



The May 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 "June Applied History Update" by July 6.

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

Simms Captures Today's Great Power Competition Through the Lens of Applied History

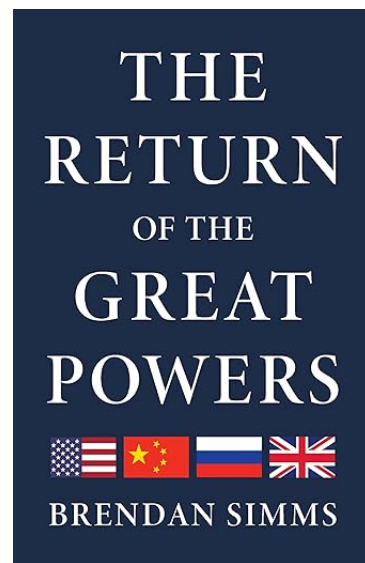
In *The Return of the Great Powers*, **Brendan Simms** (Professor of International Relations and Director of the Centre for Geopolitics, University of Cambridge) assesses the current great power rivalry in the context of centuries of the struggle for supremacy among adversaries. In *The Cipher Brief*, **Jean-Thomas Nicole** (Policy Advisor, Public Safety Canada) [writes](#) that the book's premise "lands an unfashionable, necessary punch: in the real hierarchy of causes, geopolitics has

muscled back to the top. The belief that trade ties, treaties, and talk could outrank raw power... lulled elites from Washington to Brussels to boardrooms into misreading the age—right up to Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.” Simms establishes his criteria for Great Power status:

Resources, Reach, Reputation, and Resilience. Today, by his measure, there are four Great Powers: the US, China, Russia, and the UK. He terms Japan, France, Germany, India, and the EU “almost’ powers.”

Employing his framework as a “toolkit,” Simms situates each country in the world order: “The United States

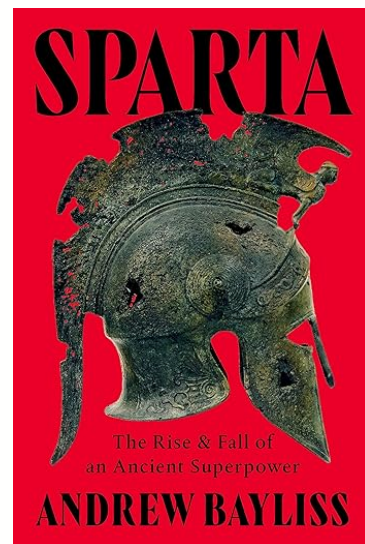
remains the yardstick power by resources and reach, even as its politics whipsaw between over- and under-reach... China... is less ‘rising’ than resuming a status it considers natural. It leveraged globalization masterfully—WTO access, supply-chain centrality, dominance in critical-mineral processing—to build the industrial and technological sinew of power.” Russia, “smaller than it looks by GDP, tougher than it seems by PPP, energy leverage, and a nuclear arsenal; a coercive, opportunistic actor whose war on Ukraine exposed brittleness yet did not erase reach or resilience.” Nicole questions the inclusion of the UK, which Simms attributes to greater “ambition” and “usable military spine” relative to its European counterparts, including its “global basing and alliances, intelligence reach, maritime presence, [and] coalition leadership.” He applies his framework to the second-tier powers, forcing trade-offs. For example, “Japan, after a decade of rearmament and alliance-building, still carries the material strength but not yet the public appetite—or the nuclear deterrent—to close the status gap... Germany is the world’s premier geoeconomic power that has preferred a philosophy of self-denial in security.” Two historical continuities are overarching: “First, Simms shows how history—especially remembered history—anchors choice. Putin’s lectures, Xi’s civilization narrative, Japan’s pacifist reflex, Germany’s reticence: these are not decor; they are operating systems. Second, he draws a straight line from the ‘flat world’ of just-in-time to today’s chokepoint world: rare earths, semiconductors, undersea cables, straits from Hormuz to Malacca. Globalization did not abolish power; it rearranged it for those who saw the levers early—and it is now being rearranged again under the stress of war, sanctions, export controls, and friend-shoring.” Simms ends the book, as Nicole writes, “without moralizing, but with urgency. The twenty-year bet on interdependence bought prosperity—and fragility. The next decade will be about repairs: stockpiles and shipyards, alliances and deterrence, redundancy, and resolve.”



Bayliss Portrays a Recurring Lesson of History in Sparta's Rise and Fall

Sparta: The Rise and Fall of an Ancient Superpower by **Andrew Bayliss** (Associate Professor in Greek History and Head of the Department of Classics, Ancient History and Archaeology, University of Birmingham) is an account of Sparta's trajectory in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. after its defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War. Although Xenophon, a Greek philosopher and historian of the period, wrote about this phase of Sparta's history, he was "a less insightful observer" than Thucydides, who brought the War and its origins to life. As a result, Sparta's post-war story is less known today. **James Romm** (Professor of Classics, Bard College) [reviews](#) the book in *The Wall Street*

Journal, writing that Bayliss places "the Spartans firmly within the time-honored pattern of overreach leading to downfall. The story he tells, especially in its grim final chapter, should be required reading for leaders of modern nations." The Spartans' strength derived from a social system dating back to its early history, when their conquests of their neighbors in the south of the Peloponnese, Greece's southern peninsula, "provided them with a huge body of slaves, known as helots, whose labor supplied their food crops." Free from farming but dependent on the helots and fearful of their possible revolts, "the Spartans developed their austere lifestyle and rigorous program of military training." Their system made it possible for Spartan males to live as "high-caste soldiers," with helots servicing their every need as they devoted themselves to exercise and drills. Restrictions on entry into the elite training system and marital limitations on birthrates resulted in a declining population while other states were growing. To maintain an adequate military force, Sparta "installed subservient leaders throughout the Peloponnese, their allies in the war against Athens." Throughout the conflict, the Spartans portrayed themselves as champions of freedom, fighting an imperial power. However, after their victory, confidence bred hubris as "Sparta embarked on its own imperial program, compensating for its dwindling numbers by keeping an ever-tighter grip on its subjects." At a point when Spartan males were reduced to about 1,000, the Spartan king Agesilaus challenged Thebes, a city far larger in population. "The Thebans judged, correctly, that Sparta's Peloponnesian allies were tired of fighting its wars and would be slow to engage." Sparta's dominance ended at the Battle of Leuctra in 371 B.C., 33 years after its victory over Athens. Thus, the Spartans, like the Athenians and the Persians before, gave way to ambition, leading to disaster. Concluding, Romm writes, "Those who



contemplate Sparta's trajectory will not, one hopes, be as blind to history's lessons as the Greeks themselves were."

Wells Curates Kissinger's White House and State Department Tape Recordings

The Kissinger Tapes: Inside His Secretly Recorded Phone Conversations, edited by **Tom Wells** (author), is a collection of transcripts of Henry Kissinger's secretly recorded telephone conversations during his years as National Security Advisor (1969-1974) and Secretary of State (1973-1977) in the Nixon and Ford

Administrations. The trove, selected from 15,000 phone records, provides an expansive view of the era, a portrait of Kissinger's personality and methods, and rare immediacy into the minute-by-minute development of policy. **Jean-Thomas Nicole** [reviews](#) the book in *The Cipher Brief*, writing, "The scope of issues covered is vast: the Vietnam War in all its dimensions...; the 1971

slaughter in East Pakistan; the administration's undermining of Allende in Chile; the rapprochement with China; SALT negotiations and Soviet summits; the 1973 Yom Kippur War; the Cyprus crisis; and the Watergate scandal." In addition, "Leaks and the paranoia they bred are a recurring thread, including Kissinger's role in the FBI wiretaps of officials and journalists." The documents reinforce many existing views of Kissinger and his contradictions: "brilliant, witty, possessed of boundless stamina and sharp bureaucratic instincts—yet also arrogant, controlling, a habitual and easy liar, and stunningly callous toward the deaths wrought by his Vietnam policies." Kissinger's fraught relationship with Nixon, also widely known, is in evidence throughout the book. Wells has organized the material chronologically by subject with accompanying context and commentary, making it "unusually dependable as a research tool and unusually gripping as a read: you get the adrenaline of real-time decision-making and the unguarded candor rarely found in memos or memoirs." Further, "The conversations... capture blunt words, invective, and scheming the participants would never have put on paper, while at other times evincing guardedness about speaking on tape... Histories tell us what was decided; these tapes show *how*—the impatience, the performative threats, the tactical feints, and the ever-present calculation about how a move would 'read' in the press." Nicole concludes, "Ultimately, the book reshapes the factual foundation for any future debate about Kissinger and his era."



**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

At his closely watched summit with President Donald Trump in Beijing on May 14-15, China's President Xi Jinping invoked Thucydides's Trap to appeal for stable US-China relations. As The Wall Street Journal [reported](#), "Chinese leader Xi Jinping reached for one of his favorite academic concepts when he met President Trump: the 'Thucydides's Trap.' 'Can China and the United States overcome the Thucydides Trap and create a new paradigm of major country relations?' Xi asked Trump at the Great Hall of the People." The Journal added: "Xi has been talking about the Thucydides Trap for more than a decade, typically urging that the U.S. and China avoid such a danger even as the countries compete vigorously."

The speech inspired numerous analysts to engage with lessons from Thucydides's magnum opus about the Peloponnesian War and consider its implications for the summit and US-China relations. This month, the Applied History Analyses of the Month section highlights illuminating articles about Thucydides and Thucydides's Trap.

["Trump, Taiwan and the 'Thucydides Trap'"](#) by Gerard Baker (Editor at Large) in *The Wall Street Journal*

Responding to Xi's invocation of Thucydides's Trap to describe the structural dynamic in which a rising China and ruling US find themselves, Baker advises analysts not to take the trendlines or the probability of war as given. Indeed, "the only reliable lesson is that there is no inevitability in great-power rivalry," he writes. "Wise leadership, prudent judgment, strategic patience, the maintenance of alliances, domestic cohesion, promotion of economic dynamism—these are all choices that trump destiny in the pursuit of national greatness." For example, he narrates the series of avoidable missteps that an "emboldened" Athens took that helped spark war and hastened its own defeat, such as the failed expedition to Sicily soon after Athens's display of egoism in Melos.

Baker returns to the source text to interrogate a familiar analogy and challenge some of the recent ways in which it has been misunderstood. He evaluates both structure

and agency to illuminate important choices, strategic options, and unforced errors that offer insight and warning to today's superpower rivals. His rigorous analysis and wise reflection on how to draw lessons from historical analogies—without caution, “the lessons you draw vary according to your priors”—elevate his piece to one of May's Analyses of the Month.

This month, Baker also [used](#) Applied History to make sense of Trump's decision to attack Iran despite his awareness of America's repeated challenges in the region.

[“Trump and His Advisers Clearly Haven't Actually Read Thucydides”](#) by **Lydia Polgreen (columnist) in *The New York Times***

In an insightful Applied History analysis of Iran, Polgreen first pinpoints Stephen Miller's declaration that “we live in a world... governed by force” as “seemingly the purest expression of Donald Trump's theory of power.” She argues, “It was with this pugnacious certainty” that Trump “barreled into a reckless, unprovoked war against Iran.” Polgreen locates the roots of Miller's articulation in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*: “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” But failing to read on, she argues, results in misusing history. Responding to Athens' proclamation, Melos rejoined: “what is this but to make greater the enemies that you have already, and to force others to become so who would otherwise have never thought of it?” What Miller presented as the “ur-realist iron law of might equaling right” marked “the beginning of the end” for Athens. Today, “Like the Athenians, the Trumpians saw their romp in Venezuela as a sign of their irrefutable power. And like the Athenians, they overreached — attacking an enemy they underestimated with muddled motives, uncertain support at home and no clear plan for victory.” Polgreen raises Hannah Arendt's theory “that violence is not a form of power,” which should be “collective, consensual and relational.” Who gets Arendt right today? China, argues Polgreen. The difference is that “America, unlike Athens, faces no Sparta,” as China shows “little interest in foreign adventurism.” For a thorough reading of Thucydides and rigorous analogical reasoning, Polgreen's column is an Analysis of the Month.

More Thucydides in the Headlines

- [“Xi Warned Trump against the ‘Thucydides Trap’ – Here’s What Ancient Greece Can Tell Us about US-China Relations”](#) by **Neville Morley** (Professor in Classics, Ancient History, Religion, and Theology, University of Exeter) in *The Conversation*: Morley agrees with Gerard Baker about the nuance in *History of the Peloponnesian War*. It “included many points where things might arguably have turned out differently,” both “short- and long-term developments,” and “individual decisions and emotions.” Thucydides “doesn’t offer straightforward laws of war and politics, but sets out the complexity of human behaviour in a way which prompts us to think more deeply about it.”
- [“Trump’s China Pragmatism is Welcome”](#) by **Fareed Zakaria** (host, CNN’s Global Public Square; columnist) in *The Washington Post*: Although “rivalry with Beijing is inevitable” in today’s bipolar international order, “rivalry need not mean total rupture.” Noting two prior Thucydidean rivalries, Zakaria argues that the goal is to avoid the events of 1914 and instead adopt the dialogue and risk reduction mechanisms that emerged in the Cold War.
- [“The Trump-Xi Narrative Isn’t True. America Keeps Falling Uphill.”](#) by **David Ignatius** (columnist) in *The Washington Post*: Ignatius challenges what he sees as Xi’s assessment—“increasingly accepted by Western observers”—that the US is declining while China inexorably rises. The US is “weirdly resilient,” Ignatius argues. As evidence of the US’s persistent growth in absolute terms, Ignatius notes the country’s two-decade track record of economic gains, military strength, and political stability despite financial crises, “corrosive” forever wars, and more. He also argues China faces economic and demographic headwinds.
- [“Xi, Trump and the Thucydides Trap”](#) by the **Editorial Board** in *The Financial Times*: The Editorial Board compliments Xi’s and Trump’s pursuit of “constructive strategic stability.” They note that fears in China of “reprising the role of Athens and plunging into war with America” have risen in recent years, motivating Xi’s concern for stabilizing the superpower rivalry. “Fears over the ‘Thucydides trap’ will surely stay near the top of the global agenda in the years ahead. But for today copies of the great Athenian historian can be put back on the bookshelves,” the board writes.

Featured Commentary

China

[“Xi Teaching Trump Thucydides? Good Luck”](#) by **Andreas Kluth (columnist) in *Bloomberg***

At last month's summit in Beijing, Xi Jinping asked Donald Trump whether the United States and China could escape Thucydides's Trap. Drawing from a discussion with **Graham Allison** (Co-Chair, Harvard's Applied History Project; Professor of Government, Harvard Kennedy School), Kluth argues the trap is escapable—but warns that Trump's circle has badly misread the history beneath it. Aides like Stephen Miller cite Thucydides to justify a might-makes-right foreign policy, leaning on the Melian dialogue's line that the strong do what they can while the weak suffer what they must. Allison counters that Thucydides was diagnosing Athens' hubris, not endorsing it: what doomed Athens was not its rise but its trampling of allies and norms—a pattern Kluth maps onto Trump's coercion of partners and his war on Iran. Allison was also [featured](#) in an interview with *CBS News* discussing Xi's use of the historical analogy.

[“Trump Xi Summit Will Be No ‘Nixon in China’ Moment – That They are Talking is Enough for Now”](#) by **Rana Mitter (Chair in US-Asia Relations, Harvard Kennedy School) in *The Conversation***

Before the summit, Mitter argues that the meeting between Trump and Xi is unlikely to be “historically groundbreaking,” despite Trump's optimism about achieving a reset in US-China relations comparable to Richard Nixon's in 1972. “The circumstances more than a half-century on are... remarkably different,” Mitter writes. China has a large economy and military and exerts influence in international bodies. So, “both the U.S. and Chinese sides know that they can expect limited cooperation at best from their opponent. But after a period, particularly during the COVID-19

pandemic, when communication between the countries atrophied, it's still important that they are talking at all," Mitter concludes. Mitter also [assessed](#) the summit's outcomes with *Foreign Policy*.

[“When Two Superpowers Meet”](#) with **Nicholas Burns (former US Ambassador to China; Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Relations, Harvard Kennedy School) on *Foreign Affairs* Podcast**

Although the US and China are locked in a “structural competition,” Burns says, “this is kind of a détente-like meeting” between Trump and Xi. “This is a visible relaxation of the feverish tensions of the last four to five to six years, really since COVID,” featuring “an absence of effective communication” and “almost complete distrust.” But while improving US-China relations, Trump is overseeing a deterioration of US alliances, Burns argues. Drawing on insights from his time as ambassador to NATO in 2001, Burns advises: “We should want to have allies in the world. That was my principal takeaway from 9/11.”

[“Macartney to Mar-a-Lago: Xi-Trump in the Long Context”](#) with **Julian Gewirtz (former Senior Director for China and Taiwan Affairs, US National Security Council; Fellow, Harvard’s Belfer Center) on *ChinaTalk***

Speaking before Trump’s visit to Beijing, Gewirtz says that he expects to see longstanding themes from China’s history of diplomacy with Western powers reappear at this summit. Just as Britain’s Lord Macartney haggled over performing the kowtow during his pioneering mission to China in 1793, so will “questions of status, visible status, and the performance of status” receive outside attention today. For Americans, Gewirtz argues that Kissinger’s and Nixon’s visits to China loom largest. “Those images of American leaders sitting in big stuffed chairs with Chinese leaders, discussing world order and shifting history’s tectonic plates in real time, continue to animate successive generations of policymakers.” This month, Gewirtz also [wrote](#) about the influence of Mao’s 1938 treatise *On Protracted War* on Xi’s thinking about US-China relations.

[“The U.S. and China Have a Common Foe. Hint: It’s Not the U.S.S.R.”](#) by **Thomas Friedman (foreign affairs Opinion columnist) for *The New York Times***

May’s Trump-Xi summit “comes at a similar transformational moment in world affairs” to that which existed when Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong met in 1972. Amid “metastasizing disorder,” growing risks from AI, and other transnational challenges such as climate change and nonproliferation, the two countries have incentives to cooperate, Friedman writes. He adds, quoting **Craig Mundie** (former head of research, Microsoft), that ““the emerging risks from asymmetric cyberthreats from agentic A.I. systems” pose a “common problem” on the order of the shared challenge that brought the US and China together 54 years ago—the Soviet Union. “Our fates are now fused,” Friedman advises, and the Trump-Xi summit should kickstart an essential dialogue about coexistence and cooperative problem-solving.

[“Rethinking the Carter Era”](#) with **Sheng Peng (Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center) for The Carter Center’s *U.S.-China Perception Monitor***

Interviewed for his new book *Jimmy Carter and China: Multilateral Competition in the Global Cold War*, Peng says, “The key lesson I would draw from the Carter era is that policymakers must take technological change seriously before it becomes impossible to control.” The delay until 1996 in bringing China onto the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty “was a tremendous, wasted opportunity to slow down the horizontal spread and vertical advancement of nuclear weapon technologies.” Crediting an Applied History “exercise developed by Professor Graham Allison [analyzing] both the similarities and the differences” in historical analogies, Peng concludes that “Today, there is a similarly urgent challenge: the spread of weaponized AI technologies. Unlike Cold War nuclear weapons, which were largely controlled through centralized command systems with humans in charge, AI is more automated, decentralized, commercially driven, and widely available. That makes it much harder to regulate and potentially more dangerous in a crisis.”

US Grand Strategy

[“The Architects of the Vietnam War Knew It Was Doomed”](#) by **Fredrik Logevall (Faculty Mentor, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Professor of History, Harvard University; Professor of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School) for *The Economist***

“American planners, presiding over the greatest military and economic power in the history of the world, believed that with the resources at their disposal, as well as their intellectual prowess and deep experience, they could wage and win the conflict.”

Logevall paints a picture that could describe any number of points in the United States’ past, both distant and recent. Logevall depicts US leaders “swept forward’ by faith in their own and their country’s invincibility. But they lacked a sense of history, as well as an understanding of their adversary and the obstacles that stood in the way of victory.”

[“Stakeholders of a Fractured World”](#) with **Robert Zoellick (Senior Fellow, Harvard’s Belfer Center; former US Trade Representative, Deputy Secretary of State, and President of the World Bank) on the *WorldViews Podcast***

Reflecting on the future for a world comprised of stakeholders, Zoellick says, “As we look forward, the real challenge will be what will people use from the past.” He argues that “After World War II, you have this 80-year-old system of alliance arrangements. Well, obviously that’s under strain. The US commitment, the sense of trust—all this is under pressure today.” For example, Zoellick says, “If the US is unreliable on things like nuclear deterrence, well, then beware of potential proliferation, because about 70 percent of the people in South Korea want to have a nuclear weapon. If South Korea, North Korea, Russia, China all have nuclear weapons, what do you think will happen in Japanese politics? So, this is a reminder that the stability that the United States provided in this system was of benefit to others as well.”

[“Can America Still Lead the World?”](#) with **Stephen Kotkin (Visiting Scholar, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) on *Uncommon Knowledge***

“We’re only 5 percent of global population and 25 percent of global GDP since 1880,” Kotkin says about the US. “150 years—unheard of in global history—that a power has sustained for that length of time such a position economically.” The challenge, however, is the “anomalous period” of 1946-1960, where the US was 40 percent of global GDP and 50 percent of manufacturing. “There’s never been anything like that, and there may never be again,” Kotkin argues. Through post-WWII rebuilding efforts such as the Marshall Plan, “we decided to take on responsibility for the whole world.” However, “as we reverted back to 25 percent of global GDP”—which “was the plan,” Kotkin notes—the problem is that “we didn’t readjust our global commitments” accordingly. “We’re not in decline,” he concludes, but “there’s no way to escape [the fact that] we must rebalance American power in the world. Now, it’s finally happening under Trump.”

[“America’s Future Foreign Policy”](#) with **A. Wess Mitchell (Fellow, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Principal and Co-Founder, The Marathon Initiative) on *American Compass***

Mitchell speaks with host **Oren Cass** (founder and chief economist, American Compass) about the policy community’s attempt (especially on the right) to articulate an American grand strategy fit for the “accelerating geopolitical structural changes in the world.” Whereas “retrenchers” would rather the US pull back from international commitments, hawks urge America to “outgrow problems” by strengthening the economy and military. The best path, Mitchell argues, is in between: broadly preserving America’s “accumulated positives from the Cold War” (including the status of the dollar and alliances, “on balance”) but adopting “a more circumspect use of American power” that prioritizes upholding a tolerable balance of power in Eurasia.

[“Paul Kennedy’s Prophecy”](#) with **Jeremi Suri (Distinguished Chair for Leadership in Global Affairs and Professor of Public Affairs and History, University of Texas’s LBJ School) on *History as It Happens***

Reflecting on **Paul Kennedy’s** (Professor of History, Yale University) theory of imperial overstretch from *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Suri identifies two threads on which Kennedy has been vindicated. First, military spending adds to GDP but “doesn’t stimulate and filter into all of American society,” so “what we saw in the 1980s and continue to see in the United States are wages that stagnate for those in the middle.” Second, starting under Reagan, “the United States begins this upward trajectory in indebtedness and that we have now reached the point under Donald Trump today” where debt is “100 percent of our GNP. It was never that high since 1946.” Debt, according to Kennedy, “raises the cost of capital... when you need to borrow more money to build new factories, to invest in innovation, it becomes more expensive.” Suri concludes: “That’s exactly the problem that other empires had before.”

[“Dr. Peter Feaver on War, Security, and the Hidden Benefits of Engagement”](#) with **Peter Feaver (Professor of Political Science and Public Policy, Duke University) on *Waft, What?***

Feaver argues that it’s important to judge recent US foreign policy against the potential alternatives. Despite the high costs of foreign interventions, they are likely lower than the costs of not dealing with problems before they metastasize—a lesson that the US learned from its belated entry into WWII, Feaver says. “My mentor Joe Nye put it this way,” he adds. “You don’t think about oxygen when you have it, but as soon as you don’t, it’s the only thing you can think about.” Feaver argues that postwar history also justifies US alliances. “Rich and powerful allies” are a “key part of what’s made the postwar strategic bargain a bargain worth paying.” Feaver also [spoke](#) with *Good Authority* about US civil-military relations.

[US Grand Strategy and the Madman Theory](#) by **James D. Boys (Senior Research Fellow, University College London) published by Manchester University Press**

“What happens when a president convinces the world he might just do the unthinkable?” Boys’s new book argues: “projecting calculated irrationality can terrify adversaries into submission, but at enormous risk.” Reviewing history “from Nixon’s secret Cold War gambit to Trump’s chaotic, tweet-driven diplomacy, [Boys] explores how these two leaders weaponised unpredictability to keep allies guessing and enemies off balance.” **John Bew** (Senior Fellow, Harvard’s Belfer Center; Professor of History and Foreign Policy, King’s College London) has said the book “places contemporary policy debates within a comparative historical framework” and **Fredrik Logevall** called it “A provocative and insightful examination of the madman theory as it developed under Richard Nixon and helps drive policy in the second Trump administration today.”

Iran

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

Ferguson compares Trump’s dilemma in ending the conflict with Iran to Nixon’s pursuit of “peace with honor” in Vietnam. To allow the US to save face and for Nixon to win reelection, Nixon secretly persuaded North Vietnam to wait a “decent interval” before annexing South Vietnam after the US withdrawal in 1973. Ferguson notes multiple factors that support the idea that a deal between the US and Iran is forming: Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has not vocally opposed it, Iran’s dealmakers visited Qatar recently, and Trump has discussed it with several Gulf leaders. But continued missile exchanges—and Trump’s wildly oscillating messages on social media—should advise caution. This month, Ferguson also [wrote](#) about Iran’s ability to outlast the US and [about](#) the Trump-Xi summit.

[“After Hormuz: Energy Security in a Fragmented World”](#) by **Jason Bordoff (Founding Director of the Center on Global Energy Policy and Professor of Professional Practice, Columbia’s SIPA) and **Meghan O’Sullivan** (Director, Harvard’s Belfer Center; Professor of the Practice of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School) in “Unpacking the Hormuz Crisis: Implications for Energy Markets and the Energy Transition” from Oxford Institute for Energy Studies**

If the Iran War continues for another one or two months, Bordoff and O’Sullivan warn that the impact on energy markets “could begin to resemble [the] earlier shocks” of the 1970s, which became “formative political traumas that permanently changed the direction of energy policy.” A major difference will be the “geography of vulnerability.” Whereas the US and Europe were hit hard in the 1970s, leading governments to expedite new pipelines and promote oil substitutes, countries in Asia and the developing world are most dependent on Middle Eastern oil today. Scholars, they write, must begin “updating [the] vast economics literature... with evidence from South-East Asia, Latin America, and Africa” that has been neglected.

[“Trump Should Just Admit He Screwed Up”](#) by **Stephen M. Walt (Professor of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School) in *Foreign Policy***

Walt acknowledges that the historical record shows “democratic leaders are reluctant to admit errors while in office, if only because they know their opponents will be ready to pounce.” Citing Kennedy on the Bay of Pigs, Obama on his Tom Daschle appointment, and Reagan on the Iran-Contra affair, Walt says “such moments are rare.” But looking specifically at Trump’s record, Walt points out that he “has been a norm-breaker throughout his political career,” and “if any recent U.S. president could go in front of the cameras, admit that he’d screwed up big-time, and then move on, it’s Trump.”

[“Empires of Flow Control”](#) by **Nicholas Mulder (Assistant Professor of Modern European History, Cornell University) in *The New York Review***

Instead of “chokepoints,” Mulder argues, “the more useful concept to grasp how economic pressure functions in the Hormuz War is that of flow control: the ability to manipulate crucial points of transit.” The purpose “is usually not to choke off or block traffic, but to regulate it and profit from it.” Hormuz “has been compared to the Suez Crisis of 1956” in the potential impact of the outcome on US power, like the impact of Suez on Britain. However, “flow control in the strait will affect... South, Southeast, and East Asia most severely.” Mulder suggests monitoring “pan-Eurasian exchange,” because “throughout recorded history, Eurasia has been the most consistently dominant region in globalization.”

[“Iran as Vietnam, Ukraine as Korea”](#) by **Gideon Rose (Adjunct Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations) in *Foreign Affairs***

Rose presents analogies for the current wars in Iran and Ukraine by comparing the decision-making of political leaders and tracing the escalation pathway in each. Iran is likely to conclude like Vietnam, he argues, “with an unstable compromise settlement that addresses some issues but leaves other important ones unresolved.”

On the other hand, “the war in Ukraine, like the Korean War, will probably end with a settlement that solidifies something like the current line of conflict, with frozen borders patrolled indefinitely.” Each conflict featured the same error, he writes: “repeated, naive, across-the-board wish casting of wartime leaders, who casually assume that military force can easily bring political gains, that the enemy won’t respond, and that serious strategic planning is unnecessary.”

International Order

“[Why Today Looks Like 1914](#)” with **Odd Arne Westad (Professor of History and Global Affairs, Yale University) on The Stimson Center’s *Dialogue***

Speaking with host **Peter Slezkine** (Senior Fellow and Russia Program Director, Stimson Center; Former Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center) about his recent book *The Coming Storm*, Westad emphasizes that the book is a “warning, not a prophecy.” While “there are differences” between today and the pre-WWI period on which the book is focused, “the structural similarities seem to hold pretty well.” Westad argues that some analysts’ misplaced confidence that today is more similar to the Cold War could persuade them that the international system is more stable than it truly is. Also underestimated is the possibility for “several of [today’s] regional conflicts to come together in a global conflagration.” The lesson from WWI is that countries often believe regional conflicts can be contained, but unforeseen circumstances may cause them to spread. This month, Westad also [spoke](#) with **Richard Aldous** (Distinguished Professor of History, Bard College) on the *Persuasion* podcast.

“[Getting Ready: Lessons from History](#)” with **Margaret MacMillan (Emeritus Professor, Universities of Toronto and Oxford), **Sergey Radchenko** (Distinguished Professor, Johns Hopkins SAIS), and **Brendan Simms**, moderated by **John Bew** for London Defence Conference 2026**

WWI “is a useful lesson in how important it is to have public opinion with you” and “to talk to your potential allies or your actual allies before the war starts,” says MacMillan, arguing the US failed in these respects pre-Iran. “Our historical experience of” WWI and WWII yielded “the conventional wisdom... that wars are decided by logistics and by attrition,” Simms says, although “what this means for today is unclear.” In a US-China war scenario, “Western economic strength will kick in, but, equally,” China is “looking at the Battle of Midway” and assuming “almost that they’re like the United States because they have the productive capacity” now, Simms argues. Radchenko’s Cuban Missile Crisis lesson supplements MacMillan’s point: “we have to communicate to the other side” as well. “It has to be said that Trump gets that,” Radchenko argues. “In the UK but also broadly in Europe... we need to learn from that.”

[“Let’s Talk Humanities: A New International Order?”](#) with **Heidi Tworek (Canada Research Chair and Professor of History and Public Policy, University of British Columbia) and **Max Cameron** (Professor of Political Science, University of British Columbia) at Vancouver Public Library**

Tworek outlines three different interpretations of whether we are living through a “rupture” in international order. First, that we have returned to the interwar period of “autocratization” and autarky. Second, that we have returned to the pre-WWI experience of spheres of influence and great power adventurism. Finally, that there is no rupture, but we have shed the “rhetoric” surrounding a liberal international order. Cameron adds one important discontinuity: “The United States is no longer acting like a hegemon. The way a hegemon acts is it establishes the rules and enforces them. And of course it stacks the deck... Other countries comply because they get some benefit as well. That’s very different from when a government seeks to exploit its power to extract concessions from both adversaries and allies.”

[“Spheres of Power in the 21st Century: Rethinking Geopolitical Competition”](#) with **Monica Toft (Professor of International Politics and Director of the Center for Strategic Studies, Tufts’ Fletcher School) at Tufts University**

When measuring a nation's power, Toft argues that “in the modern era, technology on its own matters much more than it did before.” She presents three spheres of power: geopolitical, covering military strength and alliances; geoeconomic, relating to trade and critical resources; and geo-technology, a state's (or its companies') capacity to innovate and control digital infrastructure. Toft notes several “shifts” taking place in global politics, including the absence of a willing hegemon, the rise of disorder outside the bipolar structure of the Cold War and unipolarity of US hegemony, and the growing awareness that interdependence can be weaponized—even by states much smaller than the great powers.

Economics, Technology, and Industrial Policy

[“Why Global Imbalances Matter”](#) by Martin Wolf (chief economics commentator) for *The Financial Times*

“We are now in a ‘neo-mercantilist’ age,” Wolf writes. Trade balances feature in political debates and are “again a powerful source of friction” between superpowers—in this case, the US and China. “The 1920s and 1930s were an object lesson in how everything can go spectacularly wrong,” Wolf maintains. The US's role as “principal creditor country” and the “deflationary pressure” it placed on partner countries set the scene for the global financial crash in 1929. “At present,” Wolf warns, “we are on a path to financial crises related in part to the stubborn persistence of imbalances and, in my view, unsustainable roles of the US (and UK) as balancers of the world system.”

[“States as Financiers: International Lending in War and Peace”](#) by Sebastian Horn (Professor of Economics, University of Hamburg), Carmen M. Reinhart (Professor of the International Financial System, Harvard Kennedy School), and Christoph Trebesch (Professor of Economics and Director of the Research

Center on International Finance, Kiel Institute) for the National Bureau of Economic Research

Now published as an NBER Working Paper, this study examines “state-driven cross-border lending over two centuries using a new database covering 1.2 million official loans and grants by 134 governments and 70 multilateral institutions since 1790.” The authors find that “In adverse states of the world, such as wars and financial crises, official creditors step in, at times on a massive scale.” These government lending flows are “highly subsidized” and “driven by great powers” such as “Britain in the 19th century, the United States in the 20th century, and China in the early 21st century.”

[Minutes of Empire: Dutch West India Company Politics, 1618–1648](#) by **Alexander Bick (Associate Professor of Practice in Public Policy, University of Virginia; former Director for Strategic Planning, US National Security Council) published by Oxford University Press**

Bick explores Dutch economic statecraft on the eve of Westphalia, illuminating the relationship between the Dutch West India Company and the “burgeoning Dutch Imperial Project.” Bick shows how corporate and political leaders grappled with enduring questions about “the relationship between private enterprise and public power.” For historians, the book recasts the West India Company as “an instrument of war in which noblemen, courtiers, and magistrates played a decisive role.” For Applied Historians, the book advances a historical case with echoes of today’s key geoeconomic issues.

[“Industrial Policy for an Age of Uncertainty”](#) by **Yuen Yuen Ang (Chair Professor of Political Economy, Johns Hopkins University) in *Project Syndicate***

“Industrial policy is back, and with a vengeance,” Ang writes. But the playbook is less obvious. Whereas late industrializing countries in the 20th century knew to “build infrastructure, attract factories, manufacture for export, and climb the value chain,” today’s “simultaneous disruptions” and “logic of national security” make it more

difficult to identify winning industries. Drawing on China's recent history of lending tailored support to unforeseen but promising industries, such as e-commerce, Ang recommends that governments embrace uncertainty and establish flexible institutions to find and support proofs of concept.

**[“What the 1920s Can Teach Us About Surviving the AI Revolution”](#)
by **George Anders** (journalist) in *The Wall Street Journal***

“We’ve been here before,” Anders declares, drawing parallels between America’s reaction to the adoption of cars in the 1920s and current uncertainties about the rise of AI. In the ‘20s, the car drew criticism for reshaping social norms, eliminated jobs in traditional sectors, and amassed a poor safety record, writes Anders. But trust in vehicles increased when companies installed features such as rearview mirrors and government passed regulation requiring drivers’ licenses. In addition, the auto industry generated hundreds of thousands of new jobs. Understanding “how U.S. society made peace with the 1920s’ innovation frenzy provides some encouraging signals about the ways that society can absorb” new technologies like AI today, Anders argues.

[“Does the UN Have a Seat at the AI Table?”](#) with **Nur Laiq (Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center), **Philip Thigo** (Special Envoy on Technology, Office of the President of Kenya), and **Max Stauffer** (co-founder, Simon Institute for Longterm Governance) on *World’s Toughest Job* Podcast by *Foreign Policy* and UN Foundation**

After an introduction by **Kai Bird** (Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of Robert Oppenheimer) recalling the difficulty of constructing an international authority for atomic energy at the outset of the Cold War, Laiq notes the current challenges in global AI governance. “Since the 1990s, Big Tech has sold governments a deal essentially saying let us regulate ourselves and we will deliver great innovation.” Now, “governments see [AI companies] as critical for both their economic and military power.” But there are precedents from which to draw insight, Laiq argues, pointing to Kofi Annan’s and Ban Ki-moon’s collaboration with multinational companies. Ambassador Thigo and Stauffer discussed the necessity that all

countries participate in setting the UN's AI agenda and for greater ambition by member states to develop a global vision for AI governance. This month, Laiq also [wrote](#) about US-China AI dialogue.

[“A Keynesian Solution to Global Imbalances”](#) by **Daire MacFadden (reporter, Unhedged) for *The Financial Times***

“Every time the global monetary system faces stress, or countries are forced to make macroeconomic adjustments in response to the US financial cycle, the case for a neutral international currency reasserts itself,” MacFadden notes. Indeed, near the end of his term as Bank of England governor, current Canadian PM Mark Carney floated the idea of a “synthetic hegemonic currency” based on a basket of national currencies rather than the US dollar. MacFadden presents another solution from history: in 1944, John Maynard Keynes proposed an “International Clearing Union” that would penalize trade imbalances and establish an international reserve currency called “bancor.”

[“No One Wins a Trade War. Or Do They?”](#) by **Soumaya Keynes (economist; columnist) in *The Financial Times***

“History is littered with examples of economic weaponisation forcing targets to protect themselves,” Keynes writes. Among cases she cites in which trade controls boosted domestic production, one backed by empirical evidence helps address the issue that “the counterfactual is hard to prove.” The economic study found that Chinese companies affected by the US’s 2007 “China Military Catch All Rule” spent 50 percent more on R&D and saw a 1-percentage-point increase in their chance to apply for patents on the controlled technology compared to unaffected companies. “An American policy designed to kill off the competition seemed to have the opposite effect.”

[“The Meaning of the Declaration of Independence”](#) with **Maya Jasanoff (Professor of History, Harvard University), **Christopher Brown** (Professor of History, Columbia University), **David Schmidt** (producer and co-director, “The American Revolution”), and **Jane Kamensky** (President and CEO, Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello), moderated by **Jill Lepore** (Professor of American History and Professor of Law, Harvard University) for Retreat Farm, Vermont Public, and Vermont Community Foundation**

“Isn’t it amazing that the document that is a secessionist document then becomes the foundation of a new idea of union? I think here of a point that Jill has made in your work, which is about times of war in this country being times of political possibility,” Jasanoff says. “For example, the Constitution being amended much more frequently in times of war: I just wonder, as we think about our present moment, how we might think about periods of intense conflict—within and without—also being opportunities to reconfigure and reimagine.” Jasanoff concludes: “When our country has been at its best, it’s done a couple of things that Jefferson and his peers did. One is that they were aware of international context... in ways that were hugely dialogic... and inspiring to other parts of the world,” she says. “The second thing I would say is an emphasis on education.”

[“The Presidency of Joseph R. Biden: A First Historical Assessment”](#) with **Khalil Gibran Muhammad (Professor of African American Studies and Public Affairs, Princeton University), **Timothy Naftali** (senior research scholar, Columbia’s SIPA), **John Fabian Witt** (Professor of Law and Professor of History, Yale University), and moderated by **Julian E. Zelizer** (Professor of History and Public Affairs, Princeton University) at Hunter College’s Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute**

Reflecting on the presidency that followed the monumental summer of 2020, in which millions around the country and globe were “calling for some kind of criminal justice reform in the nation,” Muhammad says, “Biden put in place a policy agenda that, in its breadth and intent, was unprecedented.” For comparison, “you’d have to go back to Lyndon Baines Johnson to capture a kind of aspirational goal for change,

from Head Start to affirmative action to funding a kind of social welfare system that was making up for what the New Deal didn't do on behalf of people left behind." Muhammad's first historical assessment of Biden? "It's not an overstatement: we've never seen anything like this in terms of the commitment" to communities that "historically were... considered not politically important."

[2026 Bradley Prize Acceptance Speech](#) by **James Hankins (Visiting Professor, University of Florida's Hamilton School) at the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation**

Hankins argues for adopting a "renaissance narrative" of American history, instead of a blind faith in linear progress. "If we want in our time to balance tradition and innovation in a prudent way, we must start by relearning our own forgotten traditions." In the same way that America's founders "read history greedily" and "knew that they could not found a better republic unless they knew what the republics of the past have been like," Hankins says, Americans must "renew the study of Western history." Hankins was awarded the 2026 Bradley Prize alongside **Phil Gramm** (Nonresident Fellow, American Enterprise Institute) and **Rabbi Meir Soloveichik** (Director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought, Yeshiva University).

["The Shot Heard Round the World?"](#) by **Daniel Immerwahr (Professor in the Humanities, Northwestern University) in *The New Yorker***

Immerwahr examines the persistent "belief in the American Revolution's transcendent importance," drawing on insights from two recent global histories by **Sarah Pearsall** (Professor of History, Johns Hopkins University) and coauthors **Trevor Burnard** (Professor of History, University of Hull) and **Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy** (Professor of History, University of Virginia). To other former colonies that had revolutions in the late 1700s and early 1800s, America's revolution would have hardly looked revolutionary, he writes. "Independence placed power in the hands of America's local elite" and "in a wide-frame shot with Britain's whole empire in view, it's hard to see them as especially aggrieved or especially liberty-loving." Wondering if the conventional wisdom is simply a public myth,

Immerwahr asks, “What if, in the age of revolution, America just didn’t matter that much?”

[“The State and the Soldier”](#) with **Kori Schake (Senior Fellow and Director of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute) on *New Books in Military History* Podcast**

Schake observes that constraining the size and influence of the military was a “central concern” for America’s founders and the public because “there hadn’t been a democracy in more than a thousand years that wasn’t overtaken by its military... America’s founders were intensely concerned about not replicating those experiences” of 17th-century England, Rome, and more. Considering the future of civil-military relations, Schake argues the current “politicization” of the military by civil leaders is likely to “get overturned in a way that prevents future iterations,” given the historical track record. “Just as the Posse Comitatus Act restrained 150 years of American policy by not letting the American military engage in domestic law enforcement, I think we are going to see a lot more of that.”

[“Who is the Good Citizen? Remarks at Hampden-Sydney College Commencement”](#) by **Allen Guelzo (Professor of Humanities, University of Florida’s Hamilton School)**

Guelzo reflects on the “first and permanent title of every American”: citizen. “Americans of the republic’s first generation – Washington, Winchester, Webster – understood that the gem of a democracy is the *citizen*” and “first concern [was] that schools at every level be the shapers of that *good citizen* .” Guelzo argues that “Today, the challenges of the fractured and violent politics of our times have forced us once again to consider the great question of the *citizen*.” He posits that good citizenship implies the “achievement of self-control,” respect for law, and “sound morality.” He recommends we “turn to the examples and the sacrifices” of Washington, Lincoln, Stanton, Anthony, and other great figures of US history.

Applied History Methods

[“Thinking Historically About the Future”](#) by Nils Gilman (Senior Advisor, Berggruen Institute) in *Small Precautions*

While schools of historical method vary in their treatment of agency and structure, Gilman writes that almost all underweight the role of contingency in historical change. In fact, he argues, the influence of randomness means that even if all tectonic trends and human decisions are considered, the best an analyst can do is describe a *range* of potential futures with some plausible connection to the present. Even then, the future may surprise, as COVID demonstrated. Gilman recommends Applied Historians practice “structured anticipation” when thinking historically about the future—seeking to clarify plausible scenarios while humbly accepting that predicting the “right one” is a dead end.

[“Selling Peace to Ukrainians, Russians”](#) by Simon Saradzhyan (Russia Matters Project founding director, Harvard’s Belfer Center) in *Russia Matters*

Demonstrating a key skill in Applied History, Saradzhyan outlines why a proposed historical analogy is flawed. “With Russia, it’s impossible to fight a long war,” said one assistant to Putin, citing Russia’s 1700-1721 war against Sweden “as evidence of Russians’ ability to endure historically longer hostilities than the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.” Pointing to starkly different battlefield conditions, Saradzhyan writes, “While that war ended with Russia and its allies inflicting a military defeat on Sweden, no such defeat is in sight in the current Russian-Ukraine war.” In fact, Saradzhyan cites *Russia Matters* data analysis showing that Russia endured net monthly losses of territory in March and April for the first time since October 2023.

Network Updates

Jill Lepore Wins 2026 Pulitzer Prize

Lepore received the 2026 Pulitzer Prize in History for *We the People: A History of the U.S. Constitution*. The prize committee [called](#) the book “a lively and engaging narrative that investigates why the Constitution is so difficult to amend.” *Harvard Magazine* [commended](#) its “sweeping exploration of the amendment process” and noted it is “a deep historical critique of originalism.” This month, Lepore also [wrote](#) about the edits and compromises that characterized the Declaration of Independence, and [traced](#) the history of attempts to automate writing, of which AI is the latest.

Christopher Clark Gives Spring 2026 Tanner Lectures

Christopher Clark (Professor of History, University of Cambridge) was [selected](#) to give the Spring 2026 Tanner Lectures on Human Values at the University of California, Berkeley, titled “The Moment of Decision.” Lecture I, “What is a Decision?” included “reflections on the special case of decisions for (or against) and in war from Thucydides to Clausewitz.” Lecture II, “The Decision in History,” began with “the historicity of decision-making: how do the narratives that structure our understanding of past and present use the moment of decision?” and concluded by asking, “What are the challenges facing today’s decision-makers and how do they seek to meet them?” Lecture III was a seminar that brought into discussion **Stephen Kotkin**, **Christian List** (Professor of Philosophy and Decision Theory, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich), and **Sophia Rosenfeld** (Professor of History, University of Pennsylvania). Clark’s book *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* was also [selected](#) by *The Sunday Times* as one of “The 25 Best Non-Fiction Books of the 21st Century.”

Mershon Center for International Security Studies Hosts Rethinking American Grand Strategy Conference

Co-sponsored by The Ohio State University’s America at 250 Initiative, OSU’s Mershon Center for International Security Studies [hosted](#) the Rethinking American Grand Strategy conference supported by the Stanton Foundation. Participants “considered how the lessons of history can foster a more productive, holistic approach to domestic and international security” and engaged in topics “not often historicized and understood in grand strategic terms,” from AI to climate change.

Participants from the Applied History Network included **Rana Mitter**, **Francis J. Gavin** (Distinguished Professor, Johns Hopkins SAIS), **Simon Miles** (Associate Professor of History, Duke's Sanford School of Public Policy), **Michael de Groot** (Assistant Professor, Indiana University), and **Daniel Sargent** (Professor of History and Public Policy, UC Berkeley). They spoke on topics including "Reflections on Grand Strategy," "Resources and the Role of Business," and "Geographics of Space and Time."

Applied History Quote of the Month

"To understand the present and anticipate the future, one must know enough of the past, enough to have a sense of the history of a people."

– **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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