



Applied History Network Newsletter

June 2026

The June 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 Hoàng Giang and Aristotle Vainikos.

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

Special Feature: Applying History to Independence Day 250

This month, on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we devote the Analysis of the Month section to impressive pieces that help sharpen or even alter our understanding of America at its semiquincentennial and of our inheritance from the nation's founders.

*We also note with sadness the passing of one of the greatest historians of the American Revolution, **Gordon Wood**, who was University Professor and Emeritus Professor of History at Brown University. In the [words](#) of The Wall Street Journal's*

Jack Butler, Wood “did more than any other academic, and perhaps more than anyone in the past 50 years, to sustain the memory and importance of the Revolution and its principles.” In his reflection, Allen Guelzo [adds](#) that Wood’s scholarship shines as both “forward-looking and painstakingly committed to the truth.” Wood argued convincingly that “what makes America unique—and radical—is that ‘to be an American is not to be someone, but to believe in something.’” Amid increased debate about what American citizenship means, Wood [reemphasized](#) that America is a “creedal nation” just months before his passing. During his career, Wood also illuminated the lives and beliefs of the Founding Fathers, the early years of the American Republic, and even the “purpose of the past”—how and why applying history matters. Wood’s vast insights and unique contribution to popular conceptions of America’s founding are evident in the articles below.

[“The Rise and Fall of US Hegemony”](#) by Martin Wolf (chief economics commentator) in *The Financial Times*

“Today, on the eve of its 250th birthday, the US and the world order it created are in crisis.” Comparing a rising China with the US’s own Thucydidean economic rise vis-à-vis the UK, Wolf advances his insightful analogy by situating both rivalries within the world’s “two big eras of trade globalization – the first pre-1914 and the second pre-2007.” Then, as now, “the changes that have been transforming order into disorder and victory into defeat are simultaneously economic, technological and political,” he argues. “Within 35 years of its triumph” ending the Cold War, “the US role as a stabilising hegemon has disappeared, just as that of the UK had done by 1900.” Wolf contends that “This world echoes that of the years before 1914. So, how might it end?” Good news comes from differences in the analogy: “nuclear weapons hugely reduce the threat of war between the great powers.” Further, “no major power today suffers from the militarism of the early 20th century” and, as a result of “unparalleled economic growth” since WWII, “today’s governments are still mostly expected to ensure the prosperity of their peoples.” Other differences, however, should raise alarm. “The bad news is that we confront a host of challenges that can only be met together,” such as AI, climate change, and democratic backsliding. “The world many of us hoped for... after the collapse of Soviet despotism, the world the US largely created, is disappearing,” Wolf concludes. “We do learn from history. But then, alas, we forget.” For drawing relevant takeaways from differences, not just similarities, from the analogous pre-WWI period to today, and pointing out that China

should remind the US of its own post-WWII rise, Wolf's piece is an Applied History Analysis of the Month.

“[‘Heritage Americans’: An Un-American Idea](#)” by Karl Rove (columnist; former Deputy Chief of Staff and Senior Advisor to President George W. Bush) in *The Wall Street Journal*

Rove's stirring analysis of what it means to be American counters the notion, presented recently by Vice President JD Vance among others, that only those individuals whose ancestors lived in the US by the time of the the Civil War or even the Revolution count as Americans. Instead, Rove argues, “What matters is living up to the Declaration's promises.” He quotes from Gordon Wood: “The Revolution that the Declaration announced ‘radically and thoroughly transformed’ American society. It ‘destroyed aristocracy,’ made ‘the interests and prosperity of ordinary people . . . the goal of society and government,’ and released ‘powerful popular entrepreneurial and commercial energies.’” Rove returns to the nation's founding documents, the wisdom of forebears like Abraham Lincoln—who championed the “right to rise”—and historical examples like the early exclusion of Catholics from nationhood to advance his argument. Rove's piece addresses a crucial debate about how nations remember their history and reminds us that different interpretations of the past influence policy preferences in the present.

More Independence Day 250 in the Headlines

- “[‘The Declaration of Independence at 250: Five Questions About America's Founding Document](#)” by **Alex Keyssar** (Professor of History and Social Policy, Harvard Kennedy School) for Harvard's Ash Center: “Like the drafters of other pro-independence documents that were circulating around,” Keyssar argues that the Founders “felt obliged to ground their decision in principles that they believed to be enduring, if not timeless.” Today, he asserts, “we can take instruction (and even inspiration) from the Declaration's principles and from its authors' insistence that those principles be publicly articulated.”
- “[‘America in Free Fall? Historian Jill Lepore on the US at 250](#)” with **Jill Lepore** (Professor of American History and Professor of Law, Harvard University) on

The Mishal Husain Show : Counting herself among Americans wondering “whether we have lived up to the nation’s ideals” and wrestling with these questions “more at this moment than in any other... on the eve of the nation’s 250th anniversary,” Lepore argues: “We’re swimming in our history right now. The question is really whether we’re drowning in it.” Her answer is that “There is no precedent for this presidency in the history of the United States. American history is not a map that you can go to to see what’s going to happen next. It’s just not. We are off that map.”

- [“The Founding Fathers and the Battle for America’s Future”](#) by **Simon Schama** (University Professor of Art History and History, Columbia University) in *The Financial Times* : Noting the Founders’ “Olympian sense of the march of history,” Schama reminds readers of their unprecedented strategic imagination. Today, “when all the saboteurs that George Washington warned against — the viciousness of faction, misadventures abroad, the shameless harm a vainglorious adventurer might inflict, corrupt turpitude — seem irreversible, it’s worth returning to the moment when irreversibility was suspended and the world did change.”
- [“America at 250: A View from Britain, with ‘The Rest Is History’](#)” with **Dominic Sandbrook** (historian; author) and **Tom Holland** (classicist; author) on *The New Yorker Radio Hour* : The hosts of the popular podcast “The Rest Is History” offer a British perspective on the American Revolution, examine its place in history, and consider the counterfactual if it had not occurred. In a reminder that how Americans see their own history may not be how others see it, they explain that “In Britain, the American Revolution is never really taught, it’s not discussed, it doesn’t really feature in our collective historical imagination... it’s eclipsed by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars,” and “we only have space in our heads for one late 18th century thing.”
- [Radical Duke: How One Aristocrat—and the American Revolution—Transformed Britain](#) by **Danielle Allen** (University Professor, Harvard University) published by Liveright: In *The Wall Street Journal*, **Jeffrey Collins** (Professor of Humanities, University of Florida’s Hamilton School) [reviews](#) Allen’s book as “one of the most important, original studies of the American founding and its background to appear in many years.” Allen elaborates on the Revolution’s British intellectual heritage by investigating the work of Charles Lennox, duke of Richmond. Although Richmond was secretive and often burned his papers, impeding any definitive conclusions, Allen argues he was the ringleader of a transatlantic network of radical thinkers including Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke, Collins writes.

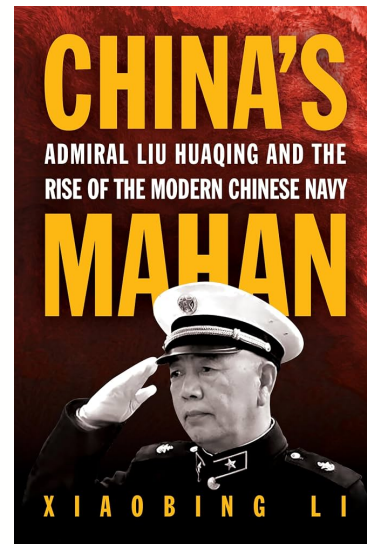
- [“The Founding Father Who Sought a Last-Minute Deal to Avert the Revolution”](#) by **Sarah Lyall** (writer at large) in *The New York Times*: Newly uncovered letters from John Dickinson to David Barclay Jr. reveal what **Jonathan Gienapp** (Associate Professor of History and Law, Stanford University) calls “a very serious attempt by arguably the leading politician in America at the time to broker a peace and prevent the American Revolution from happening that we’ve never known about before.” The documents, [published](#) in July’s *William and Mary Quarterly* with an introduction by **Jane E. Calvert** (Associate Professor of History, University of Kentucky) and Gienapp, prompt rich counterfactual analysis of the American Revolution’s causes and historical impact.
- [“America at 250: History Tells Us Hoping for Unity is not Futile”](#) by **Douglas Brinkley** (Chair in Humanities and Professor of History, Rice University) in *CBS News*: Two-and-a-half centuries after the Declaration of Independence, “it’s easy to forget how close it came to not happening at all,” writes Brinkley, referring to divisions between Americans over revolution and slavery. In a *WBUR* interview, Brinkley [adds](#): “what is sacred as we celebrate America 250 is no matter what, come thick or thin, we hold presidential elections every four years.”

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

Li Points to the Soviet Navy as the Template for China

China’s Mahan: Admiral Liu Huaqing and the Rise of the Modern Chinese Navy by **Xiaobing Li** (Professor of History, University of Central Oklahoma; Executive Editor, *Chinese Historical Review*) places Liu at the center of transforming the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) from a static “small vessel coastal force” to an active force with a doctrine that linked naval operations to claims of sovereignty. **Jean-Thomas Nicole** (Policy Officer, Public Safety Canada) [reviews](#) the book in *The Cipher Brief*. Li’s central argument is that Liu should not be seen as the Chinese analogue to Alfred Thayer Mahan, the 19th century US naval strategist, but to Soviet admiral Sergey Gorshkov, Commander of the Russian Navy from 1956 to 1985, who

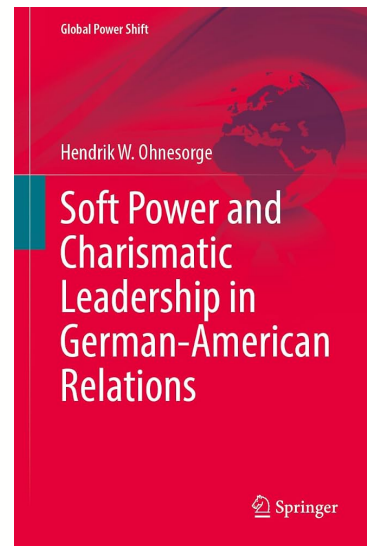
modernized the Soviet Navy through the fusion of “missile age technology, submarine deterrence, centralized research and development, and maritime strategy firmly under Chinese Communist Party (CCP) control.” Deeply researched, the book draws on Liu’s writings, archive collections, internal PLAN publications, and interviews with retired Taiwanese and Chinese admirals. Rather than a personal biography, the book’s focus is institutional, explaining the PLAN’s history and its resulting behavior today. Liu’s education at the Voroshilov Naval Academy in Leningrad between 1954 and 1958 exposed him to Gorshkov’s theory of requirements for a modern navy. Over the course of several decades Liu’s impact was singular. During his tenure as founding president of the Ministry of Defense’s Seventh Research Institute from 1961 to 1966, he created the foundation for the PLAN’s modernization by centralizing civilian and military laboratories into a single R&D organization, bringing scientists into the military and creating a strategy of “rapid imitation followed by incremental improvement.” Later, as PLAN Commander from 1982 to 1988, he translated his ideas of a technology-driven naval force into doctrine, built on “aircraft carriers, large destroyers and frigates, a sea-based nuclear deterrent, and a shift toward defending China’s sea lines of communication.” In his subsequent roles as Commander and vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, Liu accelerated the navy’s production of guided-missile destroyers and expanded conventional and nuclear submarine forces. Apart from documenting Liu’s contributions, as Nicole writes, “Li’s study demonstrates that China’s naval rise is not a reactive or ad hoc phenomenon. It is the product of decades of deliberate institutional design linking party control, industry, technology, and strategy.” Additionally, Liu’s legacy “helps explain not only the PLAN’s past, but its present trajectory toward becoming a ‘world class navy.’”



Ohnesorge Analyzes the Distortion of Soft Power

In his new book, *Soft Power and Charismatic Leadership in German-American Relations*, **Hendrik W. Ohnesorge** (Managing Director, Center for Global Studies; Senior Lecturer, Institute for Political Science, University of Bonn) argues that in the 21st century, the personality of leaders has become the “single most important variable” in how **Joseph Nye’s** (Former University Distinguished Service Professor and Former Dean of the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University) concept of “soft power”—defined as the ability to attract rather than coerce—is

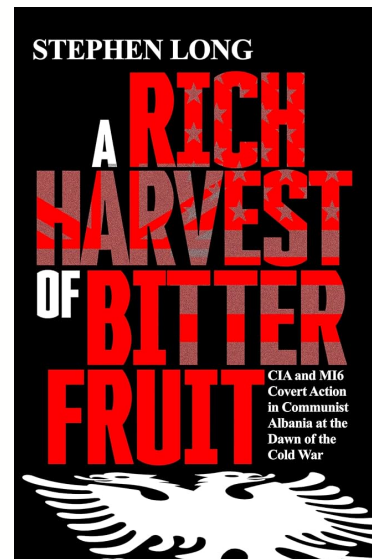
employed. As **Bobby Ghosh** (geopolitics analyst and commentator) [writes](#) in *Foreign Policy*, this default to personality represents a shift from the 20th century when “the soft power of the United States derived fundamentally from what it was, not who led it.” At that time, America’s ideology, culture, and institutions were the key sources of US influence. Not so today. Ohnesorge traverses five centuries of German-US history, with emphasis on Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. He associates German approval rates of the US with successive presidential administrations—very low when Bush left office; sharp upswing with Obama; and dramatic drop with Trump. More broadly, he attributes the potency of personality to the “fragmentation of the global information ecosystem and the celebrity-fication of politics everywhere.” As Ghosh explains, during the Cold War, institutions including cultural centers, exchange programs, and international broadcasting disseminated the content that shaped soft power. Today, social media, TikTok, and 24-hour news cycles have made leaders the content. Because leaders change, soft power swings with each election, leaving insufficient time to create sustainable influence. “Allies can’t plan. Adversaries can wait it out.” Further, Ohnesorge cites Max Weber’s sobering reminder that “Charisma is morally neutral. It can serve democracy or destroy it. It worked for Churchill and for Hitler. For Kennedy and for Mussolini.” The challenge for democracies is whether they elect leaders who can win the charisma competition against authoritarian figures, recognizing that “personality without policy is just performance art.”



Long Dissects the Cold War History of Covert Action in Albania

A Rich Harvest of Bitter Fruit: CIA and MI6 Covert Action in Communist Albania at the Dawn of the Cold War by **Stephen Long** (Associate Professor of Political Science and Global Studies, University of Richmond) is a study of the US and British covert operation in Albania in the late 1940s and early 1950s, which history has recorded as the first Cold War effort to overthrow a communist government. Its failure has been ascribed to British double agent Kim Philby’s disclosure of the plan to his handlers in Moscow, who tipped off their allies in Tirana. As **Casey Michel** (Director, Human Rights Foundation’s Combating Kleptocracy Program) [explains](#) in *Foreign Policy*, Long both revises key elements of the historical record and provides a cautionary tale on the hazards of embarking on regime change that remain

relevant today. In Long's account, the decades-long assumption that the purpose of the operation was to topple the communist regime of Enver Hoxha is incorrect as is the likelihood of Philby's involvement. Instead, British and American intelligence officials, observing what appeared to be a dictatorship in turmoil, assumed that the regime was approaching collapse, and the possibilities of Soviet intervention and territorial aggression by Albania's neighbors, Greece, Italy, and Yugoslavia, raised concerns. To gather information, British and US officials mounted a mission that included training Albanian émigrés from refugee camps across Europe and staging amphibious landings, including parachute drops into the country. The teams were instructed to radio their findings, gain additional support, and await instructions. As Long recounts in granular detail, desertions, the lack of secrecy, misdirected landings, and poor supervision from US and British intelligence officers doomed the operation, which lasted for six years with little useful information and entire teams of anti-communist Albanians lost. As to Philby, Long concludes that Albania's status as "a geopolitical backwater" would have prevented Moscow from risking the involvement of a key asset and would have caused Philby to avoid the operation. For Applied Historians, the episode is an early lesson in the cost of flawed perceptions about domestic political conditions—Hoxha led Albania until 1985—that echoed throughout the Cold War and that continues to echo today.



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

Featured Commentary

China

[“US and China: From Here to Where?”](#) with **Graham Allison (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Professor of Government, Harvard Kennedy School) at the World Economic Forum’s Annual Meeting of the New Champions**

Allison was “heartened by the summit” in Beijing “because it started with what I think is a proper diagnosis of the problem,” reflected in Xi’s question to Trump: “Are we going to be able to overcome Thucydides’s Trap?” Looking at China and the US today, “Thucydides told us that when a rapidly rising power seriously threatens to displace a major ruling power, that structural dynamic creates conditions that magnify misperceptions, multiply miscalculations, and produce conditions in which incidents or accidents that would otherwise be manageable can trigger a vicious spiral that ends where nobody wants—in a war.” The WWI analogy is instructive: “Germany rising, Great Britain ruling, the Archduke in Sarajevo assassinated,” says Allison. “What does that have to do with anything? In five weeks, all of Europe is at war.” Thucydides would say, Allison argues, that if the world conducts “business as usual, diplomacy as usual, statecraft as usual—we should expect history as usual. History as usual would be a catastrophic war.”

[“Paul Kennedy on Great Powers”](#) with **Paul Kennedy (Professor of History, Yale University) on *ChinaTalk* hosted by **Jordan Schneider****

Kennedy examines the parallels between the US-China rivalry and Great Britain’s relations with other great powers at the turn of the 20th century—increasing suspicion vis-à-vis Germany, but increasing camaraderie with the US. He notes that physical distance, cultural similarities like a common language, and ideology all help explain Britain’s behavior. The implication for the US and China is that the large distance between them could reduce the risk of danger, but the US’s commitments to allies and partners near China make it essential for the countries to reach an “amicable understanding.” Kennedy also discusses the historical examples of rising powers such as the Dutch Republic and Sweden that initially sought regional primacy but “amicably stepped down” after tiring of the costs of continued conflict.

[“China Opportunity 2.0’: Insights on China from Leaders at Summer Davos 2026”](#) with **Yuen Yuen Ang (Chair Professor of Political Economy, Johns Hopkins University) and **Adam Tooze** (Professor of History, Columbia University) at World Economic Forum’s Annual Meeting of the New Champions**

Ang argued that the current China export shock on which many critics are focused could in fact become an opportunity for China and the world. But China’s ability to control its trade surplus will be the major factor shaping the outcome, Ang said. As the readout of her comments put it, “Whether that arrives in the world as a shock or as an opportunity turns on a single variable: China’s ability to generate sufficient domestic demand to absorb much more of what its factories produce.” Tooze added that China’s export boom contains nuance. Cheap goods like solar panels and batteries only stand to increase global welfare, while other items like AI are linked to national security and will be contested. “In between lies the hard country of cars and heavy industry, where the grown-up response is a negotiation over terms,” he said, according to the readout. Germany was once accused of the same dumping practices that the West currently levels against China, he reminded the audience. From Dalian, Tooze also [spoke](#) on the *Sinica* podcast on “China Shock 2.0: This Time It’s Europe.”

[“Inside Defending Taiwan: How to Prevent a War Between China and the US”](#) with **Eyck Freymann (Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) on *Analyse* Podcast**

Freyermann discusses the Applied History methods that he uses in his recent book *Defending Taiwan* to analyze the Taiwan challenge and propose a US strategy for responding. “First, to understand how we got here... [I]f you don’t have a sense of the genealogy, the history of the present, you will be flying blind.” Second, as analogy: “There’s no single incandescent analogy... that lights up this whole problem, because the Taiwan problem is the most complex, multifaceted foreign policy challenge the United States has ever faced. But if you decompose the situation into parts, and look at particular aspects of the scenario, often those aspects have useful historical parallels.” This month, Freymann also spoke about the book with the [Foundation for Defense of Democracies](#) and [C-SPAN](#).

[“A Sovereign Peace: Reconceptualizing the Law of Sovereignty in the Taiwan Strait”](#) by **Alyssa Resar (Fellow, Harvard’s Belfer Center) in *International Law Studies***

Resar grapples with the thorny “problem of sovereignty in the Taiwan Strait,” which hinges on the question: “Where, and whether, the PRC’s sovereignty ends and where, and whether, [Taiwan’s] begins.” History, she argues, offers “inventive ways” of conceptualizing sovereignty which, if adopted by the PRC and Taiwan, could enable progress toward a diplomatic solution to cross-Strait tensions. For example, “Within divided Germany, it was the ‘Roof’ conception of sovereignty that undergirded the thaw in relations between Bonn and East Berlin,” she explains.

International Order

[“The Political Thinkers Who Envisaged a Better Postwar World”](#) by **John Bew (Senior Fellow, Harvard’s Belfer Center; Professor of History and Foreign Policy, King’s College London) in *The Observer***

Reviewing **James Holland’s** (historian, writer, broadcaster) new book [The Visionaries: Bretton Woods, the Marshall Plan, and the Making of the Post-World War II Order](#), Bew lauds it as “unashamedly a plea for the west to rediscover the same ‘moral clarity’ that animated these wartime internationalists.” By recounting the creation of the postwar international order, from Wilson and his “visionary but flawed ideas” to “the book’s main hero, Roosevelt, who spoke of ‘unity, not division, of the good of man, not hatred,’” Holland ensures “order-makers [are] given equal weight to the martial heroes” often centered in WWII stories, Bew argues. “Given the fraying of the international order today,” Bew concludes that “this book is an important reminder of the vital role of political leadership and an all-too-rare form of statecraft based around certain non-negotiable ethical goals.” Bew also [spoke](#) at the [Emerging Voices Series: Strategy, Security & Defence](#) conference at King’s College London.

[“Are We On The Brink of World War III?”](#) with **Odd Arne Westad (Professor of History and Global Affairs, Yale University) hosted by **Alastair Campbell** (former spokesman and strategist for British Prime Minister Tony Blair) and **Rory Stewart** (former UK Secretary of State for International Development; Professor in the Practice of Grand Strategy, Yale Jackson School) on *The Rest is Politics: Leading***

What worries Westad most today is some unforeseeable “world-class crisis” analogous to 1914 wherein “leaders let events run away” into conflict. Many pre-WWI tensions existed “for some time between all of the great powers that ended up” at war, but the trigger was just “one terrorist act in the summer of 1914... at the worst possible time,” when Britain, France, Germany, and Austria “were getting worried about their relative position.” Today, “just like the beginning of the 20th century, one of the major problems... is terrorism, acts by non-state actors that could, as we have seen already back in the early 2000s, change the whole international system.” Warning about the agency that smaller powers and non-state actors, not just great powers, have to escalate flashpoints into larger conflagrations, Westad argues “that’s exactly the kind of fragmentation that we had in the early 20th century as well.”

[“There Are Only Four Great Powers”](#) by **Brendan Simms (Professor of International Relations and Director of the Centre for Geopolitics, University of Cambridge) in *Foreign Policy***

“Disagreement over great-power status, and especially over which power is the ‘greatest,’ characterizes today’s system, as it did in times past,” Simms argues. Based on four “Rs” that define great powers—resources, reach, reputation, and resilience—Simms asserts that only the US, China, Russia, and the UK qualify today. “Historical performance plays an important role” in evaluating resilience, for example. “In the past, victory has not always gone to those who can inflict the most, but sometimes to those who can suffer the most,” such as the Habsburg Empire. In today’s case, Simms argues that Britain has maintained its power through its loss of the American colonies, and the US recovered from serious defeat in Vietnam. Simms also [wrote](#) in *The Spectator* on his new book [The Return of the Great Powers](#), which

was reviewed by **John Sawers** (Former Chief, MI6; Former UK Ambassador to the UN) in [The Financial Times](#), **Tod Lindberg** (Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute) in [Commentary](#), and **Jeremy Black** (Professor of History, University of Exeter) in [New Diplomatic History](#).

“[The Meaning of Place](#)” by Francis J. Gavin (Distinguished Professor and Inaugural Director of the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins’ SAIS) for *Texas National Security Review*

Introducing the latest issue of the *Texas National Security Review*, Gavin notes similarities and differences in how the “geo” in “geography” has been defined, past and present. Notably, the nuclear and ballistic missile revolutions are “key drivers of the changing nature of the geo in geopolitics.” Gavin argues that “The potential of states like North Korea and Iran—who possess little ability to project traditional military power or acquire empire abroad—to someday visit catastrophic ruin most anywhere in the world in hours, if not minutes, highlights how nuclear weapons and their delivery vehicles alter how we think of space and time in conflict.” Gavin also [gave](#) the keynote address for the 75th Annual Current Strategy Forum at the Naval War College.

“[Heartland vs Rimland](#)” by Michael Beckley (Associate Professor of Political Science, Tufts University) and Hal Brands (Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins’ SAIS) in *Foreign Affairs*

To make sense of the current global balance of power, Beckley and Brands revisit the thesis advanced by Halford Mackinder around 1900 and Nicholas Spykman in the 1940s: “The rhythm of geopolitics repeats itself: an autocratic axis, emerging from the continental heartland, seeks to rupture rimland barriers that buffer the wider world.” They note differences between the heartland empires of the previous century (Germany, USSR) and those of today (China, Russia, Iran), which are disruptive but lack the cohesion to launch a joint project of conquest. Plus, the rimland is asymmetrically stronger than the heartland, the authors argue: in natural resources, capital, market size, and technological strength, the US and its allies in Europe and

Japan hold large leads. This month, Brands also [traced](#) four ages of Japanese foreign policy.

Economics, Technology, and Industrial Policy

[“AI Is the Most Dangerous Arms Race in History”](#) by Niall Ferguson (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) in *The Free Press*

Ferguson identifies two historical analogies that capture the current global race for AI leadership. First, the competition between corporations mirrors the Mafia turf wars that raged from the 1960s to the 1980s until prosecutors and FBI investigators constrained them in the Mafia Commission Trial—similarly, today’s race for AI dominance requires regulation, Ferguson writes. Simultaneously, the US-China AI rivalry resembles the dangerous period of US nuclear monopoly from 1945 to 1949. The development of Mythos creates a window in which the US has analogous freedom of action in cyberspace, and China may take drastic measures to undermine the US advantage. To avoid conflict, the US must show self-restraint and encourage arms control negotiations with China. This month, Ferguson also [described](#) the historical continuities in the political grievances that toppled Keir Starmer from power in the UK.

[“The Invention of the Trillionaire”](#) by T.J. Stiles (Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer and historian) in *The Wall Street Journal*

The “mechanism that empowers Elon Musk to become the world’s first trillionaire” began when the link between stock prices and tangible stuff first broke, enabling John D. Rockefeller Sr. to become the world’s first billionaire. “Stock issued beyond construction costs was called ‘watered stock,’” wherein “the problem wasn’t dilution of share value, but that ‘excess’ stock represented nothing.” The “economic debate, which continues to this day” centers on “corporate power and wealth disparity, both powered by the stock market.” Stiles concludes that Musk’s trillionaire status “feels

like an inflection point... the kind of moment that might give rise to a new ethic, to new laws, that will reshape the corporate world.”

“[Can America Avoid a Jack Ma Moment?](#)” by Dan Wang (Research Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution) and Julian Gewirtz (former Senior Director for China and Taiwan Affairs, US National Security Council; Non-Resident Fellow, Belfer Center) in *The New York Times*

To illuminate the stakes of the ongoing standoff between the Trump administration and AI developer Anthropic over the release of advanced models, Wang and Gewirtz draw a comparison to China’s crackdown on Alibaba and its CEO Jack Ma in 2020. That incident, they argue, continues to depress investor sentiment and entrepreneurship in China. Likewise, “self-destructive American actions... may be the most significant threat to the evolution of AI for years to come,” they write, making their position that the US government and Anthropic must pursue a détente clear.

“[The New Wave of Nationalization](#)” by Nicholas Mulder (Associate Professor of History, Cornell University) in the IMF’s *Finance & Development*

Observing the current trend in which governments are nationalizing private assets “at the fastest pace in 50 years,” Mulder analyzes three previous “waves” of nationalization: the 1930s, 1940s after WWII, and 1970s. He shows that nationalization does not always entail protectionism; when governments took over private property in the 1940s and 1970s, they largely desired to increase their nations’ competitiveness in—and profit from—international trade. In today’s fourth wave, driven by a mixture of war and commodity shocks, it is also probable that global economic and financial integration will continue, though perhaps in slightly altered form, Mulder suggests.

Fiduciary Investors Symposium 2026 at Harvard University with Stephen Kotkin (Visiting Scholar, Harvard's Applied History Project; Senior Fellow, Stanford's Hoover Institution) and Jeremy Weinstein (Dean and Professor of Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School)

Kotkin [emphasized](#) the stunning continuity in America's global economic prowess, accounting for a quarter of the world's GDP since 1880 despite periods of recession, introversion, and major policy changes. Harsh though they are, Trump's tactics toward allies and trading partners contribute to "an overdue rebalancing" after years of overstretching. Separately, Weinstein [spoke](#) with Kotkin about the history of the pact between America's universities and government support. Taxpayer dollars granted for research at both public and private schools have fueled "the engine that has driven American productivity and economic growth since the end of World War II." But over 75 years, US universities have neglected to remind Americans that the basic research they conduct remains vital for the country, he argued.

["Economic Security in an Age of Strategic Competition"](#) by Calder Walton (Intelligence Project Director of Research, Harvard's Belfer Center) in *The Cipher Brief*

As Western leaders visit China to promote better trade relations, Walton advises a posture of "risk mitigation" to help the West retain control over the most advanced or dual-use technologies. When Kissinger and Nixon began opening trade with the Soviets, they allowed only second-tier components of advanced technologies to cross into the Soviet Union. Regardless, the GRU and KGB leveraged renewed access to Western markets to perpetrate large-scale collection of scientific and technical intelligence. Anticipating a similar attack on Western IP, Walton argues, the West—and its world-leading AI, quantum, and bio companies—should develop a strategy for limiting the risks of theft without foreclosing trade with China entirely.

["The Invisible Hand Won't Rebuild U.S. Shipyards"](#) by Mary Bridges (Senior Fellow, Vanderbilt Policy Accelerator; former

Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard's Belfer Center) in *Foreign Policy*

Bridges offers a strategy for reinvigorating US shipbuilding, drawing on the lessons learned from historical booms in US industry and the experience of other countries. "The nation needs publicly supported shipyards," she writes, "which I propose calling 'Liberty Yards,' echoing the successful maritime turnaround of the 1940s." Bridges shows how applying history can debunk popular narratives about cause and effect: it was not government intervention that sank America's shipbuilding industry, but rather government's withdrawal in the 1980s, she argues.

[“‘Recession’ Review: A Series of Unfortunate Economic Events,”](#) by **Diana Furchtgott-Roth (Distinguished Fellow, Energy Policy Research Foundation) in *The Wall Street Journal***

Contrary to the assumption held by many theorists that recessions come in predictable waves, **Tyler Goodspeed's** (chief economist, Exxon Mobil; Griffin Fellow, Stanford's Hoover Institution) recent book *Recession* claims "Recessions are fundamentally unpredictable." In her review, Furchtgott-Roth also emphasizes Goodspeed's finding that recessions are more often the result of multiple "overlapping" factors—from environmental disasters to interest rate hikes to labor strikes—than of one big event. "Economists shouldn't despair," she writes, "but call for humility and a better understanding of history."

[“The Forgotten Crash of 1873 and Its Lessons for Today's AI Frenzy”](#) by **Patrick Foulis (contributing editor; Visiting Fellow, Stanford's Hoover Institution) in *The Financial Times***

Reviewing Liaquat Ahamed's new book *1873* about the global financial crash in that year, Foulis highlights similarities to today's economic picture: a surge of infrastructure investment (railways, canals, and cables in 1873, data centers today), an increasingly complex financial system, and the multi-decade absence of great power war. There are several lessons for today, Foulis argues. After 1873, countries' economic and geopolitical fortunes became linked, as indebted countries were coerced into giving up sovereign powers. The 1873 crash also offers a

counterargument to the Keynesian view that government stimulus is essential for post-crash recovery. And 1873 explores the differential impact of the crash on laypeople and on the “rich and wannabe rich.”

[“Outsourcing the Final Frontier: SpaceX, the East India Company, and the Political Economy of Space”](#) by **Stefano Marcuzzi (Assistant Professor in History of International Relations, Centre for Higher Defence Studies) and **Alessio Terzi** (Assistant Professor, University of Cambridge’s Bennett School of Public Policy) published by the Bennett School of Public Policy**

Amid the excitement about SpaceX’s largest-ever IPO, the authors look for historical analogies for SpaceX’s dominance in space—a priority for both industry and governments. “Our applied economic history argument,” they write, “is that the emerging political economy of space reproduces institutional dynamics observed in the past, and specifically by the chartered companies of the Age of Sail.” They calculate that the British East India Company controlled 72% of seaborne trade from the Indian Ocean at its peak; SpaceX launches 75% of payloads into space. As in the Age of Sail, the US may fall into the trap of assuming SpaceX is essential for national security and is too big to fail, the authors warn.

US Grand Strategy

[“It’s Time to Stop Hunting Monsters”](#) by **Stephen Walt (Professor of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School) in *Foreign Policy***

Adapted from his opening and closing statements at a [Munk Debate](#) in May, during which he argued alongside **John Mearsheimer** (Professor of Political Science, University of Chicago) against **Mike Pompeo** (former US Secretary of State; former CIA Director) and **Victoria Nuland** (Professor in the Practice of International Diplomacy, Columbia’s SIPA; former Acting Deputy Secretary of State), Walt argues that the US should not “go abroad in search of monsters to destroy,” as John Quincy Adams stated. Patience and productive relationships even with countries that are not

democratic republics are a surer way of creating change, Walt writes. Walt gives South Korea as an example—the country was a military dictatorship until 1987 when subtle US support for democratization and a homegrown resistance movement resulted in regime change. This month, Walt also [reflected](#) on the Iraq War in assessing the ways in which political leaders try to escape blame for poor decisions.

[“The Illusion of Realism”](#) by Eliot Cohen (Chair in Strategy, Center for Strategic and International Studies; Professor Emeritus, Johns Hopkins SAIS) in *Sapir*

Cohen rejects the “dualism” in American foreign policy scholarship that pits realism on the one hand against idealism on the other. Using the experience of figures such as Henry Kissinger as an example, he argues: “Immersion in profound ideological beliefs shapes how political leaders understand and interpret the world and also how they act in it... [a] quarter-millennium of commitment to American notions of liberty and democracy affects the most unsentimental of American statesmen.” Despite reputations as hard realists, Kissinger and Nixon, he notes, negotiated the Helsinki Accords on human rights. The emphasis on idealism in American foreign policy has changed over time, he admits—and a recent focus on engineering American-style elections abroad has been unproductive.

Iran

[“The Danger of US-Iran Ceasefire Agreement Is What It Leaves Out”](#) by Monica Duffy Toft (Professor of International Politics and Director of the Center for Strategic Studies, Tufts’ Fletcher School) in *The Conversation*

Toft evaluates the peace agreement signed by the US and Iran, noting first that the contradictory claims of victory made by each party are a feature of diplomacy, not a bug. She points out that history’s first recorded treaty, following the 3,000-year-old Battle of Kadesh, was written in two languages for two audiences. Toft argues that effective peace agreements create strong incentives for compliance, as

demonstrated by the durable 1979 accord between Egypt and Israel that conditioned US aid on compliance. But the US-Iran agreement, she argues, appears to be “generous with rewards and short on penalties,” with some spoilers (such as Hezbollah) at large. Toft also [discussed](#) the modern era of “forever wars” on *The World* podcast.

Russia and Ukraine

[“David and Goliath: Commentaries on the Russo-Ukrainian War”](#) with **Serhii Plokhy (Professor of Ukrainian History, Harvard University) hosted by the University of Melbourne**

Plokhy discusses his recent book about Russia’s war in Ukraine and highlights the role that historians can play in illuminating current events: “helping people that are in the midst of the events to acquire on their own, with our help, meaning—the meaning of what is happening, the stakes.” He encourages analysts to consider insights from a range of historical analogies for the war and its wider geopolitical implications, from Austria-Hungary’s relationship with Ukraine to the rivalry between the British and Russian Empires known as the Great Game. For Europe’s repeated concessions to Russia over the construction of the Nord Stream pipelines, Plokhy uses a different analogy: “classic appeasement of the 1930s.”

[“How Russia Weaponized Energy \(Even Before Putin\)”](#) with **Sergey Radchenko (Distinguished Professor, Johns Hopkins SAIS) on *The Next Best* hosted by **Marcel Dirsus****

While observers tend to focus on Putin’s “energy leverage” over Europe at the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Radchenko argues: “In reality, this is a longer story, and it overlaps practically with the Cold War.” He explains that the oil and gas trade between the Soviet Union and Western Europe has worried US intelligence analysts and policymakers since its origins in the 1950s and 1960s. That Russia has long seen energy in strategic terms is also evident from Gorbachev’s blockade on Lithuania in 1990 and Yeltsin’s efforts to extract concessions from Ukraine amid

repeated oil cutoffs. But the inability to continue providing discounted oil to satellites and the Soviet Union's energy-intensive economy eventually contributed to the USSR's dissolution, Radchenko says.

[“Russia’s Longer Inter-State Wars Have More Often Ended in Victory”](#) by **Simon Saradzhyan (founding director), **Ivan Kurilla** (Visiting Professor of History, The Ohio State University), **Angelina Flood** (managing editor), **Ivan Arreguín-Toft** (editor) for *Russia Matters* at Harvard’s Belfer Center**

The *Russia Matters* team reviewed the historical record of Russia's performance in wars to assess a claim that Russian officials have made amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine—that Russia wins long wars. Their analysis shows that Russia has won 57% of its wars dating back to the reign of Ivan the Terrible and has won 65% of wars lasting longer than the current war in Ukraine. While they acknowledge the comparison to previous Russian wars may not hold in all cases, the authors highlight its potential relevance given Putin's affinity for Russian military history.

Europe

[“Nothing I’ve Seen in 50 Years Compares with Trump’s Chaos”](#)
with Lawrence Freedman (Emeritus Professor of War Studies,
King’s College London), hosted by **Olivia O’Sullivan** (Director, UK
in the World Programme, Chatham House) on *The World Today*

Reflecting on his visit to Washington ahead of Reagan’s inauguration, Freedman recalls “there were fears that the US would go into some strange right-wing places, and it did to a degree.” Today, the Trump administration is “an aberration, but it’ll have long-lasting effects.” Amidst the chaos, what the British foreign policymaking establishment needs is institutionalized knowledge by members “who are going to be in a position for some time to ask hard questions.” **John Bew**, for example, “provided a real sense of direction, which is why, of all the things that went wrong over the past five or six years, foreign policy wasn’t one of them.”

[“10 Years After Brexit, the Dismal Verdict Is In”](#) by **Philip Stephens** (contributing editor, *The Financial Times*) in *The New York Times*

Stephens evaluates the turmoil in British politics since the Brexit referendum of 2016, punctuated by last week’s resignation of the UK’s sixth prime minister in ten years, Keir Starmer. Stephens argues that Brexit captured voters’ imagination by appealing to their memories of Britain as a great power. Commitment to British independence from Europe was not new, but political leaders from Macmillan to Major had reluctantly recognized that Britain “could not sit on the sidelines while the rest of Europe pooled its strengths.” Because Brexit has failed to deliver on its promise of a new “golden age,” the populist sentiment that fueled the referendum continues to shake British politics, Stephens concludes.

[“Institutional Memory: The Battles Behind Defence Spending,”](#) by **Jon Davis** (Director of the Strand Group, King’s College London) in *Civil Service World*

As the UK embarks on a multiyear program to raise defense spending, history teaches that one headwind will be interdepartmental battles within government,

Davis argues. Over the last century, quarrels between the Treasury and Defense Ministry have repeatedly occurred during periods in which Britain sought to develop a more muscular foreign policy. For example, Lord Salisbury lamented “the exaggerated control of the Treasury” at the turn of the twentieth century, Davis writes. Amid austerity in 2010, Davis claims, Treasury modeled changes to defense expenditure so drastic that one proposal—eventually discarded—would have eliminated the Royal Navy.

“[What Small States Can Learn from Singapore](#)” by Floris van Berckel Smit (Postdoctoral Researcher in Applied History, Radboud University, Netherlands) and Deborah Koh (Associate Research Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore) in *Engelsberg Ideas*

Singapore’s “leaders often stress that its policies were born of unique circumstances of survival, making them difficult to transpose onto established western states,” yet Van Berckel Smit and Koh argue that its “survival in an increasingly tricky neighbourhood holds pointed lessons for Europe’s smaller states.” Singapore had “to turn the withdrawal of an external security guarantor... into a catalyst for national resilience.” Europe must now also “move from a legacy of dependency towards greater self-reliance.” The authors conclude that “the central challenge is the same: adapting to a world in which the burden of security must increasingly be borne within the region itself.”

US Politics

“[Trump is Still Haunted by Hoover’s Failures](#)” by Zachary Basu (director of news) for *Axios*

Highlighting recent comments by President Donald Trump about presidential history, Basu emphasizes the role that historical reasoning plays in Trump’s decision-making. “I’ve studied presidents — some good, some bad, some great... And the

one president I did not want to be was the late, great Herbert Hoover,” Trump said. Basu suggests three ways in which Trump and Hoover resemble each other, despite Trump’s wishes. Both were businessmen before becoming president, imposed major tariffs, and oversaw net job loss (Trump during his first term due to COVID).

[“There Is a Model for Shackling Presidential Power”](#) by Kate Shaw (Professor of Law, University of Pennsylvania's Carey Law School) in *The New York Times*

Modeled on the legislation that Congress passed in the 1970s after Nixon resigned, Shaw recommends policies that today’s Congress should adopt to rein in executive power after Trump’s term ends. For each area in which Congress must strengthen its oversight, Shaw writes, there is precedent: spending (1974), emergency declarations (1976), government ethics (1978), and declarations of war (1973). In a departure from the post-Nixon era, Shaw argues, Congress must also reform the Supreme Court to prevent future presidents from bypassing Congress thanks to favorable Court rulings, as Trump has.

Applied History Methods

[“A Return to Teaching History”](#) by Allen Guelzo (Professor of Humanities, University of Florida’s Hamilton School) in *Sapir*

Lamenting the decline in the number of history majors at US universities, instructional time devoted to history, and job openings for young historians, Guelzo offers reasons that history is essential, from “the sense of identity that history imparts to individuals and societies” to the way in which it “inoculates us against conspiracy theories” and falsehoods. The Founding Fathers, he reminds, “industriously dusted off Polybius, Plutarch, Thucydides” and other luminaries from antiquity to identify the “principles of governance” on which the American republic would be built.

“[Great Power Diplomacy](#)” with **A. Wess Mitchell (Fellow, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Principal and Co-Founder, The Marathon Initiative) on Word on Fire’s *Evangelization & Culture* Podcast**

Mitchell describes his study of diplomatic history over the last 2,000 years, recounting cases such as Byzantium’s pact with the Huns and Metternich’s central role in Europe’s balance-of-power politics. Since diplomacy is a personal and contingent endeavor, Mitchell says, “the best way to understand diplomacy is through history which is a recounting of human deeds as constrained” by external factors. Mitchell also elaborated on his logic for case selection, emphasizing a key choice that Applied Historians must make. To consider diplomacy in its most strategic form, he focused on states still in their heyday—for whom diplomacy was not merely a last-ditch effort—and responding to novel threats.

Network Updates

Justin Winokur Appointed as Associate Director of the Applied History Project

The Applied History Project at Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center is pleased to announce that **Justin Winokur** has [joined](#) as Associate Director. A specialist on the history of US foreign relations, he earned a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia for his dissertation, “Relentless Struggle: The National Security Movement and the Remaking of the American State, 1945-53.” At Harvard’s Belfer Center, Winokur has been an Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, and at the University of Virginia he has been the Norman Graebner Fellow in Diplomatic History, National Security Fellow, Governing America in a Global Era Fellow, and Albert Gallatin Graduate Research Fellow. He has also been a fellow of the Eisenhower Institute at Gettysburg College. His writing has appeared in *Foreign Affairs*. He can be contacted at justin_winokur@hks.harvard.edu.

American Political History Conference Addresses Challenges of US Democracy

The 2026 American Political History Conference, “American Democracy as Political History: Challenges across the Past, Present, and Future,” gathered historians to illuminate problems facing American democracy from domestic politics and foreign affairs to education and technology policy. According to the conveners, “A strong understanding of the past is critical to strengthening American democracy and to navigating the seismic shifts happening in our nation today.” Hosted at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg Center in Washington DC, the conference was [co-chaired](#) by **Kathryn Cramer Brownell** (Professor of History and Director of the Center for American Political History and Technology, Purdue University), **Nicole Hemmer** (Associate Professor of History and Director of the Rogers Center for the American Presidency, Vanderbilt University), and **Leah Wright** (Associate Professor of History, Johns Hopkins University), and featured several Applied History Network members including **Beverly Gage** (Professor of History, Yale University), **Daniel Immerwahr** (Professor in the Humanities, Northwestern University), **Kate Birkbeck** (Postdoctoral Research Associate, Brown University; Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center), **Nur Laiq** (Kissinger Center Fellow, Johns Hopkins SAIS; former Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center), **Justin Winokur**, and many more.

Tyler Jost Receives Tenure, Promoted to Associate Professor at Brown’s Watson School

Brown University’s Political Science department and Watson School of International and Public Affairs have [granted](#) tenure to **Tyler Jost**, who is now Associate Professor of China Studies and Political Science. Previously an International Security Project Fellow at Harvard’s Belfer Center, Jost’s first book, *Bureaucracies at War*, used four historical case studies to explain why states start conflicts that end in failure and analyzed how national security institutions shape the quality of information leaders use to make decisions. His current book project, *Inherit the Earth: The Global Politics of Major Power Cooperation*, expands on the Applied History qualities of the first in a more comprehensive endeavor. By gathering masses of cases from the end of WWII to the present, Jost examines the historical

record for instances of great power cooperation—finding that they are more common than one might think—and builds on the legacy of books such as **Graham Allison's** *Destined for War* and **James Lacey's** (Professor of Strategic Studies and Chair of War Studies, Marine Corps University) *Great Strategic Rivalries* by offering lessons from this history for policymakers today.

Former Ernest May Fellow Contributes to Negotiations on Framework Agreement Between Lebanon and Israel



Jay Mens (senior adviser, US State Department; former Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard's Belfer Center) [stands](#) to the left of Secretary of State Marco Rubio in a photograph of the US team that mediated recent negotiations between Israel and Lebanon.

Applied History Quote of the Month

“Realizing the extent to which people in the past struggled with circumstances that they scarcely understood is perhaps the most important insight flowing from historical study. To understand the past in all its complexity is to acquire historical wisdom and humility and indeed a tragic sense of life. A tragic sense does not mean a sad or pessimistic sense of life; it means a sense of the limitations of life.”

– **Gordon S. Wood**, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (2008)

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