize further.

Ledford Analyzes the US's Overdue Pivot to the Americas on *Reaganism* Podcast

Joseph Ledford (Fellow and Hoover History Lab Assistant Director, Stanford's Hoover Institution) [argues](#) that Trump's Latin America policy is aimed at "resolving long-standing challenges" in America's neighborhood. For example, "the Panama Canal has been the premier national security interest for the United States in the Western Hemisphere before it was ever built," he says, referring to the US's pushback in the 1880s against French plans to build a canal. Similarly, although it takes on a different form, Trump's emphasis on tackling the drug trade and crime "[carries] forward an older policy platform of the GOP," as demonstrated by George W. Bush's Merida Initiative with Mexico. Ledford also [spoke](#) alongside **Eyck Freymann** (Fellow, Stanford's Hoover Institution) on *Matters of Policy and Politics* about great power competition and rebuilding the US's "arsenal of democracy."

Network Updates

Logevall Receives Honorary Doctorate from Uppsala University

Congratulations to our colleague **Fredrik Logevall** (Faculty Mentor, Harvard's Applied History Project; Professor of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School), now an honorary doctor in the Faculty of Languages at Uppsala University, where in recent years he developed what the university called an "important collaboration with the Swedish Institute for North American Studies." In an interview preceding his honorary doctorate lecture in Sweden, Logevall [shared](#) his current work on a three-volume biography of US President John F. Kennedy. "My hope – and the reason for the massive size of the project – is that I can illuminate for readers not only Kennedy's extraordinary life, but also the extraordinary history of the United States during his lifetime. It's a dual story I'm telling – the story of a man and his country."

Applied History Quote of the Month

“In the absence of dependable recurring circumstance, too much confidence cannot be placed on the lessons of history. There are lessons, of course, and when people speak of learning from them, they have in mind, I think, two ways of applying past experience: One is to enable us to avoid past mistakes and to manage better in similar circumstances next time; the other is to enable us to anticipate a future course of events... To manage better next time is within our means; to anticipate does not seem to be.”

– Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History: Selected Essays* (1981)

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