



APPLIED HISTORY PROJECT | OCTOBER 2016

Applied History Manifesto

Above: **Mary Sarotte**, a Faculty Affiliate with the Applied History Project, and the Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis Distinguished Professor of Historical Studies at the Johns Hopkins Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, speaks at a meeting of the Belfer Center's Applied History Working Group.

Applied history is the explicit attempt to illuminate current challenges and choices by analyzing historical precedents and analogues. Mainstream historians begin with a past event or era and attempt to provide an account of what happened and why. Applied historians begin with a current choice or predicament and attempt to analyze the historical record to provide perspective, stimulate imagination, find clues about what is likely to happen, suggest possible policy interventions, and assess probable consequences. It might be said that applied history is to mainstream history as medical practice is to biochemistry, or engineering to physics. But that analogy is not quite right, as in the realm of science there is mutual respect between practitioners and theorists. In the realm of policy, by contrast, one finds a culture of mutual contempt between practitioners and historians. Applied history is an attempt to address that.

The Applied History Project at Harvard's Kennedy School seeks to revitalize the study and practice of history in the tradition of two twentieth century giants: the modern historian Ernest May and the leading analyst of the American presidency, Richard Neustadt. Their book *Thinking in Time*, published in 1986, provides the foundation on which we intend to build. An urgently needed companion volume might be titled *Acting in Time*. Over the past decade, particularly as one of us was engaged in research for a biography of Henry Kissinger, we shared a humbling epiphany. It has been said that most Americans live in the "United States of Amnesia." What we had not fully appreciated is how

often this includes American policy makers as well. Reflecting on a wide range of administrations, we have come to realize the crucial importance in American foreign policy making of the history deficit: the fact that key decision-makers know alarmingly little not just of other countries' pasts, but also of their own.

Speaking about his book, *Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama*, veteran U.S. diplomat Dennis Ross recently noted that “almost no administration’s leading figures know the history of what we have done in the Middle East.” Neither do they know the history of the region itself. In 2003, when President George Bush chose to topple Saddam Hussein and replace his regime with an elected government that represented the majority of Iraqis, he did not appear to appreciate either the difference between Sunni and Shiite Muslims or the significance of the fact that Saddam’s regime was led by a Sunni minority that had suppressed the Shiite majority. He failed to heed warnings that the predictable consequence of this choice would be a Shiite-dominated Baghdad beholden to the Shiite champion in the Middle East—Iran. Indeed, in attempting to explain the consequences of this fateful choice, one of the leaders from the region is reported to have told President Bush that if he cut down the tallest tree in the region (Saddam), he should not be surprised when he found the second tallest tree towering over the others.

The problem is by no means limited to the Middle East or to Bush. The Obama administration’s inability or unwillingness to recognize the deep historical relationship between Russia and Ukraine left it blind to the predictable consequences of European Union initiatives in late 2013 and early 2014 to lead Ukraine down a path to membership in the EU and, in time, NATO. “I don’t really even need George Kennan right now,” Obama told the editor of the *New Yorker* in an interview published in January 2014, referring to one of the great applied historians of the early Cold War. Within two months Russia had annexed Crimea.

Even more remarkable, however, is the apparent ignorance of the Republican candidate for the presidency of the historical significance of his own foreign policy mantra, “America First.”

While this history deficit is only one of the weaknesses in the foreign policy of recent administrations of both parties, it is one that is more amenable to repair than most. Yet to address this deficit it is not enough for a president occasionally to invite friendly historians to dinner, as Obama has been known to do. Nor is it enough to appoint a court historian, as John F. Kennedy did with Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.

We urge the candidates currently running for president to announce now that, if elected, they will establish a White House Council of Historical Advisers analogous to the Council of Economic Advisers established after World War II. Several eminent historians made similar

recommendations to Presidents Carter and Reagan during their administrations: the checkered record of U.S. foreign policy since 1977 suggests that, in failing to do so, Carter and Reagan missed a great opportunity. We suggest this council's charter begin with Thucydides' observation that "events of future history will be of the same nature—or nearly so—as the history of the past, so long as men are men." While applied historians will never be clairvoyants with an unclouded crystal ball, we agree with Winston Churchill that "the longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward." The next president's charge to this council should be to provide historical perspectives on contemporary problems.

Imagine that President Obama had such a council today. What assignments could he give them? How could their responses help inform choices he now faces?

Start with the most intractable issue the president and his national security team have been debating recently: What to do about ISIS? He could ask his applied historians whether or not we have even seen anything like this before, and if so, which precedents seem most similar? He could ask further what happened in those cases, and thus, what clues they offer about what might happen in this one. We infer from recent statements that the administration tends to see ISIS as essentially a new version of al-Qaeda, and the goal of policy is to decapitate it, as al-Qaeda was decapitated with the assassination of Osama bin Laden in 2011. But there is good reason to believe that ISIS is quite different in structure from al-Qaeda and may in fact be a classic acephalous network.

Our initial search for precedents and analogues for ISIS includes 50 prior cases of similarly brutal, fanatical, purpose-driven groups, including the Bolsheviks of the Russian Revolution. Deciding which characteristics of ISIS we consider most salient—for example, its revolutionary politics or its religious millenarianism—helps us to narrow this list to the most instructive analogues. A systematic study of these other cases could help steer the president away from a potentially erroneous equation of ISIS with its most recent forerunner.

That this kind of approach can be invaluable is illustrated by the U.S. government's response to the Great Recession of 2008. That September saw the biggest shock to the U.S. economy since the Great Depression. In 24 hours, the Dow Jones industrial average plummeted, credit swaps among major banks froze, and the shock spread almost instantly to international markets. In the words of then-Secretary of the Treasury Hank Paulson, "the 'system-wide' crisis was more severe and unpredictable than any in our lifetimes." For that reason, historical knowledge of earlier financial crises—and particularly the Great Depression that began in 1929—was at a premium. It was sheer good luck that the chairman of the Federal Reserve from 2006 to 2014 was also a serious student of economic history. As Ben Bernanke wrote in his 2015 memoir, "understanding what was happening in the context of history proved invaluable" because "the crisis of 2007-2009 was best understood

as a descendant of the classic financial panics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” The specter that haunted Bernanke most was the Great Depression of 1929. While some criticized his “obsession” with the post-1929 depression, there can be no doubt about his commitment not to repeat the mistakes that contributed to that catastrophe.

In a 2010 speech, Bernanke identified lessons from the Great Depression for policy makers today: “First, economic prosperity depends on financial stability; second, policy makers must respond forcefully, creatively, and decisively to severe financial crises; third, crises that are international in scope require an international response.” Bernanke’s Fed acted decisively, inventing unprecedented initiatives that stretched— if not exceeded—the Fed’s legal powers, such as purchasing not only bonds issued by the federal government but also mortgage-backed and other securities in what was called “quantitative easing.” The speed of the Fed’s international initiatives to backstop other central banks and persuade them to collaborate in cutting short-term interest rates so as to enhance stability can also be traced back to Bernanke’s knowledge of mistakes made in the Great Depression. Although the recent crisis took place in a radically different financial and economic context, Bernanke wrote in the conclusion of his memoir, “it rhymed with past panics.”

Just as the financial storm was gathering, our colleagues Carmen Reinhart and Ken Rogoff were just completing a decade of research during which they had assembled a database of 350 financial crises over the past eight centuries. Their book *This Time is Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly* explicitly analyzed “precedents and analogues” with a view to illuminating current events. In testimony to Congress and a series of op-eds in late 2008 and early 2009, they argued that recessions caused by financial crises tend to persist for much longer than business-cycle recessions. Indeed, they opined that the “current crisis could mean stunted U.S. growth for at least five to seven more years,” and that it would leave behind a legacy of significantly higher public debt. Though hotly contested at the time by those who claimed that monetary and fiscal stimulus would achieve a rapid “v-shaped” recovery, their historically derived insights have proven prescient.

While Western economies stagnated, China continued its meteoric growth and increasingly realized its ability to reap geopolitical benefits from its newfound financial power. Will China’s rise result in war with the United States? In a chapter written for the 2009 volume *Power and Restraint*, Ernest May offered an instructive demonstration of how the analysis of analogues and precedents can provide clues about “alternative patterns that might play out in U.S.-Chinese relationships.” To do this, he considered “experience at the turn of the century and in the 1920s that can be instructive in suggesting some of the processes that engendered enmity or friendship across national boundaries.” Specifically, he compared and contrasted interactions between Britain and two rising powers: Germany on the one hand, and the United States on the other. Britain and Germany, he notes, could have remained at peace since they “were essentially similar in culture, values, and institutions.”

“Why,” then, “did the next two decades see Britain and Germany instead become enemies?” “Why did Britain not react to America’s challenges as to those from Germany?”

May’s analysis is subtle and nuanced, as it always was. In the first case, he concluded that “most of the blame has to go to Germany and its willful ruler, Kaiser Wilhelm II.” Indeed, he argued that “the central reason for Germany’s self-destructive behavior was that the kaiser and his ministers were preoccupied with their own domestic politics.” “Wilhelm and his ministers found it useful—almost necessary—to have trouble abroad in order to maintain quiet at home.” Reflecting on the consequences, he drew a telling lesson for China: “the example of Imperial Germany clearly warns how dangerous it can be for a rising power to use foreign policy as a means of satisfying domestic political needs.”

In contrast, by finding ways to accommodate a rising United States, Britain demonstrated “how a great nation can benefit from swallowing its pride and being guided by long-term calculations of interest, both international and domestic.” In the shaping of British foreign policy, “a chain of British decision-makers calculated coldly that the cost of resisting American pretensions would be too high.” May thus applauded the British government’s wise choice “to make a virtue of necessity and to yield to the Americans in every dispute with as good grace as was permitted.” When a Liberal government came to power in 1906, British policy culminated in the new Foreign Secretary’s declaration that “the pursuit and maintenance of American friendship was and would be a ‘cardinal policy’ of the United Kingdom.”

As one of us has argued, another analogy for the U.S.-China relationship can be found as early as the tensions between ancient Athens and Sparta. As the Athenian historian Thucydides explained brilliantly in his account of the Peloponnesian War, “What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.” The Thucydides Trap—the inevitable structural stress that occurs when a rapidly rising power threatens to displace a ruling power—serves as the best framework available for thinking about U.S.-China relations today and in the years ahead. One of us has led a team of researchers at Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center that reviewed the leading historical accounts of the last 500 years and identified 16 cases when this occurred. In 12 of those cases, the outcome was war. The study represents one possible answer a Council of Historical Advisers could give to the president if he asked whether or not precedents exist for the current U.S.-China relationship.

To be sure, as Ernest May repeatedly reminded students and policy makers alike, historical analogies are easy to get wrong. Amateur analogies were commonplace in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, ranging from the then-president’s own comparison with Pearl Harbor to the even worse parallels drawn by some members of his administration between Saddam Hussein and the leaders of the

World War II Axis powers. To guard against such errors, May counseled that when considering a historical analogy, one should always follow a simple procedure: put the analogy as the headline on a sheet of paper; draw a straight line down the middle of the page; write “similar” at the top of one column and “different” at the top of the other; and then set to work. If you are unable to list at least three points of similarity and three of difference, then you should consult a historian.

To apply this “May Method” amid the flurry of analogizing on the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I, one of us compared challenges facing U.S. and Chinese leaders today with those faced by European leaders in 1914. That analysis highlighted seven salient similarities as well as seven instructive differences, and concluded that “the probability of war between the United States and China in the decade ahead is higher than I imagined before examining the analogy—but still unlikely. Indeed, if statesmen in both countries reflect on what happened a century ago, perspective and insights from this past can be applied now to make risks of war even lower.”

As the most consequential modern practitioner of applied history, Henry Kissinger, put it, “History is not a cookbook offering pretested recipes. It teaches by analogy, not by maxims.” History “illuminates the consequences of actions in comparable situations.” But—and here is the art that requires both imagination and judgment— for it to do so, “each generation must discover for itself what situations are in fact comparable.”

“Is it unprecedented?” is just one of a number of questions or assignments that we propose the president could give his or her Council of Historical Advisers. Others include:

- What lessons of statecraft from a former president’s handling of another crisis could be applied to a current challenge? (What would X have done?)
- What is the significance of a historical anniversary for the present (a common topic for presidential speeches)?
- What is the relevant history of the state, institution, or issue at hand?
- What if some action had not been taken (the kind of question too seldom asked after a policy failure)?
- Grand strategic questions like “Can the United States avoid decline?”
- Speculative questions about seemingly improbable future scenarios.

Most presidents have a favorite predecessor. In developing his strategy for meeting Iran’s nuclear challenge, President Obama is reported to have reflected on WWKD? (What would Kennedy do?) His choice of an “ugly deal” to stop the advance of Iran’s nuclear program rather than the bombing of its uranium enrichment plants (as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hoped he

might) or acquiescing in an Iranian *fait accompli* (as some of his advisers thought inevitable) had some parallels with Kennedy's choices in the Cuban Missile Crisis to strike a deal with Nikita Khrushchev rather than risk an invasion of Cuba or learn to live with Soviet missiles off the Florida coast. Two key points were that the successful deal in 1962 was based on secret negotiations with Moscow—even though that unsettled some American allies—and that there was a middle ground between complete capitulation and nuclear war.

A third type of assignment the president could give his historians would be to take the anniversary of a major historical event as an occasion to reflect on current challenges. The ongoing centennial of World War I has provided leaders with an important opportunity to speak about its significance. Despite the fact that a general European war seemed to many contemporaries unthinkable, and despite the fact that the economies of Britain and Germany were so heavily interdependent, war broke out and proved impossible to end by diplomatic means. When it ended four years later with the disintegration of the Central Powers, more than ten million men had lost their lives prematurely, and Europe had been severely weakened.

In the decade before this war, the major governments had made a series of commitments to each other that created what Kissinger has called a “diplomatic doomsday machine.” As the strategic competition between the United States and China in the South and East China Seas intensifies, applied historians could usefully carry out a serious review of U.S. commitments to Japan, the Philippines, and others that might one day function as a modern-day equivalent.

A fourth type of assignment suitable for the president's historians would be to determine the relevant history of the state, institution, or issue at hand, and how foreign counterparts understand that history. In dealing with foreign nations, we should never forget Henry Kissinger's observation that “history is the memory of states” and that “for nations, history plays the role that character confers on human beings.” Learning the history of other nations, and honing the skills of historical enquiry in general, can help to promote cultural empathy. As Sir Michael Howard argued thirty-five years ago, any proper historical education must teach its students “how to step outside their own cultural skins and enter the minds of others; the minds not only of our own forebears, enormously valuable though this is, but of those of our contemporaries who have inherited a different experience from the past.” Unfortunately, many of our elites can be, as Sir Michael put it, “people often of masterful intelligence, trained usually in law or economics or perhaps in political science, who have led their governments into disastrous decisions and miscalculations because they have no awareness whatsoever of the historical background, the cultural universe, of the foreign societies with which they have to deal.” We cannot understand the decisions of key players in foreign nations without grasping how they themselves understand their nation's history, for, in Sir Michael's words, “all we believe about the present depends on what we believe about the past.”

Therefore, in preparing to engage China's leaders, what might the next president ask his or her council? A useful starting assignment would be: How does Xi Jinping understand the arc of Chinese history and his role in China's future? Does he see his mission simply as rounding out China's economic development and restoring it to its historically "normal" role as the biggest country in the world after its "century of humiliation?" If so, we could expect to see the emergence of a richer and more confident China, but probably embedded in a "status quo" system still fundamentally shaped by U.S. power and institutions. Or does he also seek to revise the international order by displacing the United States as the predominant Asian and perhaps global power in the foreseeable future? In answering this assignment, the applied historians could draw on the recorded wisdom of a man who perhaps understood the worldview and historical consciousness of China's leaders better than anyone: the late leader of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew. Lee—whom every Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping, including Xi, has called a "mentor"—argued that "the size of China's displacement of the world balance is such that the world must find a new balance," and that China "wants to be China and accepted as such—not as an honorary member of the West." When asked if China's leaders wish to supplant the United States, Lee responded: "Of course. Why not? How could [the Chinese] not aspire to be number one in Asia and, in time, the world?"

One clear example of how the history deficit can be dangerous becomes apparent when considering America's dealings in the Middle East. If the president who takes office in 2017 were preparing to engage the leaders of Israel and the leading Arab nations on the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum, what might he or she ask the applied historians? A good start would be to ask them what have been the most significant U.S. policies and actions in the region in recent decades and how key players in Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran interpret and remember those decisions. As Dennis Ross has noted, while U.S. leaders are usually ignorant of our previous actions in the Middle East, "those in the region know the history very well." How does the experience they have inherited from the past differ from ours? What lessons have they drawn from U.S. behavior?

A fifth type of assignment for applied historians is to pose and answer "what if?" questions designed to analyze past decision-making. Addressing such questions requires disciplined counterfactual reasoning. While many mainstream historians have voiced reservations about counterfactual analysis, this method lies at the heart of every historical account. As one of us argued in *Virtual History*, "it is a logical necessity when asking questions about causation to pose 'but for' questions, and to try to imagine what would have happened if our supposed cause had been absent."

When assessing the relative importance of various possible causes of World War I, historians make judgments about what would have happened in the absence of these factors. Methods developed for doing this systematically can be employed by applied historians in considering current policy

choices. Thus, President Obama’s successor could ask his Council of Historical Advisers to replay 2013. What if Obama had opted to enforce the “red line” in Syria against the Assad regime, rather than delegating the removal of chemical weapons from Syria to the Russian government? And what if, in January 2014, the EU had not offered Ukraine an economic association agreement that was clearly designed to pull Kiev westward? Would President Putin still have intervened militarily in Ukraine?

A sixth kind of question for the Council of Historical Advisers would be of a fundamentally strategic nature. Is the United States in irreversible decline? Can it overcome the challenges facing it to lead a new “American century,” or will the coming decades see the steady erosion of American power? Applied historians would begin by noting the recurring streak in American political culture of what Sam Huntington labeled “declinism.” Many people were convinced that the United States was being overtaken by the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and 1960s, or by Japan in the 1980s. But in none of the earlier cases had the majority of Americans lost faith in the American Dream: the belief that if one works hard and plays by the rules, one’s children will have more opportunities and a higher standard of living than their parents. In the past generation, as middle-class incomes have stagnated, that belief has been eroded. Bismarck defined a statesman as “a politician who thinks of his grandchildren.” It is unclear whether the current American political system would allow such a statesman to enact the farsighted policies required to address the growing problem of intergenerational inequity—or indeed to be elected in the first place. The current generation is the first in the history of the United States to have asked, in essence, “What have our children and grandchildren ever done for us?” A truly visionary president would revive the importance of our posterity as the most important constituent of a well-governed republic.

Finally, a more speculative assignment, but still a vital one, would be to ask the council: “What unlikely but possible strategic upheavals might we face in the medium-term?”

- Will ISIS buy or steal a nuclear weapon?
- Will Chinese and Japanese forces clash in the East China Sea, sparking a wider war?
- Will the Saudi royal family be deposed?
- Will the European Union disintegrate?
- Will Russia invade a Baltic state? While some of these scenarios may seem far-fetched, recall this time six years ago: How many pundits would have predicted the timing or speed of the Arab Spring, or that Syria would now lie in ruins? Two and a half years ago, how many believed it probable that Vladimir Putin would invade Crimea, that his proxies would shoot down a Dutch airliner, or that he would commit combat forces to Syria?

Of course, building future scenarios is part of what intelligence agencies do. Yet, currently, historians play a very small part in this process. Applied historians do not have crystal balls. But they do have certain advantages over those who would try to answer such questions with models and regression analysis. They know that dramatic events that were dismissed as implausible before the fact are in hindsight frequently described as inevitable. Their study of previous sharp discontinuities encourages a “historical sensibility” that is attuned to the long-term rhythms, strategic surprise, and daring coups de main that run through history.

This historical sensibility can prove invaluable. One applied historian, now well-known for discerning and profiting from long-term historical cycles in markets, developed so much of an historical sensibility while writing a doctoral dissertation on the relationship between commodities and the grand strategy of the British Empire that he was able to anticipate Iraq’s seizure of Kuwait’s oil fields, a full two years before Saddam made his move.

For too long, history has been disparaged as a “soft” subject, often by social scientists offering spuriously hard certainty. We believe it is time for a new and rigorous applied history to close America’s history deficit. Not only do we want to see it incorporated into the Executive Office of the President, alongside the economic expertise that has so long been seen as indispensable to the executive branch. We also want to see it develop as a discipline in its own right in our universities, beginning at Harvard.

Harvard’s Applied History Project is taking a “big tent” approach to revitalizing applied history in the academy and promoting its use in government, business, and other sectors of society. We stake no claim to inventing the concept: indeed, we trace its origins back at least to Thucydides and acknowledge that it had been a major strand in mainstream history until recent decades. We make no claim to exclusivity: indeed, we applaud colleagues—and mentors—such as Sir Michael Howard of Oxford or Paul Kennedy of Yale, whose contributions in this domain we celebrate and hope to emulate.

We encourage journalists to ask candidates for the presidency how they intend to eliminate the history deficit in American policy making. The slogan “America First” has a bad history. A better slogan—which has no past to speak of in the United States—might be “History First.”