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AND LEADERSHIP

Applied History Network Newsletter

September 2026

The September 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.

If you would like to submit an item for next month's issue, please email it to aristotle_vainikos@hks.harvard.edu with the subject "October Applied History Update" by November 5.

In This Issue:

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Special Feature: Applying History to the 9/11 Attacks

September 11, 2026, marked the 25th anniversary of the deadliest terror attack on American soil. This month, we highlight articles and events presenting poignant reflections on 9/11 and candidly analyzing the repercussions on American foreign policy over a quarter century.

- [“25 Years Later: The Lessons and Legacy of September 11, 2001”](#) with **Meghan O’Sullivan** (Director, Harvard’s Belfer Center; Professor of the Practice of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School), **Joe Pfeifer** (former Acting Fire Commissioner, NYC Fire Department), **Mike Mullen** (former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), and **Nancy Gibbs** (Director, Harvard’s Shorenstein Center): Panelists share memories and lessons-learned from the 9/11 attacks and America’s geostrategic response. They discuss the difficulties of crisis decision-making and ask, “How do you respond to an attack of that scale but prevent a strategic overreach?” Adm. Mullen explains it is essential to ask: “Tell me how this ends. Where are we going here? What are the objectives? You can’t, you’re never going to, get that perfectly right, but you need to have the discussion.”
- [“25 Years After 9/11—A Look Back”](#) with **Ivo Daalder** (former US Ambassador to NATO; Senior Fellow, Harvard’s Belfer Center), **Nicholas Burns** (Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Relations, Harvard Kennedy School), **Meghan O’Sullivan**, **Juliette Kayyem** (Senior Lecture in International Security, Harvard Kennedy School): Belfer Center experts consider the profound historical changes that the 9/11 attacks prompted. For example: “how ‘homeland security’ didn’t exist as a concept on September 10th, and how, by necessity, it was built from scratch.” Daalder highlights O’Sullivan’s proposition that 9/11 “gave America’s foreign policy a *negative* organizing principle, defined by what we opposed rather than what we stood for.” The lesson Burns learned as NATO ambassador on 9/11—*allies matter*—resonates today, Daalder notes.
- [“9/11 Did Not Doom the American Empire”](#) by **Niall Ferguson** (Co-Chair, Harvard’s Applied History Project; Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover Institution): Ferguson updates the thesis of his book *Colossus* published in the aftermath of 9/11. “No one would now call the United States a

hyperpower, to be sure. But my prophetic vision of decline and fall 25 years ago clearly has not been fulfilled. In relative terms, America is still Number One by any measure except maybe numbers of robots.” Compared to 2001, America still faces high debt, demographic challenges, and an attention deficit—but “I would far rather have America’s problems than those of the Axis powers.” This month, Ferguson also [wrote](#) about the analogy between regulating AI and constraining biological weapons in the 1970s.

- [“What Was the War on Terror?”](#) by **Philip H. Gordon** (Sydney Stein Jr. Scholar, Brookings Institution): Reviewing *All the Presidents’ Wars* by **Peter Bergen** (journalist; Professor of the Practice, Arizona State University), Gordon evaluates the “price of victory” in America’s War on Terror that helped prevent another 9/11. “It has left the United States safer in some ways, but also poorer, more divided, less respected, more world-weary, and less sure of itself,” he argues. Gordon contends that Bergen does not fully appreciate that the main problems with the War on Terror were fundamental strategic errors rather than tactical miscalculations. But he compliments the book’s implicit consideration of the counterfactual: “was there an alternative to this costly outcome?”
- [“Amidst ‘a World of Generational Change’: 9/11’s Lessons and Legacy”](#) with **Philip Zelikow** (Senior Fellow, Stanford’s Hoover): Zelikow reflects on his experience as executive director of the 9/11 Commission established in the aftermath of the attacks. He reminds of the anxiety in Washington—the atmosphere in which subsequent decision-making occurred—and emphasizes the takeaway that “you sometimes will have to do things that will seem disproportionate to stop [a threat] because, the day before 9/11, going into Afghanistan was literally inconceivable at scale. By the afternoon of 9/11, it seemed like something we should have done six months ago.” While he warns America must remain vigilant, he argues “for 25 years America has been somewhat safer”—and “it’s not an accident.” This month, Zelikow also [wrote](#) about the history of society’s reception of general purpose technologies, of which AI is the latest.

Applied History Analyses of the Month

[“A New World Order Is Coming. We Aren’t Ready”](#) by Margaret MacMillan (Professor Emerita of History, University of Toronto; Professor Emerita of International History, Oxford University) in *The New York Times*

MacMillan observes, “There is no single pattern for revolutionary change, but those at the summit of a regime often fail to recognize how brittle it is.” She cites the French Revolution, 1917 Russian Revolution, and Hitler’s rise to power. But she also highlights one case in which an established government successfully adapted to change instead of stubbornly refusing to recognize it: in 1832, the British elite passed the Great Reform Act to accommodate the expanding middle classes. Given the major geopolitical changes underway—a “new age of disorder,” she proposes—and the track record of governments’ responses, MacMillan warns: “A world war is not inevitable, but the threat of a catastrophic conflict between big and well-armed powers is closer than it was for decades.”

MacMillan’s piece demonstrates the power of historical reasoning to put the noise of current events into perspective. Considered separately, policy challenges can be explained away as temporary or insignificant. When MacMillan considers them the way an historian would—in connection to each other and in context—they instead become indicators of a “new age of disorder.” She analyzes four historical cases in which a similar overlapping set of problems prevailed. Her method indicates the difficulty of averting a disaster—in three of four cases, revolution struck—but also demonstrates that there is precedent for achieving a better outcome.

[“The Trouble With the Nuclear-AI Analogy”](#) by Christopher David LaRoche (Assistant Professor, Central European University and Bard College) and Ankit Panda (Stanton Senior Fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) in *Foreign Affairs*

The authors warn against improperly applying the analogy of controlling nuclear weapons to the contemporary dilemma of mitigating the danger posed by AI. “Too rosy a picture of nuclear weapons governance,” they write, risks ignoring the role of chance in averting nuclear war and leaves “architects for AI governance ill-prepared for what is likely to come.” Moreover, the technologies differ. AI is software, not countable hardware, and uniquely can continue to improve after being trained and released. Whereas the “decisive moment” of nuclear use at the end of WWII displayed the full catastrophic potential of nuclear weapons and motivated

campaigns to regulate them, AI has yet to experience a similar event that would “transform fear into action,” they write.

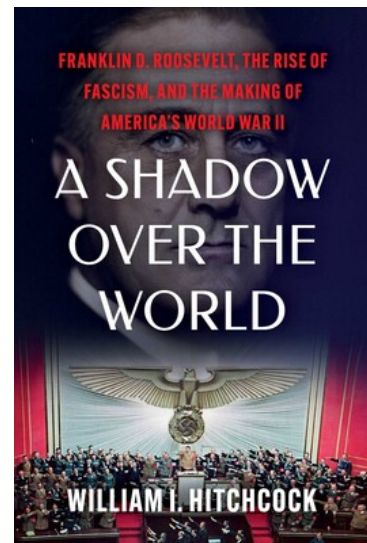
The piece is a powerful demonstration of reasoning by analogy. It demonstrates the authors’ thorough understanding of both nuclear history and current problems in AI policy and technology. It engages both similarities and differences between past and present, clarifying the limitations of a widely used analogy and illuminating the present by analyzing what makes it unique. Finally, it builds on its historical analysis to engage ongoing debates, concluding by emphasizing the opportunity for Trump and Xi to advance AI safety at their September 24 summit.

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

[*A Shadow Over the World: Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Rise of Fascism, and the Making of America’s World War II*](#) by **William Hitchcock** (Professor of

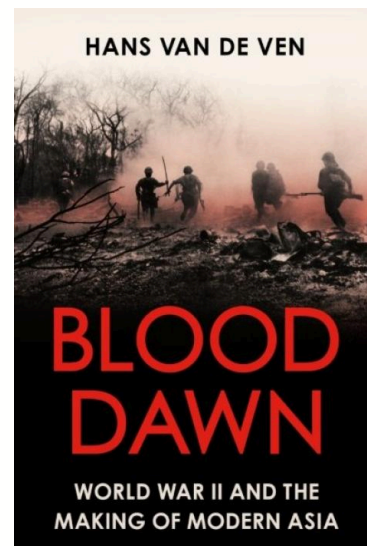
History, University of Virginia): Hitchcock analyzes America’s response to the rise of fascism in Europe leading up to World War II. He asks “why Roosevelt did not act sooner to confront the threat of Fascism,”

[according](#) to a review by **Beverly Gage** (Professor of History, Yale University). A history of the antifascist networks that lobbied FDR to overcome his “confusion and undue caution vis-à-vis European Fascism,” the book “makes a vigorous case for antifascism as a central inheritance of the modern American political tradition,” writes Gage. She concludes: “It is impossible to read *A Shadow Over the World* without wondering what happened to the thoughtful, generous style of political leadership that Roosevelt embodied.”

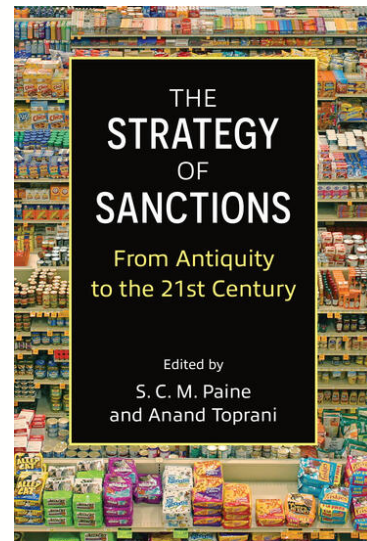


[*Blood Dawn: World War II and the Making of Modern Asia*](#) by **Hans van de Ven** (Professor of Modern Chinese History, University of Cambridge; Chair Professor of History, Peking University): van de Ven offers “a view of World War II—its causes,

battles, and consequences—as seen from Asia,” [summarizes](#) **Tom Nagorski** (senior contributing editor, *The Cipher Brief*) in his review. Important events in the Pacific and Asian mainland have been “insufficiently examined, inadequately narrated, and rarely remembered,” van de Ven writes. The book fulfills the Applied Historian’s task of asking: “how does the other side remember it?” For one, colonialism—not fascism, as in Europe—was a major driver of war in Asia. Nagorski quotes van de Ven: “Their North Star was the end of imperialism.”



[*The Strategy of Sanctions: From Antiquity to the 21st Century*](#) edited by **S.C.M. Paine** (University Professor Emerita of History and Grand Strategy, Naval War College) and **Anand Toprani** (Professor of Strategy and Policy, US Naval War College; former Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard’s Belfer Center): The book “uses case studies from antiquity to the present to evaluate the strategic utility of sanctions and embargoes.” Among other examples, contributors analyze the US embargo of Japan before WWII, Western sanctions against the USSR during the Cold War, and America’s economic pressure on Britain during the Suez Crisis. Authors assess the efficacy of some ongoing sanctions regimes, such as Western pressure on Iran and sanctions against Russia.



**This section was inspired by Paul Kennedy and his wide experience in writing book reviews.*

Featured Commentary

Artificial Intelligence

["This is the Most Powerful Technology Ever. Don't Fail to Imagine the Risk"](#) by **Fareed Zakaria (host, CNN's *Fareed Zakaria GPS*) in *The Washington Post***

Zakaria disputes the claims made by AI companies that government regulation will cripple the industry or allow China to surge ahead. He writes: "During the Cold War, the United States was locked in an existential nuclear race with the Soviet Union, yet we required civilian reactors to be licensed and meet federal safety standards. In fact, the Soviets were the ones with a weak safety culture and inadequate oversight, which produced the Chernobyl disaster." Moreover, he argues good regulation can make the US AI industry even more internationally competitive. After 2008, when Washington imposed on banks what some saw as "asinine" regulation, US banking only grew in size and international influence—and was more resilient to any future "severe shocks."

["Humanity Has Avoided Apocalypse Before. Let's Do It Again"](#) by the Editorial Board in *The New York Times*

The Times presents the regulation of nuclear weapons as an existence theorem for the proposition that America and the international community can successfully mitigate the risks posed by AI today. "The nuclear analogy is useful," they write, "because it reminds us of something our cynical age can forget: Human society can restrain a dangerous innovation once it decides to." The piece acknowledges meaningful differences between nuclear technology and AI, especially the fact that private companies—not a secret military project—are leading AI development. Nonetheless, the piece recommends creating an AI analog of the Atomic Energy Commission and negotiating "a coordinated AI slowdown with China," similar to nuclear talks with the USSR.

["Is A.I. Above the Law?"](#) by **Jill Lepore (Professor of American History and Professor of Law, Harvard University) in *The New***

Yorker

After this summer's hack of Hugging Face by AI models built by OpenAI, Lepore asks what the law should make of machines that act on their own. Courts treat robots as things, not persons, which leaves them “outlaws,” she writes. Searching for analogies from the past, she notes that colonial slave law borrowed from livestock law: it treated enslaved people as property, yet held them to be persons when they were charged with crimes. Until the law develops a proper framework for AI beings, robots will remain in “a no man's land of outlawry,” she argues. Lepore [discussed](#) the argument on WBUR's *Here & Now* program.

“[Can Washington Accept Yes From The AI Giants?](#)” by David Ignatius (columnist) in *The Washington Post*

Ignatius argues that Washington is squandering a rare industry consensus on AI guardrails: “We have a dangerous combination of very smart machines and very dumb political leaders.” He turns to precedent for a better process. He recommends analyzing the 1975 Asilomar Conference, at which scientists, doctors, and lawyers discussed ways to contain risks of recombinant DNA research. Moreover, the National Space Council, established first in 1989 and again in 2017, shows that innovation can coexist with White House oversight and coordination, he notes. Ignatius urges Trump and Xi to begin at their 24 September summit with a hotline for accidental AI incidents.

US Politics

Salem State Series Hosts Fireside Chat with Barack Obama

Doris Kearns Goodwin (Pulitzer Prize-winning author and presidential historian) [moderates](#) a conversation with President Obama about his presidency and the value of history. As framing, Goodwin commends the study of history: “history can be our guide, providing us perspective, lessons, and most importantly hope.” Obama reflects on the role that academic scholarship and historians played during his

presidency. “Every once in a while, I'd bring some historians in for lunch or dinner, and I'd say to them, ‘Is it always this crazy?’ And then they'd say, ‘Well, actually,’ and they'd give me citations and I'd feel a little better.” He adds: “One of the benefits of history is it cures you of nostalgia.” Goodwin and Obama also discuss the role of the citizenry in democracy and the importance of debate.

[“The Military Cannot Save US Democracy”](#) by Kori Schake
(Senior Fellow and Director of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies,
American Enterprise Institute) in *Current History*

Schake highlights the amazing fact that in American history “there isn’t a single example of a military leader refusing to carry out the president’s orders or gathering troops to threaten to take over the government,” even as today’s military faces more political pressure than it has since the Reconstruction era, she claims. Historically, high public trust in the military but low trust in political leaders—increasingly true in the US—has motivated “efforts to supplant civilian authority.” “That the US has not succumbed to this fate is a fact we ought both to note and to treasure,” she writes.

[“What Machiavelli Would Say About Trump”](#) by Stephen M. Walt
(Professor of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School) in
Foreign Policy

Walt reviews President Trump’s behavior against Niccolo Machiavelli’s dictums for a successful prince and argues Machiavelli would “see Donald Trump as Exhibit A for why a well-ordered republic is preferable to the rule of an erratic and self-absorbed potentate.” Walt considers Trump’s performance on Machiavelli’s criteria for successful leadership, from his lack of strategic foresight in military affairs and lack of fiscal discipline to arbitrary application of justice. Walt contends that while Trump may appear to possess the qualities of a Machiavellian prince, he lacks the subtlety to wield those traits successfully, meaning Trump is neither feared nor loved; rather he falls into Machiavelli’s most perilous category: being despised.

[“‘Frederick Douglass’s American Founding’ and ‘Until the Last Yoke Is Broken’: A Foundational Question”](#) by David S. Reynolds

(Distinguished Professor, CUNY Graduate Center) in *The Wall Street Journal*

Reynolds reviews two books about the evolution in Frederick Douglass's reception of the US Constitution: *Until the Last Yoke is Broken* by **Bradley N. Rebeiro** (Associate Professor of Law, BYU Law School) and *Frederick Douglass's American Founding* by **Dennis C. Rasmussen** (Professor of Political Science, Syracuse University). Amid heated debate among abolitionists in the nineteenth century, Douglass reframed key passages in the Constitution and the private views of its Framers to recast it as "a glorious liberty document." In Rebeiro's account, he argues that Douglass was practicing what legal scholars today call natural-rights originalism. The books highlight how changing narratives of the nation's founding can influence policy long after the fact.

["Blame Ronald Reagan"](#) by **Jonathan Kaufman (Professor and Director of the School of Journalism, Northeastern University) in *The New York Times***

Kaufman argues that the "1980s live on in even more ways than many Americans recognize," given the impact that President Reagan, executives such as Jack Welch, and the emergent Federalist Society had on America's economy and politics. Among the legacies of the '80s, Kaufman ranks "the unchecked power of big business" as one of the most significant. He advises today's Democrats to learn from how conservative activists 45 years ago began accumulating influence. To start: "liberals and Democrats must learn to play the long game."

Great Power Competition

Westad Examines Historical Parallels for Today's US, China, Russia on *Clearer than Truth*

Odd Arne Westad (Professor of History and Global Affairs, Yale University) [argues](#) that the current transition from geopolitical stability to instability, and the presence of multiple regional crises that could serve as sparks for world war, most resembles the

period before World War I. Westad compares the partnership between China and Russia to Austria-Hungary's dependence on Germany—with Russia playing the role of Austria today. He proposes that Soviet-style Marxism continues to influence China's political and economic system, creating similar structural problems despite China's greater wealth and openness.

[“What to Expect When You’re Expecting Great Power Conflict”](#) by Brendan Simms (Professor of the History of International Relations and Director of the Centre for Geopolitics, University of Cambridge) on the School of War podcast

Simms labels the interlude between the Cold War and today as the “eclipse of the great powers,” when great power competition reached its historical nadir. Simms proposes four pillars of great power status: resources, reach, reputation, and resilience. His pillars build on other historians’ attempts to characterize the great powers, such as Leopold von Ranke’s assertion that “a great power needs to stand for something in the world.” Looking ahead, Simms anticipates increased “bi-order” confrontation, where the authoritarian order, led by Russia and China, clashes with the democratic order of the United States, Europe, and their allies.

[“How to Survive in a World Without Rules”](#) by Hal Brands (Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins’ SAIS) in *Foreign Policy*

Brands argues that that age-old drivers of state behavior are overpowering “the core of the rules-based order...the idea that old, destructive impulses could be overcome through the adoption of liberal practices and principles—and the consistent application of U.S. power.” Brands claims states must prepare for a more anarchic world by recovering the concept of self-help, even as he acknowledges that interstate cooperation will continue to play a role. He warns that a “gangster’s paradise” may suit powerful states in the short run, but history teaches: “Principle *is* a fount of power. If Washington forgets that, it will pay a heavy price.”

[“America’s Attrition Trap”](#) by Nadia Schadlow (Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute) in *Foreign Affairs*

Schadlow declares “Attrition is the defining feature of today’s conflicts,” visible in wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, despite their differences. She argues that America will need fresh ideas for fighting and winning these wars, some of which may be old: for example, “nearly four decades ago, the military thinker Edward Luttwak proposed a strategy of ‘relational maneuver,’ which would focus on attacking the enemy’s internal cohesion and functioning rather than simply grinding down its forces.” While Schadlow is skeptical the US has the political will to implement that strategy—as is currently being tested by Trump’s Operation Economic Outcast in Iran—she recommends US leaders be more realistic about waging war in the first place.

Europe

[“Oral Evidence: Multilateralism”](#) with John Bew (Professor of History and Foreign Policy, King’s College London; Senior Fellow, Harvard’s Belfer Center) before the UK House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee

Bew explains that post-1945 international institutions were “power games” that “were reflective of power dynamics,” and Britain’s weight in them depended on economic strength, defense spending, and development funding—all of which have weakened. Bew calls for doubling down on the UK’s present strengths—like its approach to AI regulation—to provide cachet in today’s hard power-oriented geopolitical landscape that he suggests is best navigated through “coalitions of the willing.” Despite the US’s “transactional” turn, Bew reminds that “there is a lot that pushes the Western Alliance together,” including shared interests on China and technology.

[“Can Western Civilization Endure?”](#) with James Hankins (Professor of Humanities, University of Florida’s Hamilton School)

and **Allen Guelzo** (Professor of Humanities, University of Florida's Hamilton School) on *Voices of Freedom*

Commenting on the recent volumes of their history of Western civilization, *The Golden Thread*, Hankins emphasizes the influence of the past on the present. “The point is that the golden thread is the memory we have of the past and it's guidance to us that we don't need to despair.” In particular, he notes “Western civilization has great resources of renaissance,” as the Theodosian Renaissance of the fourth century and the Carolingian Renaissance of the eighth century demonstrated. In Guelzo's summary, “the western tradition has within it such deep and rich resources —of insight, of debate, of argument, of law, of a dedication to curiosity and the freedom to be curious.”

“[How Sweden's Social Democrats Survived in the Capital of Capital](#)” by **Rikard Westerberg** (Director, Center for Statecraft and Strategic Communications, Stockholm School of Economics) in *Engelsberg Ideas*

After Sweden's Social Democrats posted their worst result since 1921 in this month's elections, Westerberg asks why the party has lasted when its sister parties in France and the Netherlands collapsed or merged. The decisive reason, he argues, is historical. The party chose “pragmatism and a will to rule over radicalism”: it began deregulation in the 1980s, kept the market reforms of the 1990s, and started Sweden's bids to join the EU and NATO. Stockholm. But he notes that the party's pragmatism now faces its hardest test since the financial crisis of the early 1990s.

Applied History Methods

Roundtable Review of *Thinking Historically* in H-Diplo's Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

Four authors [discuss](#) the contributions and arguments of **Frank Gavin's** (Distinguished Professor, Johns Hopkins' SAIS) book *Thinking Historically*. In his review, **Alexander Bick** (Associate Professor of Practice in Public Policy, UVA's

Frank Batten School) asks how policymakers are meant to cultivate Gavin's sensibility: "if one acknowledges that Gavin's insights are the fruit of long and careful study, is it not reasonable to ask how policymakers, many of whom have little or no analogous training, will be able to develop the capacity to think historically on their own?" **Thomas Mahnken** (Professor of Practice, Johns Hopkins' SAIS) contends that "Understanding the world requires both a knowledge of history, the world of facts, as well as theory, a sense of how those facts relate to one another"—a role best played by political science. Gavin pushes back by noting that history deals better with complexity: "History, like statecraft and strategy but unlike theory, does not solve for 'X' or expect easy equilibria solutions." Both **Shivshankar Menon** (Visiting Professor, Ashoka University) and **Daniel Sargent** (Professor of History and Public Policy, UC Berkeley) applaud the book, though Sargent notes examples of major figures who had historical sensibility but nonetheless lacked "moral clarity," such as John Calhoun.

Jobs and Opportunities

Ernest May Fellowship in History and Policy at Harvard's Belfer Center

The Ernest May Fellowship in History and Policy aims to help build the next generation of scholars who will bring professional history to bear on strategic studies and major issues of international affairs. The program supports resident pre- and post-doctoral historians who are expected to complete a book, monograph, or other significant publication during their period of residence. The application deadline is **December 1, 2026**. [Learn more and apply here](#).

Applied History Research Coordinator at Harvard's Belfer Center

The Belfer Center seeks a Research Coordinator to support the Belfer Center's Applied History Project by conducting Applied History research and coordinating operations for the project. The Research Coordinator will report to the Associate Director of the Applied History Project. Responsibilities include writing the monthly

Applied History Network Newsletter, conducting research on Applied History methods and supporting the production of instructional materials, conducting Applied History research, coordinating logistics for private and public events, managing the Applied History Project's website and social media, and assisting in administering the Ernest May Fellowship in History and Policy. The first date of application review is **October 10, 2026**. After that, applications will be reviewed on a rolling basis. [Apply here](#).

Program Manager at John Hopkins University's SNF Agora Institute

Johns Hopkins University's SNF Agora Institute is hiring a program manager or coordinator to work closely with [Yuen Yuen Ang](#) (Chair Professor of Political Economy, Johns Hopkins), supporting her research, public engagement, and, in particular, two faculty labs: [the Polytunity Project](#), which develops new ways of thinking about political economy in a disrupted, multipolar world, and the [Multipolar Forum](#), which brings together U.S. and international experts to examine what it will take to build a functional multipolar order. Although the position is formally listed as "Assistant Research Scholar," the role is a hybrid of program administration, research support, event coordination, and communications. Seeking candidates who are both intellectually excited about Professor Ang's work and strong at execution, who can help build communities around the initiatives, from across sectors and regions, and deliver outcomes in a reliable and organized manner. Especially welcome candidates with experience in event management, communications, and journalism. Review of applications will start immediately and will continue until the position is closed. [Apply here](#).

Innovation Fellowships with UK's Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office

The British Academy and the FCDO [invite](#) applications for Innovation Fellowships in Applied History. The scheme will provide funding and support for established early-career and mid-career researchers in the humanities and social sciences to partner with organizations and business in the creative, cultural, public, private and policy sectors, to address challenges that require innovative approaches and solutions. The Innovation Fellowships scheme has two routes: [Route A: Researcher-led](#) and

Applied History Quote of the Month

“The whole of history will help us understand the world we live in. A mind that has established contact with forms of life remote and unfamiliar, that has come to know great events and personalities of some particular period, pondering motives and evidence, watching the ever surprising shapes in which greatness and character appear, or studying the curious changes of social habits and the impact of economic factors—such a mind is likely to see more deeply into contemporary phenomena and movements, be it of culture or of politics.”

Pieter Geyl, *Use and Abuse of History* (Yale University Press, 1955), pp. 83-4

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