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Applied History Network Newsletter

October 2026

The October 2026 issue of the Applied History Network Newsletter spotlights member-contributed news items for 700 leaders in the Applied History movement across 75 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 "November Applied History Update" by December 4.

In This Issue:

Analyses of the Month • Recent Books • Foreign Policy & Strategy • US Politics • Technology & Economy • US Military • Middle East • Network Updates • Jobs and Opportunities

Applied History Analyses of the Month

"The Limits of American Power" by **William McRaven** (former Commander, US Special Operations Command; former Chancellor, University of Texas) in *Foreign Affairs*

Reflecting on the evolution of America's "excessive faith" in military power as a tool of foreign policy, McRaven argues this "American delusion" has only worsened in the past 25 years. In fact, he proposes that the "risk of overreach" is increasing due to unconstrained presidential power, politicization of the military, and the emergence of new technologies that may "[reinforce] a sense of complete battlefield awareness and mastery." Adapting one of Norman Schwarzkopf's insights, McRaven argues the policymaker's priority before declaring war is to ask, "Is it worth it?" He adds that American leaders should be mindful to "build the case" with the American public and international allies, set concrete objectives, and ensure the country occupies the "moral high ground."

The article exemplifies candid and clinical reflection on the lessons of recent military history and personal experience. McRaven not only demonstrates the persistent allure of the "American delusion" over decades, but also uses the anomalous case of the Gulf War—in which, he writes, experienced US leaders understood the limits of military power—to distill concrete criteria and key questions for leaders considering war. He engages with elements of today's politics and the state of civil-military relations to anticipate how the trendline is likely to change in the coming years.

"The Method to Trump's Foreign Policy Madness" by **Niall Ferguson** (Co-Chair, Harvard's Applied History Project; Senior Fellow, Stanford's Hoover Institution) in *The Free Press*

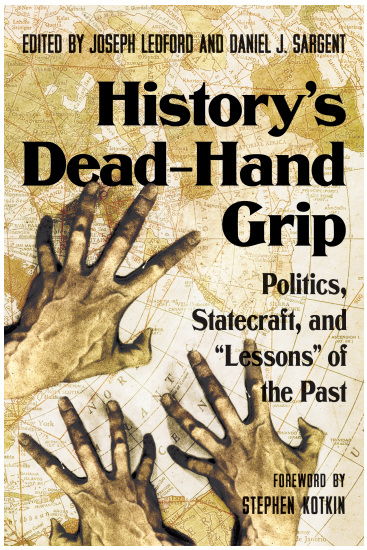
Ferguson argues that "Trump is a Nixonian in foreign policy," concerned most with the "national interest" rather than "international idealism." Like Nixon, Trump is not afraid to meet and strike deals with authoritarian leaders if doing so reduces America's burden abroad or steadies relations with America's great power rivals. There are differences, Ferguson notes: the war in Iran is "the least Nixonian (and most Bush-like) thing [Trump] has ever done," and Trump prioritizes "personal enrichment" in ways Nixon did not. On whether Trump's foreign policy will produce outcomes similar to Nixon's, Ferguson points to one major source of uncertainty: the US economy, whose strength helps determine the cards in Trump's hand.

Ferguson offers a comprehensive accounting of Trump's and Nixon's foreign policies, noting both similarities and instructive differences that might explain whether Trump's policies succeed or fail. Defining Trump's foreign policy principles in

reference to an historical figure who is seen to have had a coherent grand strategy offers insight into Trump's motives and logic. Ferguson's piece contributes to a wider debate about the degree to which US foreign policy changes over presidential administrations.

This month, Ferguson also wrote in *Foreign Affairs* on lessons from imperial history for understanding AI, alongside **Lisa Klaassen** (doctoral candidate, Oxford Internet Institute) and **Eric Schmidt** (former CEO and Chairman, Google).

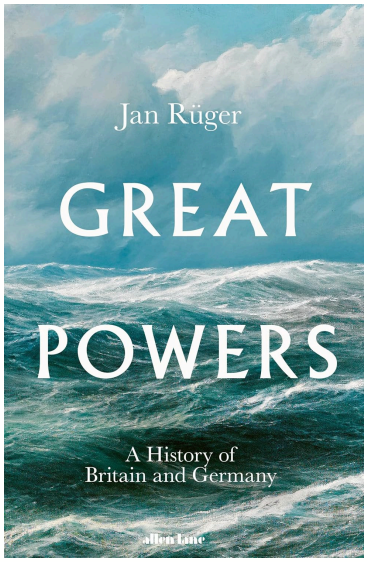
Recent History Books Illuminating Today's Headline Challenges and Choices*



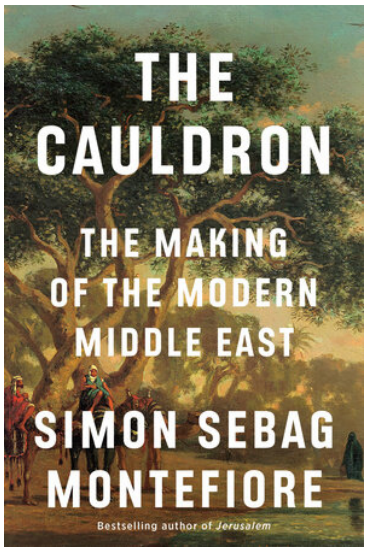
History's Dead-Hand Grip: Politics, Statecraft, and "Lessons" of the Past edited by **Joseph Ledford** (Assistant Professor of Security Studies and Director of Research, Clements Center for National Security; Griffin Fellow, Stanford's Hoover Institution) and **Daniel Sargent** (Professor of History and Public Policy, UC Berkeley): This volume, dedicated in memory of Ernest May, contains eight essays illuminating the influence of historical reasoning and memory on the politics and foreign policies of countries from the US to Brazil to Saudi Arabia. Contributors demonstrate "the double-edged sword of historical reasoning's power: it can be a vital compass for prudent policy or a trap that produces strategic error." The volume builds on papers presented at a 2025 Hoover History Lab conference on May's legacy and Applied History.

Great Powers: A History of Britain and Germany by **Jan Ruger** (Professor of History, Birkbeck, University of London): Ruger traces the competing elements of "attraction and repulsion" in the relationship between Great Britain and Germany from 1714 to the present, according to a review by **Brendan Simms** (Professor of the History of International Relations and Director of the Centre for Geopolitics, University of Cambridge). Simms highlights Ruger's attention to the agency of

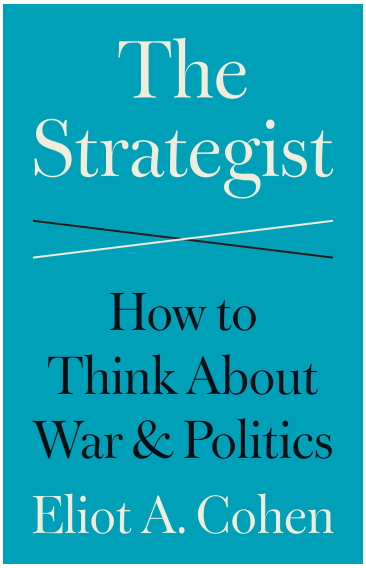
protagonists in determining the course of the relationship, such as arguing a “series of decisions” by Admiral Tirpitz and others was primarily responsible for WWI. **Philip Stephens** (contributing editor, *The Financial Times*) agrees: “The book does a service in debunking the historical determinism that says a clash between Britain and Germany was always an unavoidable ingredient of the warp and weft of an international system.



The Cauldron: The Making of the Modern Middle East by **Simon Sebag Montefiore** (historian and author)**:** Montefiore puts the complexity of the Middle East’s geopolitical tensions into historical perspective, beginning in the year 1900. In his review, **Calder Walton** (Intelligence Project Director of Research, Harvard’s Belfer Center) commends the book’s “sweeping narrative.” He writes: “That breadth is the book’s greatest achievement. Montefiore rejects monocausal explanations.” Walton also emphasizes “the book’s larger argument about the constant interplay between foreign intrigue and domestic agency."



The Strategist: How to Think About War & Politics by **Eliot Cohen** (Chair in Strategy, Center for Strategic and International Studies; Professor Emeritus, Johns Hopkins SAIS): Cohen outlines the seven “core questions” of strategy (defined as “the use of military means to pursue political ends”) beginning with: “What else is going on?” In an interview, he argues the “historical reality” is one of “staggering errors of judgment,” making an improved understanding of strategy valuable. The best strategists, he says, are those with “certain qualities or virtues—empathy, curiosity, intellectual humility, and a certain kind of courage—all of which are cultivated and enhanced by wide reading, particularly in history and culture, and deep thought."



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

Featured Commentary

Foreign Policy & Strategy

"What Does a Return to Realpolitik Mean?" with John Bew (Senior Fellow, Harvard's Belfer Center; Professor of History and Foreign Policy, King's College London) on RUSI's *Talking Strategy* podcast

Bew reflects on contemporary calls to return to a "realpolitik" foreign policy, which he argues arose amid dissatisfaction with the outcomes of an idealistic foreign policy during the 2000s and the growing recognition that we "cannot wish away" the challenges posed by Russia or China. Realpolitik has been misunderstood since its first articulation in 1853 to be synonymous with "power politics," Bew says. Instead, realpolitik was about understanding the realities of the distribution of power and one's limits. Bew paraphrases the definition from the term's originator, Ludwig von

Rochau: “how to pursue liberal, enlightened goals in a world that does not follow liberal, enlightened rules."

“Trump Is Gutting America’s Core Geopolitical Advantage” by **Robert Zoellick** (Senior Fellow, Harvard’s Belfer Center; former US Trade Representative, Deputy Secretary of State, and President of the World Bank) in *Foreign Affairs*

Zoellick argues that a friendly North America is an American strategic asset and highlights the long tradition of support for closer economic ties with Canada and Mexico. Secretary of State William Seward, best remembered for buying new territory such as Alaska, in fact “envisioned a North American union created through free choice, not coercion or conquest...Commerce, he maintained, would be the new ‘god of boundaries’ that would redraw borders and pull countries together.” In the twentieth century, the US cooperated with Mexico despite its "stunted democracy, prickly nationalism, and closed economy" by launching the Bracero employment program in 1942, while close cooperation between Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Brian Mulroney enabled deeper US-Canada integration after the Cold War.

“What the Dutch Empire Reveals About America Today” with **Alexander Bick** (Associate Professor of Practice in Public Policy, University of Virginia) on *School of War* podcast

Based on his recent book *Minutes of Empire* about decision-making in the Dutch West India Company, Bick argues that the history of the Dutch Republic can inform contemporary US policy. Faced with the challenge of “trading with the enemy”—how to reconcile a commitment to free trade with a growing rivalry with the Spanish Empire—the Dutch adopted a strategy of limited decoupling, Bick notes. For some goods with military uses, the Dutch continued to sell to Spain, but levied a heavy tax whose revenues they reinvested in the Dutch military. Bick argues America needs a similarly innovative response to its rivalry with China, in which the 30-year assumption that commerce and security are “distinct spheres” is being challenged.

"The Strategist in the Gray Flannel Suit" by Beverly Gage (Professor of History, Yale University) in *Foreign Affairs*

Reviewing *John Foster Dulles: Apostle of American Empire* by **Bevan Sewell** (Associate Professor in American History, University of Nottingham), Gage argues Dulles' story "is best understood as a cautionary tale." While Dulles thought seriously about the necessary conditions for "just and durable peace," he also advocated a "Manichean, good-versus-evil approach that made war more likely, not less." Dulles' story reveals the contradictions of postwar America, Gage writes: "U.S. leaders today sometimes romanticize the midcentury moment as a time of bipartisan unity and national pride, but the era's Cold War consensus also bred hubris and a willingness to entertain policies of vast destruction." This month, Gage also spoke at the 2026 USC Sol Price Leadership Lecture at Mount Vernon alongside **Colleen Shogan** (CEO, *In Pursuit;* former Archivist of the US) and **Sean Wilentz** (Professor of American History, Princeton University).

"U.S. Strategy in an Era of Rising Conflict" with Nadia Schadlow (Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute), Andy Baker (Managing Director, American Global Strategies), and Philip Gordon (Sydney Stein Jr. Scholar, Brookings Institution) at the Council on Foreign Relations

Baker challenges the assumption that the world order is increasingly multipolar. He notes the relative decline of Europe as a US peer since the end of the Cold War and argues, "China has a great deal of hard power but is often unwilling to exert it." Schadlow argues for "retaining balances of power" in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. "We're in a renegotiation now of those formulas for doing that," she notes. Gordon claims "I don't think any of us are better off" if the US's "only way to get [allies] to do more" is to threaten to remove its commitment to their security.

US Politics

"Kennedy and Today: A Fireside Chat on JFK and Us" with Fredrik Logevall (Professor of History, Harvard University; Professor of

International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School; Faculty Mentor, Harvard's Applied History Project) and Stephen Kennedy Smith (investor and entrepreneur; board member, John F. Kennedy Library) on *WorldViews* podcast

Logevall, a biographer of John F. Kennedy, and Smith, a member of Kennedy's family, reflect on lessons from JFK's presidential leadership. Smith argues JFK embodied what biographer **Robert Caro** called the most important job of the president: "educator in chief." JFK reminded Americans that "This is about something bigger than you. This is about all of us," Smith suggests. Similarly, Smith says, "we need to get back to that civic idea, meeting each other face to face and solving problems together." Logevall looks to JFK's successful handling of the steel industry's proposed price hike in 1962 for lessons on reining in corporate power. Logevall highlights that JFK did not "crow about the fact that we got the companies to back down," demonstrating tactful leadership born of empathy.

"Taking a Stand: The Force of Revolution" by Joanne Freeman (Professor of History, Yale University) at Western Washington University

Freeman highlights four "defining features" of the American Revolution from which we can learn today: its "extreme contingency," its demands on ordinary people "to take a stand," the challenge of "[wrestling] with the ideas and ideals that they had long taken for granted," and the realization "that there is a national 'we' that you are part of." Freeman argues that we are also in a time of uncertainty about the course of American democracy and that, like the Americans in 1776, progress will depend on our courage and rediscovery of what unites us as a nation.

"The DSA's Definition of 'Democracy' and 'Socialism' Is Frightening" by Jeremy Friedman (Professor of Strategy and Statecraft, University of Texas at Austin) in *Civitas Outlook*

Friedman evaluates the degree to which the Democratic Socialists of America are committed to democratic principles by identifying clues from the history of the early twentieth-century Bolsheviks in Russia. While he notes significant differences between the two cases—especially America's multi-century democratic tradition—he

argues a relevant lesson from the Bolsheviks is that a group which sees democracy as “valuable only insofar as it served to build socialism” is ultimately likely to dispense with democratic principles. Friedman finds signs that the DSA’s policies show a “utility-driven attitude towards democracy.”

Technology & Economy

“Our Current AI Moment Has Darker Historical Echoes” by **Adam Tooze** (Professor of History, Columbia University) in *The Financial Times*

Tooze challenges attempts to analogize the current AI boom to familiar historical episodes like the Industrial Revolution, railroad bubble, or Manhattan Project. Instead, he proposes, “don’t flinch from what histories of slavery have to tell us.” He argues that only the history of colonialism and the slave trade it facilitated featured a comparable mobilization of capital, financial engineering, and “radical modernist thinking about the category of the human and state power.” Indeed, he writes, “the very idea of a project as a globe-spanning ‘venture’” comes from this era of empire.

"Britain Cannot Build Its Future by Returning to the 1970s" by **Martin Wolf** (chief economics commentator) in *The Financial Times*

Wolf evaluates the ways in which British Prime Minister Andy Burnham's and Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch's speeches at their recent party conferences "harked back to the past." To reinvigorate the economy, Burnham called for a reversal of the "deregulation" and "deindustrialization" that he associated with Margaret Thatcher's policies—a misreading of history, Wolf argues. Wolf asks rhetorically: "Did the pre-Thatcher UK of the 1970s work well? No." He shows that disruptive labor strikes and inflation spiked in the 1970s; similarly, he graphs manufacturing's share of GDP and employment in the UK over decades to show that deindustrialization predated Thatcher.

"The Global AI Bust" by Ruchir Sharma (Chairman, Rockefeller International) in *Foreign Affairs*

Sharma compares the ongoing AI boom to historical technological bubbles. He argues that AI is a "hybrid" bubble offering the genuine promise of increases in productivity (such as the Internet revolution of the 1990s) but financed with substantial debt, usually an unhealthy indicator (as in the 2000s real estate bubble). Sharma proposes a framework of four "O's" for understanding tech bubbles: the industry becomes overvalued, overowned, overinvested, and overleveraged, no matter its potential future benefits. To critics who claim this time is different because profitable tech companies are driving the AI boom, Sharma responds that the giants of the dot-com era (Qualcomm, Oracle, Cisco) also posted profits at the time.

US Military

"What It Takes to Succeed as Secretary of the Navy" by John Lehman (former Secretary of the Navy) and Anand Toprani (Professor of Strategy and Policy, US Naval War College; former Ernest May Fellow in History and Policy, Harvard's Belfer Center) in *Breaking Defense*

In the authors' list of historically-informed criteria for a successful Secretary of the US Navy, the first is a "grounding in history, geopolitics, and economics." They argue that it is impossible to "justify and articulate the purpose of the US Navy…without an awareness of how and why the United States is a maritime nation that depends on its sea lines of communications." Indeed, as Assistant Secretary, Theodore Roosevelt would quote legendary naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan. The authors also draw lessons from Gideon Welles during the Civil War, Graham Claytor during the Carter administration, and Lehman's own experience during the Reagan administration.

"Reducing the Number of Generals Isn't the Problem" by **Kori Schake** (Senior Fellow and Director of Foreign and Defense Policy, American Enterprise Institute) in *The Atlantic*

Schake evaluates the claims by supporters of Secretary of War Pete Hegseth comparing his removals of top military officers to General George Marshall's clean-up of the US Army before WWII. She argues that Marshall "would never have crowed that 'the patriotic cowboys are in, with testosterone testing on top,'" and Marshall's evaluation of combat capabilities was more rigorous than Hegseth's proposed plan to test aptitude largely through a two-hour written test. Schake acknowledges both leaders have adopted top-down approaches to reforming the services, but adds that Hegseth's culling of generals is undoing the system of meritocratic promotion that Marshall helped create.

"The Two Georges: Using Biography to Teach Strategic Logic" by **David Christopher Arnold** (Professor of National Security Strategy, National War College) in *International Perspectives on Military Education*

Arnold argues that studying biographies of notable decision-makers is an effective way to learn the fundamentals of strategy, drawing on insights from two courses at the National War College on the lives and careers of George Washington and George Marshall. He notes other ways in which military education incorporates history. For example, "Longtime staples of military learning, staff rides [such as to Valley Forge] make learning more tangible and valuable at the tactical and operational levels, but they can have value at the strategic level as well."

Middle East

"Between Israel and Iran: Security, Strategy, and the Future of the Middle East"

The Clements Center at the University of Texas at Austin hosted a conference on the past, present, and future of the Middle East. In the keynote discussion, former Israeli

Ambassador to the US **Michael Oren** argued one reason for the pattern of conflict in the Middle East has been US pressure on Israel since at least the 1956 Suez Crisis to stop short of decisive victories to avoid potential Cold War escalation. He later told students: “If you don’t understand history you are coming into any discussion at a disadvantage.” In the afternoon panel discussion, **Cole Bunzel** (Assistant Professor, Clements Center for National Security) argued Saudi Arabia’s history—the Saudi dynasty is older than America and has survived uprisings and terrorism—demonstrates the country’s resilience. Other presenters included: **Matthew Fuhrmann** (Professor of Security Studies, UT Austin’s LBJ School), **Simone Ledeen** (Managing Director, Maven Defense Systems), and **David Marlowe** (Professor of Practice, UT Austin’s LBJ School).

Network Updates

Ax:son Johnson Hosts Applied History Roundtable

The Ax:son Johnson Institute for Statecraft and Diplomacy, in collaboration with King’s College London’s Centre for Statecraft and National Security, University of Cambridge’s Centre for Geopolitics, and Stockholm School of Economics’ Center for Statecraft and Strategic Communication, hosted a three-day roundtable on the past, present, and future of Applied History at Halewell Manor in Gloucestershire, England. Participants reflected on the Applied History movement’s impact over the last decade since the publication of the Applied History Manifesto in 2016. They evaluated the proliferation of both good and bad Applied History, and considered opportunities for expansion to new institutions, such as public policy schools, and sectors, such as the financial industry.

EUI Launches “History & Policy” Program

The European University Institute has launched the History & Policy Program “dedicated to understanding and promoting the importance of history in how we see the world today, and the choices we make.” Led by **Glenda Sluga** (Professor of International History and Capitalism, EUI), **Emmanuel Mourlon-Druol** (Chair in

History of European Cooperation and Integration, EUI), and **Monika Baar** (Professor in the History of East-Central and South-Eastern Europe, EUI), the program will produce research and analysis “showing how history can inform policy” and host events for historians and policymakers.

Applied Historians Among American Historical Association 2026 Prize Winners

Heidi Tworek (Professor of History and Public Policy, University of British Columbia) and her co-editor **Andrew Denning** (Professor of History, University of Kansas) received the Waldo G. Leland Prize for Reference Tools for *The Interwar World* (2023). **Renata Keller** (Associate Professor of History, University of Nevada, Reno) won the Friedrich Katz Prize in Latin American and Caribbean History for *The Fate of the Americas: The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Hemispheric Cold War* (2025). **Daniel Immerwahr** (Professor in the Humanities, Northwestern University) has been selected to deliver the 2027 James M. Banner, Jr., Lecture on the State of the Discipline of History at January’s American Historical Association annual meeting. The full list of honorees is here.

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.

Policy Research Fellow at UT Austin's Clements Center

The Clements Center is seeking Research Fellows to conduct historically inflected policy research on national security challenges. The position is an ideal opportunity for post-doctoral researchers to work on Applied History at UT Austin. Learn more and apply here.

Applied History Quote of the Month

"Historical examples always have the advantage of being more realistic and of bringing the idea they are illustrating to life. . .[yet] a single thoroughly detailed event is more instructive than ten that are only touched on."

Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (1832)

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