

**Reflections of Change:
Achieving Intellectual Overmatch Through Historical Mindedness**

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Introduction: The Crisis of 1946

Last time I saw it all coming and cried aloud to my own fellow countrymen and to the world, but no one paid any attention. Up till the year 1933 or even 1935, Germany might have been saved from the awful fate which has overtaken her and we might all have been spared the miseries Hitler let loose upon mankind. . . . We surely must not let that happen again. This can only be achieved by reaching now, in 1946, a good understanding on all points with Russia under the general authority of the United Nations Organisation and by the maintenance of that good understanding through many peaceful years, by the world instrument, supported by the whole strength of the English-speaking world and all its connections – Winston Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech, Fulton, Missouri, March 4, 1946.²

As Churchill warned his audience, the great Allied victory of 1945 left behind a host of strategic problems that could pull the great powers back into a war. They included the introduction of atomic weapons, the reconstruction of Europe, instability in the Middle East, anti-imperial movements in Africa and Asia, and a massive civil war in China, to name just a few. Most importantly, the future of the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union showed increasing signs of tension. Optimists in London and Washington had hoped that the nations of the Grand Alliance would continue to share enough vital interests in common,

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author alone. They are not those of the Department of Defense or any agency of the United States Government.

² The text is available at: <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-sinews-of-peace/>. At the time only 18% of Americans approved of the ideas in the speech. Forty percent disapproved. See R. J. Reinhart, “Gallup Vault: Americans’ Views as the Iron Curtain Descended,” March 2, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/vault/330926/gallup-vault-americans-views-iron-curtain-descended.aspx>

especially the need for a sustained period of peace and stability, to remain on reasonably good terms. President Roosevelt had thought so at the time of his death in April. In his first meeting with Soviet officials, however, President Truman bluntly warned them of severe consequences if they failed to keep promises they had made at the Yalta Conference a few months earlier. At the end of the meeting, Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov told Truman, “I have never been talked to like that in my life.” Truman dismissed him with a curt, “Carry out your agreements and you won’t get talked to like that.”³

The fate of the world hinged on the ability of the great powers to manage their complex relationship. Churchill’s Iron Curtain speech came just days after Joseph Stalin had predicted a future war between the former Allies, declaring that capitalism and communism could not co-exist. American officials reported that the Soviets were tightening their control over Eastern Europe and refusing to honor the pledges they had made at Yalta for free and fair elections in Poland. Could the United States and the Soviet Union avoid a third world war? What responsibility should the United States assume for the defense of Europe? What strategy should western governments pursue to maximize outcomes while reducing risks in such a dangerous world? Were the tools to solving these problems primarily military or economic? On the answers to these existential questions might rest the fate of the United States and maybe even the future of mankind itself.

George Kennan, a Russia expert whose views conflicted so deeply with those of official Washington that he considered resigning from the State Department in August 1945, worried that Truman’s hardline approach increased the risks of a catastrophic war. Kennan believed that Washington did not understand the Soviets or what drove their behavior. He contended that

³ “Memorandum of Conversation of 23 April [1945],” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945*, volume 5, Europe (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1967), 256-257.

American leaders were fooling themselves if they thought that further negotiations or threats of military force could coerce the Soviets into behaving as the Americans wanted. Moreover, playing a game of high-stakes chess with the Soviets move by move, as Truman's team seemed to be doing, would only set the United States up for failure. Desperate to make his views known, Kennan wrote a memorandum, known to us today as the Long Telegram, that set the intellectual basis for dealing with the Soviet Union for the next four decades.

Kennan sought to shape the future by casting his mind to the past. The United States, he argued, needed a grand strategy that began from an understanding of continuities in Russian history that dated back to the eighteenth century rise of Imperial Russia under the Romanov dynasty. In the Soviet worldview, the Allied victory in 1945 represented merely fleeting security amid a long history of conflict in Russia's western borderlands. For Stalin and those around him, the war represented not triumph, as it did in the United States and Britain, but enduring evidence of the existential dangers and duplicity of the west. The Soviet leadership would thus build its postwar strategic thinking not on the victory of 1945 but on the betrayal of 1941, when Germany invaded the USSR in violation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed in 1939. Although they had played a leading role in the defeat of Nazi Germany, the Soviets emerged from the conflict with tens of millions dead and paranoid for their future safety. The Truman Administration, Kennan argued, needed to understand that a quest for security drove Soviet priorities, not diplomatic agreements they had signed or even the ultimate goal of peace itself. The Soviet leadership did not see 1945 as the return of peace, but as the beginning of a new age of great power competition, this time with nuclear weapons in the mix.

Kennan thought more deeply than those who only saw short-term patterns or those who interpreted the Soviet regime exclusively through the prism of its communist ideology. He

recognized the massive changes of the previous thirty years under Bolshevism, but he also saw back much further to centuries-old continuities in Russian history. The Soviet Union, he argued, sought essentially the same strategic aims that the tsars had sought, most importantly control of central and eastern Europe to prevent invasion from the west or the incorporation of the region into a western-centered framework. Kennan argued that a longer view revealed a Soviet Union that, like previous Russian regimes, would respond aggressively, even irrationally, to anything it read as a threat to its safety.

Kennan recognized the hold that this history of invasion from the west had on the Russian mentality. Unable to deliver freedom or material progress to their people, successive Russian regimes had built their legitimacy instead on deterring and defeating foreign enemies. The United States represented the latest in a long line of states that the Soviet regime would demonize if for no other reason than to justify the brutality that it used to remain in power. Still, the United States was lucky. The Russians needed time to recover from the ravages of the war, the United States temporarily held a nuclear monopoly, and the American industrial base remained intact. If the United States used this time wisely, it could develop a strategy for defeating the Soviet menace without risking a third world war.

By exporting democracy and economic prosperity, the United States could present to Europeans, and eventually to the Soviet people as well, a superior model for living. Doing so, Kennan argued, would secure the free zone of Europe from communist influence and, over time, delegitimize the Soviet regime inside its own zone. To realize this vision, the United States needed a long-term, whole of government effort to promote the western system over the Soviet one. The United States had to abandon the idea that it could cut deals with the paranoid and untrustworthy Soviets. American leaders also needed to recognize that the Soviets, with their

massive manpower advantage, would match with superior force any threatening foreign influence inside what the Soviets saw as their zone of control. Kennan therefore argued that as much as the United States wanted to help the Poles, they could do little in the short term because the Soviet Union saw Poland as an existential issue while the west did not.⁴

Kennan's Long Telegram spelled out the basis of the containment doctrine that the United States and its allies used to win the Cold War. Building a thriving and successful free zone as a model to the entire world won the conflict in the long run, and without a war. The Long Telegram struck a senior member of official Washington as "the finest piece of analytical writing that I have ever seen come out of the [Foreign] Service."⁵ Its power came from its analysis, rooted in a long view of history, that both explained seemingly irrational Soviet behavior and proposed a response. Originally intended for a small official audience, the administration deemed the telegram so important that it took the extraordinary step of arranging for its anonymous publication in *Foreign Affairs* so that its ideas could find a wide audience.⁶

The telegram led Secretary of State George Marshall to bring Kennan to Washington to work on what became the Marshall Plan, itself informed by a careful reading of history. The plan had many authors, but the ideas behind it came largely from Kennan, using American wealth to shore up western institutions both to help people in need and to make clear that the west's capitalist, free model offered the best chance at peace and prosperity. Kennan later served as

⁴ Kennan surely saw the tragedy of sacrificing half of Europe to the Soviet sphere of influence. Late in the war he had written about the Poles, "I wish... we had had the judgment and the good taste to bow our heads in silence before the tragedy of a people who have been our allies, whom we have helped to save from our enemies, and who we cannot save from our friends."

⁵ John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 226.

⁶ X, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, 25, 4 (July 1947): 566–582. In International Relations terms, Kennan was a Realist. He argued that the United States should only use military force where and when it was likely to resist Soviet expansion at an acceptable cost. He strongly opposed both NSC-68 and the war in Vietnam. He also opposed building a hydrogen bomb, rearming West Germany, sending American troops north of the 38th parallel in Korea, and, later, expanding NATO.

ambassador to the Soviet Union, president of the National Defense University, and professor at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study. Colin Powell called Kennan "our best tutor" for understanding foreign policy.⁷

Thinking historically as Kennan did can help you achieve the "intellectual overmatch" that the Joint Chiefs of Staff demanded in their guidance to the force in May 2020. They specifically call for "deepening [your] knowledge of history."⁸ This document will assist you on that journey. It will introduce you to some of the ways that we all use history, often subconsciously, to inform decisions we make about the present and the future. Just as individuals are products of where they grew up, what they experienced along the way, and those odd moments of happenstance that life throws at them, so, too are nations, states, and peoples. By thinking about history more deliberately, strategists can improve the ways that their understanding of the past shapes their decision making in the present. If they are really astute, they can, as George Kennan did, learn to read how other groups view history and thereby get a critical insight into their mindset, akin to discovering a tell in the poker player across the table.

I originally wrote this document in 2020. Now, as I edit it in April 2022, the issues of Russian aggression have come back to the forefront, making it all the more important that you as strategists sharpen your ability to think historically. I hope you saw in this introduction a few echoes of the problems that the West faces in dealing with the disruptive and destabilizing actions of Vladimir Putin. If Kennan were alive today, would he see Putin as just another in a long line of Russian leaders all influenced by the same historical patterns? If so, what might such

⁷ Carolyn O'Hara, "Cold Warrior," *Foreign Policy* (March 2005), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2005/03/21/cold-warrior/>

⁸ "Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War," https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jcs_pme_tm_vision.pdf?ver=2020-05-15-102429-817

an understanding imply about western strategies for deterring and compelling Russian behavior? There are no easy answers at the strategic level but developing an historical mindedness will help you ask better questions and have more informed discussions.

Living Inside Old Buildings, or What You Don't Know CAN Hurt You

Unlike George Kennan, most people who believe in the importance of studying history have difficulty convincing policymakers of its utility. History is messy, complex, and sometimes emotional. It does not naturally lend itself to clear-eyed policy analysis or easy elevator speeches. It can be a special problem in a self-consciously young country like the United States. As Adam Garfinkle wittingly observed, “We’re the only country in the world where if you say, ‘that’s history,’ it means it doesn’t matter.”⁹ Sometimes, historians lean on pithy quotations or metaphors to convince sceptics. They include George Santayana’s famous dictum that “Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it,” Mark Twain’s remark that while history does not repeat itself, sometimes it rhymes, and the Roman statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero’s “To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child.”¹⁰

Others compare the study of history to telling your doctor your full family medical history. Only once the doctor knows the problems in your family’s medical background can she fully understand your risk factors and chart out a plan for your health. To remain ignorant of, or dishonest about, your family’s problems greatly limits her ability to care for you. Still others use the metaphor of buying an old building. You should not do so without learning in detail about the

⁹ Thanks to my friend Alan Luxenberg for sharing his words with me.

¹⁰ My personal favorite is W. E. B. DuBois’s reaction to an editor who told him to “leave out the history and come to the present.” DuBois wrote, “I felt like going to him over a thousand miles and taking him by the lapels and saying, ‘Dear, dear jackass! Don’t you understand that the past is the present; that without what was, nothing is?’” Thanks to my friend Chad Williams who shared that anecdote with me.

building's strengths, its flaws, who built it, who remodeled it and when, and what catastrophic events might have happened to it over the decades. You would certainly consult professional inspectors to give you an honest, informed assessment of anticipated costs, opportunities, and risks associated with its purchase.

I always thought of these aphorisms and metaphors as little more than clever lines that might persuade administrators who wanted to cut the hours spent on studying history in favor of something more "topical." But a 2018 experience changed my mind. After touring some battlefields of the First World War with friends, we stayed in a beautiful hotel just outside the city of Reims in eastern France. The next morning on checkout, I asked the manager what she knew about the history of the building. It sat, after all, just a few hundred yards away from the western front. The German shelling of Reims and the damage done to its magnificent cathedral, which we had toured the day before, had spurred much of the desire to make the Germans pay massive reparations to rebuild the iconic pieces of French history that they had destroyed.

My question led to a journey. The manager came out from behind her desk and took me to the front of the building. She showed me patches of cement that were slightly darker than the main color of the exterior wall. These patches, she told me, represented the filling in of damage from the war. The repair teams intentionally chose a different shade of cement to make sure that the building physically reflected its history. She then fetched some photos of the château taken in 1919. The lovely back garden, where we had enjoyed a glass of the local champagne the night before, is a scene of devastation. The entire outer wall of the elegant dining room is gone, and the left side of the mansard roof under which I had slept appears ready to collapse.



Domaine les Crayères, Reims, 1919

Nearly destroyed during the war, in 1918 the château served as a field hospital for Senegalese soldiers, in whose honor a plaque stands nearby. During the Second World War the Nazis used it as an SS headquarters and officers club. In 1980 a Belgian investment banker who made his money in London and Florida bought the property. After a gorgeous reconstruction, it reopened and soon boasted of Michelin stars and a prestigious Hotel of the Year Award. All of that change happened in about a century, a remarkably short period of time in historical terms. The château's owners, themselves a product of this history, do not need to know it to be shaped by it, nor, of course, do the workers and the guests. Still, that history has made them, and the building, what they are today.



Domaine les Crayères, Reims, today

With an understanding of history, one can do a similar exercise in thousands of places worldwide. If you take the European Advanced Regional Studies class, you may get the chance to do so in front of the Reichstag building in Berlin. Built in 1884 to govern a newly unified and assertive Germany, the government added the words *Dem Deutschen Volke* (“To the German People”) in 1916 to bolster morale during the First World War. Its infamous burning, damage from which intentionally remains visible today, gave the Nazis the excuse they sought to suspend democracy in 1933. A famous photograph of a Soviet soldier waving a hammer and sickle flag in 1945 atop the building (with the devastation of Berlin in the background) marked its conquest by the Red Army. Restorations after the war removed nationalist statuary and art works but kept some of the anti-Nazi graffiti left by Soviet soldiers as a reminder of the costs of hubris.



Atop the Reichstag, 1945

The Reichstag is now the most visited building in Berlin, in part because of the iconic glass dome added in the 1990s to celebrate German reunification. It represents what historian Fritz Stern called the “second chance” that its allies bestowed upon Germany, a rare gift in the

history of international relations.¹¹ The first time I toured the building, I saw a joyous couple having wedding photos taken inside. The choices made about how to restore the building reveal a desire among German leaders to use the Reichstag as a living warning against war and dictatorship, while simultaneously projecting a hopeful message of democracy and recovery. A short walk away stand Germany's main Holocaust memorial, a Soviet War Memorial, and the United States Embassy. The embassy sits in the former "Valley of Death," cleared by East German troops in the 1960s in order to patrol their side of the Berlin Wall, remnants of which are also visible nearby. If you know what these buildings and monuments, both old and new, represent, then you can explain a lot of modern German and European history just by walking around the Reichstag. Armed with that knowledge, you can also understand a lot about the continent's contemporary strategic environment.

Historical Mindedness for Strategists

By casting our minds backwards, we can see more accurately when we look forward. History can therefore become an invaluable strategic asset, helping strategists to sharpen their thinking and ask better questions. No historian, however, claims that a study of the past provides a magic answer key to the future. Quite the reverse, in fact. As a profession, we tend to argue that a study of the past shows the difficulty of predicting what will come next and how powerless we can sometimes be in the face of the forces of history. We are innately suspicious of those who promote so-called laws of history or use the past to make bold predictions. As the great British

¹¹ Fritz Stern, *Five Germanys I Have Known* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006), 474-475. Stern (1926-2016) was himself a symbol of a changing Germany. Born to a Jewish family that converted to Lutheranism to protect itself from anti-Semitism in what is today Poland, he immigrated to the United States in 1938.

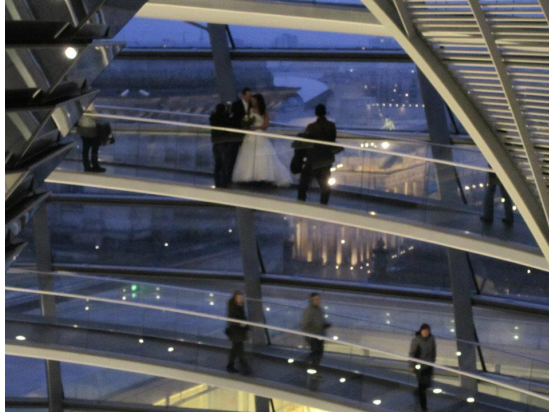
historian Sir Michael Howard wrote, “Historians have seen too many confident people fall flat on their faces to lay themselves open to more humiliation than they can help.”¹²

Still, a deeper appreciation of the past can help you, as it helped Kennan, to better understand the strategic environment. It can therefore help you to ask better questions about the present and the future. It should also inspire some humility about how much even a well-resourced and well-designed strategy can achieve. Every decision we make is in part a function of decisions made and unmade over the years, the decades, and the centuries. When tackling any strategic problem, you are walking into an old building and dealing with the legacies of its previous owners. Knowing as much as you can about it will not guarantee you success, but it should help you prioritize what you need to repair and decide how much you can expect to remodel given your budget. What you don’t know can hurt you if you overlook major flaws in the building or ignore significant aspects of history.¹³

Developing the skill set you need does not require a deep background in academic history, nor does it mean that you must spend your weekends reading the *American Historical Review*. But developing a sense of historical mindedness should change the way you look at the news and how you frame questions about national security problems. It should also make you a bit more skeptical when you hear people misuse history to justify a policy or try to convince you to support a strategy with serious flaws. We hope it will inspire you to read more history, but even if it does not, we hope it will change the way you think.

¹² *A Historical Sensibility: Sir Michael Howard and the International Institute of Strategic Studies, 1958-2019* (London: Routledge, 2020), 8.

¹³ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: Norton, 1995), 307.



Celebrations Under the Reichstag Dome, 2012.

Think about a big historical question like “Why did war break out in Europe in 1914?” or “How could the German people have committed mass genocide during the Second World War?” Scholars who study topics like these do not normally look to provide the definitive answer, although they usually have confidence in the conclusions that they spent years researching and developing. They seek instead to make arguments that either challenge existing ideas about a topic or add some new layer of complexity or clarity to it. New methods and new sources constantly change the way we see and interpret the past, as does the passage of time. To understand a river, we need to explore not only its headwaters and its many tributaries but also discover where it empties into the sea and what lives in its waters. It is the same with history. We need to see where a problem began, when and why it gathered momentum, what changes it experienced over the centuries, and what effects it might or might not create downstream. We must also be aware that our view of the river changes as we move along it and as we move up and down on its many small waves.

The question of how the Holocaust could have happened presents a fascinating case of how different scholars read the same river. Two scholars working with some of the same primary sources at roughly the same time produced books on the subject that drew radically different

conclusions about the past with radically different implications for the present and the future. Daniel Goldhagen argued that a particularly virulent strand of anti-Semitism, long present in German society, found a willing audience among the German people under Nazism, making them, in Goldhagen's provocative title, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.¹⁴ Christopher Browning argued, by contrast, that the members of the unit he studied were, in his title, *Ordinary Men*.¹⁵ Nothing about them suggested a proclivity to commit mass murder nor even a special hatred of Jews. Banal factors such as peer pressure and the nature of small group dynamics, more than anti-Semitism or years of indoctrination under Nazi ideology, led a unit of normal men from Hamburg to do the unthinkable.

These histories matter for how we see the present and the future. If one accepts Goldhagen's argument, it becomes much easier to confine the horrors of the Holocaust to a particular place and time in a rapidly receding past. We should still study it as a warning from the past, but we do not really need to worry about a repeat because the particular conditions of interwar Europe are unlikely to repeat themselves. For this reason, the book became a surprise bestseller in Germany because it gave readers a comforting narrative, namely that contemporary Germany had learned its lessons and closed a terrible chapter in its history by confronting its demons and making amends. Moreover, with post-reunification Germany having assumed a cooperative and constructive place in the global community, readers everywhere could take comfort in the notion that even societies that commit genocide can recover and rejoin the community of nations. If, however, we accept Browning's argument, then we must face the much less comforting reality that commonplace circumstances such as peer pressure can turn

¹⁴ Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

¹⁵ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

“ordinary men” into killers and that Holocausts can reoccur, perhaps in places where we least expect them.¹⁶ The intense debate over the two books proved that one’s views of the past influence one’s views of the present, and vice versa.

As is common in academia, the two scholars did not try to find a compromise or a way for their two arguments to fit together into a single “truth.” The Browning-Goldhagen debate represents just one among many well-known cases of disagreement between scholars. Historians love to argue, ideally (though not always) in a professional, constructive manner. They find little use in divergence-convergence models, nor do they seek to create a compromise version of history to which all can agree. For most historians, consensus is not a desired end state. You will therefore rarely hear a professional historian say “history tells us…” because we know that the study of history will not produce a single agreed upon truth, but rather a quest (or multiple, competing quests) to attach meaning to the past.

The images of history that we have in our heads shape how we think about the present and the future. At one end of a diverse spectrum sit those who believe in teleology, the notion that history has a discoverable path and direction, usually leading toward a better future. At the other end are those who think that history has no pattern, that it is, as the influential German historian Oswald Spengler once described it, the story of the combined impact of centuries of human catastrophe. Or as Mrs. Lintott, a character in the wonderful 2004 play *History Boys* described the class that she taught, little more than the story of “five centuries of masculine ineptitude.”¹⁷

¹⁶ This is what Hannah Arendt meant when she talked about the “banality of evil.” Adolf Eichmann, whose trial in Israel she observed in 1961, struck her as an average figure. He oversaw the mass murder of Jews not because he was an anti-Semitic monster, but because it was his job and a bureaucratic system rewarded him for doing it. See *Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Vintage, 1963).

¹⁷ Alan Bennett, *History Boys* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 84-85.

You have some construct of how history works in your head already. This academic year will give you a chance to think deliberately about those ideas and how they condition your views of strategy. What forces lead states to go to war? Are humans basically good and peaceful or selfish and warlike? Thomas Hobbes, who translated Thucydides into English in the eighteenth century, argued that naturally violent humans formed structures like governments and armies to protect themselves from invasion and murder by marauding neighbors. Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued, by contrast, that humans were naturally good. The institutions they formed made war and collective violence possible. Woodrow Wilson, for one, agreed; his views of history influenced how he sought to rebuild Europe in 1919. What do you think drives human history? And where will that past lead us in the future? The answers to these questions will inform everything you do at the strategic level.

What History Cannot Do for You

Just like any other source of information, reading history requires us to control for our biases. We must condition ourselves not to accept history that entertains us or confirms what we already believe. We also must not reject history because it challenges our preconceptions or makes us uncomfortable. We need to become critical consumers of history, questioning sources as well as the qualifications and motivations of those producing the representations of the past that we see. Historian Margaret Macmillan warns us that we must be wary of history that constructs a mythic past somehow better or less complex than our present day. She cites Michael Howard, who called books stuffed with overly caricatured heroes and villains “nursery

history.”¹⁸ Insightful history, of course, does not belong to professional historians alone, but whoever creates it, it should always be complex and force readers outside of their comfort zone. Monochromatic history or history designed purely to entertain is of little use to the serious strategist. Fritz Stern, whose histories of Germany helped inform the process of reunification after the Cold War, wrote that his study of history meant that “remnants of black-and-white thinking receded, and the past became a fabric of shifting colors.”¹⁹ Developing historical mindedness can do the same for you.

Stern had chosen his words carefully. Shifting colors give us a fuller picture, but a more colorful picture is not necessarily a clearer one, in part because of the close links between history and identity. Think about your personal response to the recent removals of Confederate statues, the debates over the teaching of history in school curricula, or the decision to rename Army bases once named for Confederate generals. Whether you agree or disagree with these decisions, at least one of them likely produced in you an instinctive reaction of some kind. None of these decisions will make much material difference to how you live your life, yet they produced a response because they speak to identity and a collective understanding of how we came to our place in the world today. In other words, they speak to the ways we internalize the past and its links to our individual and collective identities in the present.²⁰

For those reasons, historians do not attempt to achieve objectivity. After all, they spend their careers studying their chosen subjects precisely because those subjects mean something to them. Why else would they have become historians in the first place? Instead of trying to remove

¹⁸ Margaret Macmillan *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Modern Library, 2008), 16-17, 39. She argues that a persistent “cult” of Winston Churchill in the United States and Britain partly serves to compensate for a perceived lack of political greatness in those two countries today.

¹⁹ Stern, *Five Germanys*, 4.

²⁰ The writer Zadie Smith wrote a beautiful essay on history and identity. See Zadie Smith, “What Do We Want History to Do to Us?,” *New York Review of Books*, February 27, 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/02/27/kara-walker-what-do-we-want-history-to-do-to-us/>

their bias, a goal that one historian dismissed as little more than “a noble dream,” they try to recognize and even embrace their biases, being honest with themselves about those biases so that they are transparent to readers.²¹ Objective history, one friend of mine likes to say, is a contradiction in terms. Historian Jill Lepore underscores this point through her terrific podcast, *The Last Archive*, on how our collective understandings of truth itself have changed over the years.²²

Historians are, of course, affected by the events in their own lives and trends in the pursuit of knowledge more generally. Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity, published in 1913, posited in part that aspect changed with distance. It influenced professional historians, who recognized that one’s distance from events in both time and space altered our understanding of them. A history of the Napoleonic Wars written in 1920, for example, will naturally look different from one written in 1820 because decades after the event we will know more of the end of the story, and we should be far enough removed to treat the event with less emotion. Similarly, a history of the Second World War written in China will surely look different from one written in Canada. None is necessarily more “objective” or “true” than any other; as perspective changes so, too, do representations of the past.²³

During and after the First World War, which began at about the same time that Einstein published his theory of relativity, governments hired historians to write books and reports to explain the causes of that catastrophe. In effect, each country produced its own history of the war to justify its actions. Not surprisingly, each found its own set of heroes and villains, and each

²¹ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

²² Jill Lepore, *The Last Archive* (Pushkin Industries, 2020), <https://www.thelastarchive.com>.

²³ Professional historians do, however, take very seriously their role as gatekeepers against malicious historical distortions like Holocaust denial. See, for example, Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Plume, 1993).

assigned blame for the war's outbreak to someone else. These developments together all but destroyed the prewar idea of "truth" as a final goal of the historical community. As the great English historian E. H. Carr wrote, "after the First World War, the facts seemed to smile on us less propitiously than in the years before 1914."²⁴

To accept the limitations of historical truth and recognize our biases, of course, does not mean ignoring evidence that runs counter to our predispositions or only reading works by authors who share our biases. Instead, it means acknowledging where we come from, both personally and intellectually, rather than trying to imagine that we can rise above our human biases to find some common objective truth, especially if, as Lepore argues, the meaning of truth itself constantly changes.



1917 Political Cartoon

²⁴ E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London: Penguin, 1961), 21. Richard J. Evans makes the same point in his *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997). The writing of nationalist histories became especially important to the new states created in 1919.

Given the sheer amount of information at their disposal, historians necessarily make choices about what they can cover and what they cannot. John Gaddis, a well-known scholar of Cold War grand strategy and a biographer of George Kennan, compares historians to cartographers, always rooting their work in evidence, but necessarily making critical choices about perspective and which features they represent on their “maps” of the past.²⁵ Historians, moreover, never want to simply redraw old maps. They want instead to challenge conventional truths and longstanding myths by asking new questions and introducing new perspectives. As Alan Luxenberg, the former president of the Foreign Policy Research Institute likes to say, a good historian makes the unfamiliar familiar; a great historian makes the familiar unfamiliar.

Part of the process of making the familiar unfamiliar involves shining lights into the dark corners of the past that most people would prefer to leave unexamined. French philosopher Ernest Renan once said that “a nation is a group of people united by a mistaken view about the past.” He meant that nations (or armies or any other group of people) invent collective mythic pasts to mold their identity. Historians pride themselves on challenging and analyzing those mythic narratives to expose their limitations and outright falsehoods.²⁶ It doesn’t always make us popular (nobody likes to have their myths shattered) but it sits at the core of what we do. To make assumptions about the present or the future based on an understanding of history that makes us feel better sets us up for failure. A study of history in all its complexity should not aim to make you feel good or bad about your world; it should instead prepare you to live inside that

²⁵ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), chapter eight and Macmillan, *Dangerous Games*, 82.

²⁶ James Loewen made a career out of shattering these myths. See his *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1995) and *Lies Across America: What Our Historical Monuments and Markers Get Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1998).

world. Put another way, if the history you are learning does not explain the present you are living, then it probably isn't history.²⁷

The Networked Webs of History

Historians tend to see everything as interconnected. In general, therefore, we mistrust the idea of independent variables and predictive models. Although we specialize in political, social, economic, cultural, or military history, we know that we cannot separate any one of these factors from the others. We also know that what happens in one part of the world inevitably impacts others, like the metaphorical butterfly that flaps its wings over a flower in China and sets in motion the forces that cause a hurricane in the Caribbean.²⁸ To quote John Gaddis again, members of the historical profession have a “web-like sense of reality. . . . For that reason, it's not clear to us how any variable can be truly independent.”²⁹

This approach complicates the utility of history to policymakers. Historians know that a better understanding of the past can help sharpen our focus and ask better questions, even as we believe that the world is too complex to make accurate forecasts about it. The English historian R. G. Collingwood, notably writing in the turbulent year of 1939, compared historians to expert woodsmen walking through a forest alongside an inexperienced traveler. The traveler only sees grass and trees, but the woodsman can spot places where tigers might be lurking. It does not take much imagination to see that Collingwood was expressing his frustration with the strategists of

²⁷ Daniel Immerwahr, “History Isn't Just for Patriots,” *Washington Post*, December 23, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/12/23/teach-history-american-patriotism/>.

²⁸ Jamie Vernon, “Understanding the Butterfly Effect,” <https://www.americanscientist.org/article/understanding-the-butterfly-effect>

²⁹ Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, 64.

his own time for not dealing with the tigers hiding in the grass much sooner than they did. As a result of their failure, Britain fought a second world war in as many generations.³⁰

Still, even if woodsmen can spot potential areas of trouble, they do not have perfect vision. As Henry Kissinger liked to remind policymakers, we must not think of history as a cookbook with pretested recipes.³¹ Nor do historians always agree on how to interpret the past to provide insights for the present. If a policymaker asks an historian a question about the future, she will likely respond with “it depends” or “it’s complicated,” answers that are not terribly helpful even if they are true. The world is far too complex to make forecasts about it on the basis of isolating two or three variables. For that reason, most historians mistrust neat “lessons learned.” What worked in one context might not work in another. Not all forests conceal lurking tigers, and strategists must often read unfamiliar forests. As Collingwood noted, few topics of study will help them in this endeavor more than History.

For most historians, the study of the past on its own terms presents enough challenges. We normally leave forecasting the future to others, perhaps because most people, including historians, tend to forecast pretty badly.³² Humans have an innate bias toward an assumption that the future will look something much like the present, in part because it is too difficult for our mind’s eye to envision anything radically different. To cite one famous example, despite the start of the French Revolution in 1789, British Prime Minister William Pitt told Parliament three years later that “unquestionably there never was a time in the history of this country when, from the situation of Europe, we might more reasonably expect fifteen years of peace, than we may at the

³⁰ Quoted in Robert Crowcroft, “The Case for Applied History: Can the Study of the Past Really Help Us to Understand the Present?,” *History Today* 68, 9 (September 2018), 2.

³¹ Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979), 54.

³² Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is it? How Can We Know?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Tetlock found that most experts are not particularly good at forecasting the future, although there are characteristics that help experts, and non-experts as well, make better forecasts. The most important, Tetlock found, were intellectual curiosity and a willingness to revise one’s initial impressions.

present moment.”³³ We can forgive Pitt for not having the superhuman ability to predict that Napoleon would rise to power in France within a few short, eventful years, but we need not forgive him for making the essential error of failing to recognize that the world is dynamic or for his assumption that Britain could somehow remain insulated from the effects of the seismic revolution then occurring in nearby France.

Unlike historians, strategists need to make educated guesses about the future if they hope to avoid Pitt’s mistake. Thus, we have a paradox: accurately forecasting the future is nearly impossible, yet strategists must do it anyway if they hope to make decisions beneficial to their nations and their allies. If, like William Pitt, they forecast incorrectly, serious, potentially catastrophic, consequences can result. A knowledge of the past can help by giving you better insight into the nature of the human experience over time. As the historian Jacob Burckhardt said, a study of history may not make us especially clever for the next time, but it should hopefully make us wiser forever.³⁴

How to Buy an Historical Diamond

Jewelers talk about the four Cs of their profession: color, cut, clarity, and carat.

Historians talk about five Cs: change, continuity, causation, context, and contingency.

1. Change. At its most basic, the study of history is the study of change over time, which historians organize through a technique called periodization. Just as individuals mark the years of their life by events like youth, college, first job, and that year spent in Carlisle, so do historians divide the years for nations and regions. The way they periodize tells us a lot about what they

³³ In his defense, Pitt did say that “events may arise which human foresight cannot reach, and which may baffle all our conjectures.” See *The Monthly Review*, volume 9 (1792), p. 346, available through Google Books.

³⁴ The quotation comes from Fritz Stern, “Imperial Hubris: A German Tale,” *Lapham’s Quarterly* online, <https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/states-war/imperial-hubris-german-tale>.

think matters most in history. Periodization also helps us find moments in history of fundamental change. For historians of modern Europe, 1789, 1848, 1914, 1945, and 1989 stand out as frequent points of reference. For Americanists, 1776, 1861, 1941, and 2001 often stand out. By implication, scholars argue that what came after the year in question marks some fundamental change from what had come before. Listening to what people use as their periodization can provide a crucial insight into how they think.

Periodization presents historians with some of their most important challenges. How far back in time do we need to go to answer a question before we face the problem of diminishing returns?³⁵ Not all societies, moreover, change in the same way at the same time. Older societies such as China and India often feel the weight of history differently than newer ones such as the United States. Periodization that describes one region therefore does not always accurately describe another, even for the same historical event. Historians therefore often disagree about the periodization they use, depending in part on the exact question they seek to answer. Did the Second World War begin in 1919 with the failures of the Treaty of Versailles? In 1931 when Japan invaded Manchuria? In 1939 with the German invasion of Poland? On December 7, 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor? The way people or nations answer this question can tell us a great deal about how they see the past as well as the present.

2. Continuity: In 2010, as the American-led war in Afghanistan began to show no signs of ending quickly, commentators promoted an image of Afghanistan as a tribal, disunified country that had frustrated all previous British and Soviet efforts to control it. “We are not going to ever defeat the insurgency,” said Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. “Afghanistan has

³⁵ To borrow the metaphor in the last paragraph, how many generations do you need to go back to understand your own life? I do not even know the names of my great grandparents, but had they chosen to remain in Poland and Russia in the 1890s you would surely not be reading this.

probably had — my reading of Afghanistan history — it’s probably had an insurgency forever, of some kind.” The implication for people who worried about a long, inconclusive war seemed to be that the American-led effort would prove just as frustrating as the British or Soviet wars had been, or that a “law” of history argued against western armies being able to achieve meaningful strategic outcomes (i.e., to impose change over time) in environments such as Afghanistan.

An article in *Foreign Affairs* by journalist Christian Caryl subtitled “If You Want to Figure out a Way Forward for Afghanistan, Fake History is Not the Place to Start” challenged this view.³⁶ Caryl argued that the image of continuous instability and inevitable failure of foreign efforts in Afghanistan represents a misreading of history that states have used to excuse their own strategic and operational shortcomings. Opponents of western efforts in Afghanistan, moreover, have happily promoted this history of an unconquerable, fiercely tribal land to justify their viewpoint. In effect, Caryl argued, by buying into a false image of a history of continuity, we had already given ourselves a ready-made excuse for not achieving our goals in the region. Caryl thus employed a powerful use of history to pose big questions of strategy.

Continuity partly explains why we spend so much time reading Thucydides. If a strategic principle has consistently been important since the time of the ancient Greeks, then we should begin from the assumption that it will remain important for the foreseeable future. Thucydides discusses enduring patterns of war and strategy such as the role of alliances, the corrosive effects of war on a democracy, the importance of leadership, the dangers of mission creep, and the difficulty of achieving conflict termination, to name just a few. To search for continuity is not to argue that nothing changes, of course, only that if a principle of war has held true for hundreds (or even thousands) of years, then the burden of proof must fall on those claiming that it will

³⁶ Christian Caryl, “Bury the Graveyard: If You Want to Figure out a way Forward for Afghanistan, Fake History is not the Place to Start,” *Foreign Policy* (July 26, 2010), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/07/26/bury-the-graveyard/>.

soon change. The challenge for strategists lies in identifying those immutable, unchangeable, continuous principles and making sure that if we do indeed violate them, we fully understand the associated risks.

The balance of change and continuity informs some of Carl von Clausewitz's most insightful thinking. Clausewitz separated what he saw as the nature of war (continuity) from the character of war (change). The nature of war refers to those factors we should expect to find whenever and wherever societies fight. They include his complex "trinity" of the interaction between the government, military, and people. By contrast, the character of war (weapons systems, ideologies, and individual leaders, for example) constantly changes. Clausewitz understood the importance of looking for patterns within change and continuity alike. Reading him should inspire us to do the same.

3. Causation. Describing change and continuity presents one challenge. The greater challenge lies in analyzing the causes of change and separating causation from correlation. French historian Fernand Braudel took a position at one extreme. Writing in the 1950s, he warned historians not to focus on the wars and economic catastrophes through which they had recently lived. He contended that change and continuity ultimately derive from centuries-old patterns mostly invisible to us in the present. They have their roots in geography, the distribution of natural resources, and collective mentalities that societies develop over time. These patterns exert an influence far stronger in the long run than world wars, charismatic personalities, or short-term changes that appear important at the time, but are in fact insignificant over what Braudel called the *longue durée* of human history.³⁷ Think about a newspaper that only publishes an issue every six months, or fifteen years, or even fifty years. What news stories would merit a

³⁷ Braudel developed some of his key ideas in a German prisoner of war camp. He wanted to explore those patterns of history that would endure despite Germany's defeat of France in 1940.

mention in the paper's various sections? Which would seem important enough to appear on the front page? This thought exercise helps us separate important, long-term events from eye-catching, but ultimately less important, short-term events.

At the other end of a broad spectrum sit those who argue for human agency theory, once known as the "great man" school of history. This school contends that the decisions of a small number of extraordinary people like Mohandas Gandhi, Rosa Parks, and Napoleon can fundamentally alter the course of history in a very short time span. In this interpretation, the Allies won the Second World War not because they had greater resources or more favorable geography but because their leaders made better decisions than the leaders of the Axis powers did. History, such scholars argue, ultimately tells the story of exceptional human beings and the decisions they make. Military history sometimes finds itself especially attracted to this way of thinking because of the many crucial decisions that senior leaders make in the course of a war.

Not everyone agrees with this interpretation of the central role of humans in shaping history. In an episode of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, Amy tells her boyfriend that his hero, Indiana Jones, is irrelevant to the plot of his favorite movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Take Indy out of the movie, she tells him, and the French archaeologist still finds the crucial medallion, he still locates the ark, the Nazis still open it, and the bad guys still die. Amy was, in effect, challenging Sheldon's belief that a small number of important individuals drive the "plot" of history. Her comments to Sheldon imply that human beings, especially those we build up as our heroes and villains, may play a smaller role in history than we sometimes presume.³⁸ Imagine for a moment that Winston Churchill or Adolph Hitler (or both) had died during the great influenza epidemic of 1918-1919. How much of history would have been different?

³⁸ Tolstoy intended *War and Peace* (especially Book Nine) to be a commentary on the insignificance of people, even Napoleon, in the face of the powerful ebbing and flowing of history.

Some historians follow Braudel and more or less take human beings out of history. Most, however, accept a version of Karl Marx's dictum that people make history, but not always in the ways they wish. He meant that context and external factors limit and constrain how much even "great" men and women can move the patterns of history. Who was Winston Churchill? Was he an exceptional leader who did what no other British leader could have done, or was he more like Indiana Jones, a charismatic star with witty lines and great hats who steals the scenes, but ultimately has less impact on the outcome than we think? Indiana Jones should still have fought the Nazis because fighting Nazis is always a good idea, but maybe we, his audience, should be more circumspect about how much one professor on temporary academic leave can change the world.³⁹

Most historians describe the forces of change as polycausal, an academic's way of saying that change results from the interaction of multiple factors. One useful metaphor compares historical events to building a campfire. For the fire to provide heat it needs logs, kindling, a spark, someone to put it all together, and, finally, favorable weather conditions. Debating the relative importance of such factors lies at the heart of what historians do. Was the Second World War mainly the product of geography and resource distribution (the logs), the failures of the Paris Peace Conference (the kindling), the Great Depression (the spark), the mania of Hitler (the person), or favorable weather conditions (the weakness of the international system in the 1930s)? If you say, "all of them and more," historians will applaud you for thinking polycausally, although they will warn you that you still need to prioritize if you hope to derive any real meaning from the past. The answers you have in your head about these questions will determine

³⁹ <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/back-from-yet-another-globetrotting-adventure-indiana-jones-checks-his-mail-and-discovers-that-his-bid-for-tenure-has-been-denied>.

much of your view on how change happens in the present and how and why we are likely to experience change in the future.

4. Context. Why did the assassination of Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914 lead to a global war? Europe had survived assassinations before, and truth be told, not that many Europeans (not even in Vienna), grieved for long. Looking backwards from several years of distance, the Viennese author Stefan Zweig wrote, “only a few more weeks and the name and figure of Franz Ferdinand would have disappeared for all time out of history.”⁴⁰ Yet they didn’t disappear. Instead, his death has become emblematic as the spark that set the flames of world war. Why?

To answer this question, we need to study context, or the events happening around the assassination, in both breadth and depth. The assassination occurred at a particular moment of tension between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Serbia. The Austrian ruling elite, even those members of it relieved that Franz Ferdinand would never become emperor, interpreted the assassination as what we would today call an act of state-sponsored terrorism by Serbia. Austrian leaders had long viewed Serbia as an existential threat to imperial unity; several had argued for a preemptive war against the Serbs for years. If the Austrians could persuade Europeans that the Serbian government had planned the assassination, then few people would question Austria-Hungary’s right to seek justice. Even tsarist Russia, normally inclined to support its fellow Slavs, would not want to set the destabilizing example of supporting a government that sought regime change by regicide lest someone try to kill their own royals.

⁴⁰ Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday: An Autobiography* (New York: Viking, 1943), 218. Zweig, who was Jewish, committed suicide in 1942.



Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, in Sarajevo, June 28, 1914

Looking at the wider context, the rest of Europe barely paid attention to the assassination, giving the Austrians room to present Europe with a *fait accompli* before the international system could stop them – or so the Austrians had reasoned. The British faced a Home Rule crisis over Ireland and the French had their eyes firmly fixed on the salacious murder trial of Henriette Caillaux, the wife of a controversial government minister.⁴¹ In Berlin, people showed no more interest in the events in faraway Sarajevo than those in London or Paris. Powerful members of the German government, however, fearing that its relative military power had begun to wane as Russia grew stronger, unwisely encouraged the Austrians to take risks. If war were to come, the German elite reasoned, better to fight it in 1914 than in 1917 or 1920. In other words, the summer of 1914 produced a perfect storm of contextual events. To understand the assassination without the context deprives it of all meaning.

Five. Contingency. Can small decisions both made and not made inadvertently cause important shifts in the course of history? If Broward County, Florida had designed a clearer

⁴¹ It's a great story. Henriette Caillaux, wife of finance minister Joseph Caillaux, shot and killed a newspaper editor for, among other things, publishing the couple's embarrassing love letters. Mme. Caillaux admitted to the murder, but her lawyer argued to an all-male jury that she could not be guilty because her female brain had been forced to assume the male role of defending the family's honor. Given the prominence of the Caillaux couple, many senior politicians, including the president of France, gave testimony. In the end, the jury found her not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. The acquittal came on July 28, 1914.

ballot for the 2000 election, would Al Gore have won the presidency? And if he had, would he have led America into a war in Iraq in 2003 as President George W. Bush did? Might the actions of a handful of county election officials in Florida have inadvertently helped to cause a war halfway around the world? If the Framers of the Constitution in the 1790s had decided that only a simple majority of the Senate would suffice to ratify a treaty (instead of two-thirds), then the United States would almost surely have ratified the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 and joined the League of Nations. Might that act from more than a century earlier have changed the course of twentieth-century history? If so, are there insights we can gain from studying second- and third-order effects of seemingly disconnected events?

My favorite example of contingency brings us back to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. An attempt earlier in the day to kill him by throwing a bomb into his car failed when the bomb detonated under the carriage of another car in the motorcade. Franz Ferdinand's security team rushed him to the safety of Sarajevo's City Hall, where this story probably should have ended. Instead, a set of contingencies began to unfold: (A) Franz Ferdinand insisted, against the advice of almost everyone close to him, that he and his wife would visit those injured in the earlier attack; (B) the head of the security detail suggested an unusual route to the hospital to allow the archduke to travel most of the way at high speeds in order to deter any other bomb throwers who might still be at large; (C) in the confusion of the moment, no one told the archduke's chauffeur of the decision to change routes; (D) the unfortunate chauffeur needed a moment to put the car in reverse when he saw the other vehicles in the motorcade take the alternate route; (E) a member of the bomb plot team, a teenager named Gavrilo Princip, stood in the perfect spot with his pistol still in his pocket because he had ultimately decided against tossing it into the river; and (F), by pure chance, the archduke's bodyguard stood on the running

board on the opposite side of the car, rendering him unable to do anything but look on in horror.⁴²

We can therefore imagine a different June 28, 1914 in Sarajevo, a day in which any one of the steps above does not happen. Franz Ferdinand takes the advice of those around him and stays inside the safety of City Hall for the rest of the day, or someone accurately conveys the new route to the driver, or the bodyguard stands by chance on the other side of the car, or Princip goes to literally any another street corner in Sarajevo. Is it then possible that the First World War never happens? And if so, is it then possible that the Russian Revolution, the Treaty of Versailles, the Great Depression, the rise of the Nazis, the Second World War, the Holocaust, the Cold War, the founding of the State of Israel, and the Korean and Vietnam Wars never happen? Which events are the butterflies that cause the tsunami? We can never know, of course. But reflect for a moment on how you felt when you read this paragraph. Do you think that history moves on such contingent moments like those in Sarajevo? Might the French have been able to defuse the crisis of 1914 if Mme. Caillaux had not shot a newspaper editor? To take one often debated example of the contingency problem, would the United States still have fought a war in Vietnam if Lee Harvey Oswald had missed John F. Kennedy in Dallas in 1963?

Historians themselves do not agree; many believe that the questions are not worth asking because we cannot learn much from what amounts, in effect, to accidents. We should therefore spend our time looking for patterns of change and continuity elsewhere. Others argue that contingent factors carry less importance than we might like to believe. The same domestic and international forces that drove Lyndon Johnson to send American troops to Vietnam in 1965 would, they contend, have driven Kennedy to do something broadly similar had he lived.

⁴² There are many versions of what happened on that fateful day. My account follows the prologue of Sean McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

Likewise, many First World War historians argue that the instability of Europe in 1914 would sooner or later have led to war even if the archduke had stayed in City Hall. Still others argue that although the accidents themselves may not matter, how people respond to them certainly does. Imagine for a moment what the twentieth century might have looked like if the Austrians had settled for an international conference instead of pushing for a war with Serbia.

The point of contingency exercises is not to answer unanswerable questions, but to inspire you to think about what you believe drives history and how it informs your vision of strategy. You do not need to argue Braudelian structuralism versus contingency with your seminar historians, although some of us might enjoy that discussion. Thinking historically might, however, help you to figure out your own understanding of the past and how it influences how you read the present. The exercise should help you sharpen your appreciation of which contingent factors matter most and which will likely have minimal impact on strategy even if they temporarily dominate headlines.

Similarly, what periods and events in history do you think mark major changes? What are those changes? Twenty years on, does 9/11 still seem like the history changing event that it seemed at the time? What long-term changes resulting from COVID-19 will still be with us ten or twenty or fifty years from now? What does it mean that China understands itself as a millennia-old society shaped by devastating events such as the Opium War (1839-1840), the Chinese Revolution (1911), and the Chinese Civil War (1949-1950)? How might their different histories explain why China and the United States have emerged as geopolitical rivals in the twenty-first century? We cannot get our strategies right if we do not study questions like these through the lenses of change, continuity, causation, context, and contingency. As the great

scholar of China John Fairbank said, when dealing with geopolitical problems, “historical perspective is not a luxury, but a necessity.”⁴³

Focusing on Counterfactuals

Counterfactual analysis, a variant of the contingency problem, asks questions about what did not happen in history. It refutes teleology and hindsight bias, the mistaken notions that history unfolded in the only way that it could have. Instead, it challenges us to think of the many other paths that history could plausibly have taken. Most professional historians remain instinctively suspicious of answering these types of “what if?” questions. We prefer to work from written sources and construct our arguments based on what we can assert through those sources. We also mistrust this kind of exercise for the simple reason that we can never know the answers. History presents far too many variables to derive meaning by isolating just one.

Still, counterfactual thinking does have utility if not carried too far. The goal of constructing counterfactuals is not to come to an answer about whether the Vietnam War would have happened decades later if Franz Ferdinand had stayed in City Hall in 1914, but to engage with the driving forces of history. Which are the most important? Which could we remove from the story without materially changing the ending? If Churchill or Hitler had indeed died of influenza in 1919, would the Second World War have happened in more or less the same way? If your answer is no, then you are at least implicitly arguing for the primacy of human decisions in history. If your answer is yes, then you are arguing that larger forces of history triumph over even the most influential individuals.

⁴³ John Fairbank, *The United States and China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 9.

There may be no clear answers to these questions, but you should think about how you instinctively reacted to them. If you believe in the central importance of individuals in history, then you probably tend to think that a new generation of leaders in Russia, China, or Iran could help pave the way for improved relationships with the United States. If, however, you think that economic, geopolitical, cultural, and historical contexts shape and constrain leaders no matter who they are, then the solutions you may favor to strategic problems will go far beyond dealing with leaders alone. George Kennan sat firmly in the latter camp, arguing that Peter the Great, Nicholas II, Lenin, and Stalin all shared a basic outlook on the outside world because they were all shaped by the same Russian geography, mentality, and, most importantly, a shared vision of history.

We can use counterfactual analysis like athletes use game film, to spot good and bad decisions, many of whose impacts are only fully visible after the game is over. Players study game film to analyze their own and their opponents' performance in order to identify and learn from the decisions that had the most impact on the outcome. Which decisions and actions set teams onto disadvantageous courses that they later had difficulty correcting? Which moves forced changes in an opponent's behavior to one team's advantage or disadvantage? Knowing how the game unfolded, which decisions might the teams have made differently?

We could take this idea a step further into the study of counterfactuals in history. Unlike sports, however, historical case studies do not have bounded sets of rules and limited combinations of moves, thus making history infinitely more complicated. Take, for example, the First Persian Gulf War. What if China or Russia had chosen to block American efforts to build a coalition, as they likely would have done, in a different historical context, just a few years earlier? What if Michael Dukakis or Bob Dole had been president instead of George H. W.

Bush?⁴⁴ What if some of America's key allies in the region had refused to support the war?

Complexities notwithstanding, counterfactual analysis assumes that increasing an understanding of the past can result in improvements in forecasts about the future. It also assumes that studying counterfactuals can build skills that strategists can refine over time, and that an intellectually rigorous examination of plausible alternative decisions can help us better understand the drivers of change and the role of contingency. To do that, we need a better understanding of history and practice in exercising historical mindedness.

Using Historical Analogies and the Godwin Rule

Psychologist Daniel Kahneman popularized the idea that human beings have two systems for thinking. System One is our fast, instinctive response, like when we hear a loud, angry growling noise in the woods. We do not stop to do a detailed comparison of the growl to other growls we have heard or try to work out a typology of growls. We get out of the area as quickly and safely as we can. System One thinking is responsive and instinctual. It might save your life. But many critical decisions, and all decisions at the strategic level, require his more deliberative System Two thinking, where we use our powers of analysis to go beyond our System One response. Kahneman called this kind of thinking slow thinking because it engages analytic reasoning to control for the emotion and cognitive biases in our fast thinking.⁴⁵

Strategists use historical analogies, in a System One fashion, to help us quickly assign meaning to unfamiliar issues. If A looks like B, then maybe the ways we dealt with B decades ago can inform our response to A. Was Saddam Hussein like Hitler, shrewdly taking advantage

⁴⁴ Unlikely as that premise seems today with our hindsight bias, Dole won the first two Republican primaries and Dukakis had a lead in the polls until September.

⁴⁵ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2013).

of the timidity of his adversaries to extend his hold on his region? Or was he an Arab strongman in the mold of the Egyptian ruler Gamal Abdel Nasser, standing up to the west to increase his appeal across the Sunni world? Or was he like a grandstanding Mussolini, bombastic on the outside, but sitting atop a fragile state and anxious to distract his people from his regime's failures? Observers used all of those analogies and many more in 1990. The analogy in a person's mind inevitably conditioned their view of the strategy best able to achieve a desired outcome.

Analogies help us make sense of a complex world, especially when we have incomplete information about the situation at hand, but they carry important repercussions for strategy. The American decision to send ground troops to Vietnam in 1965 provides us with an excellent case study of the use of historical analogies in action. President Johnson's advisers offered three general analogies. The most dominant one saw Vietnam as a frightening replay of the appeasement spirit of the Munich Conference: just as the Allies had failed to stand up to Nazism in 1938 when they had the chance, so too would a failure to stand up to communism in 1965 only encourage further aggression from Moscow and Beijing. A second analogy looked to the war in Korea, reasoning that the United States could expect to fight another long, difficult Asian war in which victory as traditionally defined would prove elusive. A third, more pessimistic, approach argued that like France from 1947 to 1954, the United States would find itself fighting a frustrating and unsuccessful limited war far from home.

When Yuen Foong Khong analyzed the data, he found that to understand what a given strategist advised Johnson to do in 1965, we only need to know the analogy he most often used.⁴⁶ In other words, his view of history was the most important factor in shaping his advice for

⁴⁶ Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

present and future policy. If an adviser thought that Vietnam in 1965 most closely resembled Munich in 1938, then he likely advocated a heavy military response. If Korea, then he likely suggested setting limited goals.

H. R. McMaster argued that the Joint Chiefs especially relied on the Munich analogy because it played to their desires to seek a military solution. For Gen. Curtis LeMay and the Chiefs, McMaster argued, Munich meant that “the United States had to demonstrate an unyielding determination to protect non-communist governments from communist aggression” even in a place as far removed from America’s core interests as Vietnam.⁴⁷ Only through a major military commitment, they warned Johnson, could the United States avoid making the situation worse, as Britain and France had unwisely done in 1938. Concepts like the “domino theory” reinforced the power of the analogy to Europe in the 1930s and made a major military response more likely.

Nazi analogies remain disproportionately common because they carry with them so much emotion. They appeal to our System One thinking like an ominous growling noise in the woods. If Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait makes us think of Hitler invading Poland, then we must stop him at almost any cost. Advisers who saw Vietnam in 1965 not as a nationalist uprising with popular support against a brutal post-colonial regime but an act of international aggression backed by the Soviet Union and Communist China argued that the United States had to act and act fast to keep the dominos from falling. “I feel there is a greater threat to start World War III if we don’t go in,” warned the American ambassador to Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. “Can’t you see the similarity to our own indolence at Munich?”⁴⁸ In this case, the Second World War

⁴⁷ H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997), 146.

⁴⁸ Notes of Meeting, July 21, 1965, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume III, Vietnam, June–December 1965, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v03/d71>. Lodge’s use of “our” is

analogies blinded Americans to other possible understandings of the problem. Both Fritz Stern and Christopher Layne argued that the United States' heavy use of the Munich analogy during the Cold War made wars of choice more likely. Analogies thus have serious consequences.

The issue of analogic thinking goes beyond problems of national security. If an opposing political party's new education bill feels like an overreach of government power, then expect someone to compare it to what the Nazis did, even (maybe especially) if that person knows nothing about Nazism. American attorney Michael Godwin invented a rule now known as Godwin's Law. It predicts, sometimes with mathematical precision, that in any contentious political discussion someone will compare someone else's viewpoint to the Nazis. It also posits that the first person to make the Nazi analogy loses the argument, a rule that I vigorously enforce in seminar. It can be cathartic to compare one's opponents to Nazis, but it rarely makes for clear strategic thinking.⁴⁹

Historical analogies, focusing on both similarities and differences, have utility when they make the unfamiliar familiar, but we must engage our System Two thinking. First, ask why your System One thinking made the analogy that it did. Did you make too strong an analogy about a given policy because you dislike the person who proposed it? Did you overdraw an analogy in your mind because you needed an emotional response to overcome your lack of real understanding of the issues involved? As always, we must ensure that we do not allow our natural cognitive biases to distort our responses, especially if our analogies weigh heavily on our strategic thinking.

intriguing. As he surely knew, the United States was not represented at Munich. Who did he then mean by "our"? See Layne, "Why the Gulf War Was Not in the National Interest," *The Atlantic*, Vol. 268 (July 1991): 54–81.

⁴⁹ Dan Amira, "Mike Godwin on Godwin's Law, Whether Nazi Comparisons Have Gotten Worse, and Being Compared to Hitler by His Daughter," March 8, 2013, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2013/03/godwins-law-mike-godwin-hitler-nazi-comparisons.html>

Richard Neustadt and Ernest May created a useful framework for thinking about historical analogies. They recommend organizing analogies in two stages. In the first stage, identify the Knowns, Unknowns, and Presumptions of the issue at hand. This simple exercise produces the raw material needed to make good comparisons and intellectually rigorous analogies. Second, identify the System One analogies that came to mind, then carefully test them to find their strengths and weaknesses, always keeping in mind that no two historical scenarios will ever be exactly alike.

In 1950, the North Korean invasion of South Korea called to President Truman's mind three analogies: the Japanese seizure of Manchuria from China in 1931-1932; the Italian conquest of Ethiopia in 1935; and Germany's 1938 takeover of Austria in violation of the Treaty of Versailles. Notice that all three present apocalyptic scenarios. Manchuria marked a critical step on the way to the Second World War in Asia just as the unification of Germany and Austria did in Europe. Ethiopia is the most interesting of the three. The impotence of the League of Nations in the face of the crisis, following a similar impotence in dealing with Manchuria, all but destroyed the League and the concept of multilateral arbitration that lay behind it. Truman believed deeply in the United Nations and saw it as an enduring legacy to Franklin Roosevelt's vision. He placed so much of his hope for postwar peace on the organization that the fear of Korea destroying the new UN just as the Ethiopia issue had destroyed the League weighed heavily on his mind.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Emperor Selassie's emotional appearance before the League can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyX2kXeFUlo>. The text of his speech is available at <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/selassie.htm>.



Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie Pleading the League of Nations to Stop the Italian Invasion of His Country, June 1936

Neustadt and May saw the same problem that hopefully you have identified as well. All three analogies suggested a large-scale military response to prevent an even bloodier outcome in the future. Truman and his advisors, they argue, failed to slow down and take two critical intellectual steps. First, they did not rigorously test these analogies to see if they really applied to the case at hand. When they listed knowns, unknowns, and presumptions decades later, Neustadt and May found serious flaws in the analogies Truman used. First, the Koreans, unlike Japan and China or Italy and Ethiopia, are not historically separate nations. Second, in the analogies Truman used, the three aggressors possessed technologically sophisticated militaries capable of operating far from home. North Korea in 1950 did not; its relative military weakness combined with the geography of the Korean peninsula meant that the war had little chance of expanding. Third, unlike the Roosevelt Administration's assumptions about China and Europe in the 1930s, the Truman Administration had recently excluded Korea from its self-defined defensive perimeter.⁵¹ Did those differences undermine the utility of the three analogies Truman used? We will never know because no one slowed down their thinking long enough to test them.

⁵¹ See Gaddis, *George Kennan*, 396.

Truman might also have kept his analogies but drawn a different implication from them. In all three cases he mentioned (Manchuria, Ethiopia, and Austria) the American people saw no direct threat to themselves and, despite the injustices caused to people in the region, American voters made no demands on their leaders to become directly involved. Drawing the analogies that Truman and his team did, however, made a major military response more likely. His administration therefore responded not just by sending troops to Korea, but also by implementing the militarization of American foreign policy called for in NSC-68 and by sending more troops to Europe than he did to Asia.

We will never know if a closer examination of the analogies and their meanings could have produced a better outcome. Yet Neustadt and May's central point, namely that unexamined analogies carry with them significant risks for strategists, holds an important lesson. They argue that a slower, more deliberative process of using historical analogies would have helped the Truman administration to craft a wider set of options for responding to the North Korean invasion of South Korea. Deeper reflection might, they contend, have led to the more attainable strategic aim of restoring South Korean sovereignty. Articulating this strategy early on and sticking to it later might have removed the need for the subsequent invasion of North Korea, the ensuing Chinese intervention, and the stalemate that continues to this day.⁵² The analogies Truman and his advisors drew, however, made such outcomes less likely and encouraged them to think in terms of a big war with existential stakes. We are still feeling the effects of those historical analogies more than seventy years later.

More recently, policymakers and scholars have searched for analogies to frame the enormous problems presented by great power competition with China. Most argue that however

⁵² Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986), chapter three.

much the Cold War seems similar on the surface, too many differences exist for the analogy to give us the guidance we need. Unlike the United States and the Soviet Union, the United States and China have interdependent economies. The two sides, moreover, do not lead competing collective security networks designed to deter and fight one another, nor does containment as practiced in the Cold War seem feasible in our interconnected age. Therefore, scholars argue, the Cold War model and Kennan's containment strategy can provide us with insights, but they ultimately fall short as analogies for the challenge that China poses.

A recent analogy popular in policy circles takes us much farther back in time to Thucydides. Harvard political scientist Graham Allison's provocatively titled *Destined for War* argues that the Peloponnesian War presents the right analogy for the United States and China in the twenty-first century. Just as the growing power of Athens evoked fear in Sparta, he argues, so, too, does China's growth evoke fear in the United States. Allison further compares the United States to Britain, which twice failed to manage the growth of Germany without violence. The book, with its eye-catching title, has become one of the most-influential works on the US-China relationship.⁵³

Allison's book addresses power transition theory, which posits that large shifts in global hegemony produce wars. Kori Schake's study of power transition leads her to the conclusion that this process has happened peacefully only one time, when the United States replaced Britain as a global hegemon in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁴ If you accept her argument and Allison's analogy, then the prospect of war between the United States and China becomes more likely or

⁵³ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017).

⁵⁴ Kori Schake, *Safe Passage: The Transition from British to American Hegemony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017).

even seemingly a “law” of history. But is it the right analogy? Obviously, the United States and China are not Athens and Sparta; nor are they Britain and Germany in the period 1900-1939.

Moreover, when studied carefully the analogy carries multiple meanings. One could argue that just as Britain and Germany went to war in 1914 over a third-party state like Belgium, so too could the United States and China go to war over an incident involving Taiwan, South Korea, or Japan. Thucydides wrote about this old problem: the spark that caused the war between Athens and Sparta came from a dispute between their allies Corcyra and Corinth. One could therefore argue that Allison had the right analogy but for the wrong reasons. Maybe in this case, the proper warning from history is not the risks of power transition but the possibility that great powers can get drawn into wars over matters existential to their allies but not to themselves.

Analogies therefore have both power and utility in organizing thinking, but we must examine them slowly and carefully to ensure that we understand both similarities and differences. We also need to make absolutely sure that we do not reach for analogies that best suit our preconceptions or supports our preferred policy outcome rather than ones that provides the most insight. Supporters of Allison’s argument face this criticism, as some of them use his book to justify a bigger defense budget or a more confrontational policy toward China. After all, they argue, if the “lesson of history” is that we are “destined for war,” then wouldn’t a larger and more powerful American presence in the Pacific be the best way to deter and potentially fight this war? This use of historical analogies can become self-fulfilling and therefore quite dangerous.

Will using the right historical analogies guarantee you a successful outcome? Of course not. But drawing a flawed analogy can muddy your thinking and lead you to poor strategies. You should also periodically reexamine your analogies as you learn more about the problem at hand.

More information should make you see the similarities and differences in your analogies more clearly. We all draw analogies. They can serve as an excellent way to begin to shape our thinking about a problem. But always exercise caution and intellectual rigor. The more we rely on assumptions based in historical analogies, moreover, the more closely we need to examine the strengths and limitations of those analogies, especially if you or someone around you violates Godwin's Law.

History as Power

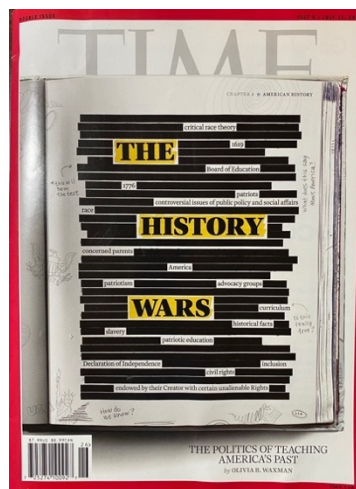
As Margaret Macmillan so eloquently said, "history is about remembering the past, but it is also about choosing to forget."⁵⁵ Just as importantly, it speaks to who has the power to decide what we remember and what we forget. Sometimes this decision is conscious. As we have seen, choices made by German leaders turned parts of Berlin into a living museum, reflecting the messages they want visitors to take away with them. Similarly, the decision to create national military parks out of Civil War battlefields gives millions of Americans an exposure to history they might not otherwise have had. Even the decision to maintain some documents in accessible archives and discard or classify others affects how we can learn about the past. As Macmillan reminds us, the act of forgetting can be just as important as the act of remembering. Omitting or consciously excluding some voices from history misleads future generations and renders our understanding incomplete or misleading.

Control over the uses of history in museums, schools, and public memory has always been a political battle because of the ways that understandings of the past shape power in the present. Near the end of its time in office, the Trump administration introduced the "1776

⁵⁵ Macmillan, *Dangerous Games*, 113.

Project” as a direct rebuttal to the “1619 Project,” produced by the New York *Times*, that explored the myriad legacies of slavery. Each tried to use a version of the past to project a message about collective identity and political power in the present. The debate about them was much more about culture and politics than it was about history in any meaningful sense. Notably, the Biden administration, which does not share its predecessor’s understanding of history, took down the 1776 Project’s website within minutes of the inauguration.

History is complex and emotional specifically because it connects to identity. We feel a link to the past because we know on an intuitive level that the past has an intimate connection to our collective identity in the present. A decision in 2006 by the French and German governments to produce one history textbook for pupils in both countries provides a remarkable example of this process of reconceptualizing history to serve a purpose in the present. A century earlier those students’ ancestors read history books that described the essential differences between French and German history, and therefore, identity.



Time Magazine cover, July 12, 2021

By contrast, the 2006 project aimed to give students a history that emphasized their similarities. Symbolically, the two education ministers launched it at a museum on the Somme battlefield from the First World War that showcases the everyday lives of soldiers from all combatant nations.⁵⁶ “The great lesson of this story is that nothing is set in stone,” said the French minister. “Antagonisms that we believed were etched in marble are not eternal.” The project received decidedly mixed reviews from specialists because it treated many difficult topics only superficially, but it earned support from the highest levels of both governments because it served the short-term political goal of enlisting history in the projects of European integration and Franco-German friendship.⁵⁷

Sometimes the hardest history to understand is one’s own. We are simply flooded with information about our own history in school, on television, in our politics, and in our everyday lives. Our confirmation bias filters out what we do not want to hear and lets in what provides comfort. This normal and human way of processing information has important effects on how we vote, how we react to current events, and how we ultimately identify ourselves. For strategists, however, leaving questions of history and identity unexamined can be quite a dangerous game indeed.

Learning another country’s history, of course, presents its own challenges. Whereas we learn our own history from the inside, we must learn someone else’s from the outside. Languages as well as different cultural and political understandings often complicate this process. The Cold War began in part because both sides had difficulty empathizing with the other’s history. American analyses consistently downplayed the horrors of the Soviet experience of the Second World War (and the First World War and Napoleon, for that matter) when looking for

⁵⁶ <https://www.historial.fr/en/>

⁵⁷ “Franco-German Textbook Launched,” May 5, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4972922.stm>

explanations of Soviet behavior. It took Kennan's remarkable ability to look much deeper into Russian history to formulate different questions and different answers. The Soviets, for their part, tended to reduce American history to the simplicity of Marxist understandings of capitalism. The same problem emerges today with China. Few people on either side fully understand, or even try to understand, the other's past and how it affects behavior in the present.

Historical Anchoring

Ten days after the attacks of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush delivered a stirring speech to a combined session of Congress. He said, "We have seen their kind before. They're the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the twentieth century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions, by abandoning every value except the will to power, they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism, and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way to where it ends in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies."⁵⁸ Bush's words sent a clear signal to the world that the United States would fight the new terrorist menace no matter what the cost.

Still, I hope you have already noticed the application of Godwin's Law. Instead of describing the evils of Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda on their own horrific terms, President Bush invoked Nazism. Some pundits soon began to call al Qaeda's ideology "Islamofascism," a concept that made little sense when examined even cursorily, but which linked al Qaeda to Nazism. Given those associations, the idea of fighting a global war of justice and self-defense like the Second World War came naturally. Tellingly, Bush's speechwriters tried to tie

⁵⁸ "Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation," *Washington Post*, September 20, 2001, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html

America's disparate foes together through another rhetorical device based in Second World War imagery, the "Axis of Evil."

Those using the Islamo-fascism and "Axis of Evil" concepts employed a technique known as historical anchoring. We all use a version of it, whether intentionally or not.⁵⁹ The president may have anchored where he did because he wanted to rally his audience with the Second World War analogy or because the analogy came naturally to him. As evidence of the latter, he wrote "The Pearl Harbor of the 21st century took place today" in his diary that night.⁶⁰ His heavy reliance on Second World War and fascist imagery when discussing al Qaeda gives us an insight into his mindset in those first few days following the attacks. It undoubtedly made a global war on terrorism more likely.

By contrast, Osama bin Laden's historical anchoring rooted back much further in history. In his 1996 fatwah against the United States and in a foundational 1998 article in an Arabic-language newspaper in London, he anchored his rhetoric in the seventh century. In his construct of history, the United States represented the latest in a long line of acquisitive crusaders from the west trying to steal land from its proper owners.⁶¹ He used an anchoring in time much further back than any American leader would have done. ISIS's quest for a new caliphate shares much of bin Laden's historical anchoring; their fighters drove bulldozers over the Sykes-Picot line, drawn by the British and French in 1916 to delineate the border between Syria and Iraq. In doing so they saw themselves as physically destroying an anchor point invented by the west to divide the Middle East.

⁵⁹ Churchill's Iron Curtain speech noted above is filled with historical references that date back to the Magna Carta.

⁶⁰ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/bush-on-9-11-moment-to-moment/>.

⁶¹ Bernard Lewis, "License to Kill: Usama bin Laden's Use of Jihad," November/December 1998, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/1998-11-01/license-kill-usama-bin-ladins-declaration-jihad>

To take another example, read the speech that Vladimir Putin gave after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Putin frankly stated at the beginning “Let us not forget history’s lessons.” He then discussed the ways that the west has, according to his understanding of those lessons, taken advantage of Russia through the centuries. He then exclaimed, “I want to point out that we did not start this,” a clear indication that his history is one of Russia as victim. The speech included anchor points rooted mainly in the Cold War and post-Cold War order that allegedly expose the anti-Russian agendas of western leaders.⁶² These anchors underscore Putin’s view that the collapse of the Soviet Union was, in his words, “the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century,” a bold historical statement indeed given the many disasters of the period.⁶³ Putin’s historical imagination often stretches back much further; he frequently refers to Peter the Great’s 1709 victory over Sweden at Poltava in Ukraine as a defining moment in Russian history that continues to justify Russian presence there. Given that Putin likes to receive foreign delegations in a room surrounded by the busts of Russia’s four great empire builders, we should take seriously his weaponization of a distorted view of the past and his sense of himself as following in the footsteps of the tsars to build Russian power.⁶⁴ His use of history is central to his information warfare and propaganda campaigns, which in turn build support for his aggression among the Russian people.

Learning to recognize anchor points thus provides a critical insight into the motivations, analogies, and understandings of history that people use. Former Secretary of Defense Ashton

⁶² “Putin’s speech at the Valdai Club 2014 - full transcript,” October 24, 2014,

https://d11.cuni.cz/pluginfile.php/337958/mod_resource/content/1/Putins%20Valdai%20speech%202014.pdf

⁶³ “Putin Laments Soviet Breakup As Demise Of ‘Historical Russia,’ Amid Ukraine Fears,” December 13, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-historical-russia-soviet-breakup-ukraine/31606186.html>

⁶⁴ They are Peter the Great (1672-1725) who added Kiev to the Russian Empire; Catherine the Great (1729-1796) who added much of Poland and Lithuania as well as Crimea; Alexander I (1777-1825) whose armies chased Napoleon all the way back to France; and Nicholas I (1796-1855) under whom the Russian empire reached its territorial zenith.

Carter had such an approach in mind when he said, “the language people speak in the corridors of power is not economics or politics. It is history.”⁶⁵ Many Chinese leaders, for example, speak not of a “rise of China” as we usually do, but of a “return” of China.⁶⁶ The difference is much more than rhetorical; it reveals an understanding of Chinese historical anchoring. The “rise” of China focuses on the meteoric changes in that country since the 1970s, lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, making China a country to take seriously on the world stage, and upending the geopolitical balance of power. It makes the changes that China has experienced seem like a radical and revolutionary break with the past.

A “return” of China, on the other hand, anchors back centuries earlier, to a period before what the Chinese call the “century of humiliation” that began with the Opium War of 1839-1842. That avaricious war, which the British began in order to force Indian opium into the Chinese market, set in motion a steady collapse of Chinese power. Revolution, civil war, and famine resulted from that period of catastrophe. When seen as a part of a much grander sweep of history going back thousands of years, the century of humiliation appears as a relatively brief aberration in a long history of Chinese dominance in Asia and beyond. The events of the last few decades, many Chinese scholars and politicians believe, thus serve merely to restore the natural, pre-Opium War global order with China returning to its proper place at the center.⁶⁷

As this example shows, sometimes history demands a recognition that others have had an experience quite different from your own. A trip I took to Israel and the Palestinian territories in the West Bank brought this home to me quite clearly. When Israeli speakers talked about history,

⁶⁵ <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-03-22/niall-ferguson-putin-and-biden-misunderstand-history-in-ukraine-war>.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Michael Schuman, “China’s Inexorable Rise to Superpower Is History Repeating Itself,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-27/china-rise-to-global-superpower-is-a-restoration-not-an-ascent>

⁶⁷ See Rana Mitter, *China’s Good War: How World War II is Shaping a New Nationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020).

they frequently anchored in 1948. To them the year represented a moment when the Jewish people, devastated by genocide then ignored by the international community, struggled to carve out a new homeland in the face of invasion by several Arab states. For their part, the Palestinians spoke of 1948 as the *nakba* (catastrophe) in which they lost their land to newcomers sent to the Middle East by western nations unwilling to open their own borders to impoverished Jewish concentration camp survivors.

Nineteen forty-eight therefore represents one historical anchor with two diametrically opposed meanings that imply different solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian problem. Neither historical narrative is any more “right” or “wrong” than the other. They nevertheless exclude one another and complicate the process of each side empathizing with the other side’s plight.

Without an understanding of the other side’s history, strategic empathy becomes impossible to achieve.

In a conflict as complex as the Israeli-Palestinian one, multiple narratives and anchor points will emerge. Israelis note the Balfour Declaration of 1917 in which the British Empire pledged to make Palestine a homeland for the Jewish people. Palestinians counter that Balfour did not use the word “state” and that the declaration insisted that Jewish settlers respect the rights of the Arabs already living in Palestine. Moreover, the Hussein-McMahon Agreements, negotiated at the same time, promised the formation of an expansive Arab confederation that would include Palestine. Both sides argue over the meaning of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 in which the British and French carved up the Middle East for themselves while making Palestine an ill-defined “international zone.” Other historical anchors go back centuries or even millennia. As one veteran peace negotiator told me in Jerusalem, the uses of history on both sides

remind him of when his young sons were fighting and one of them said “It all started when he hit me back!”

These different historical narratives matter because they speak to both the past and the present. Historian John Horne has studied the problem of how formerly endemic conflicts end. How, for example, did France and Germany come to remove the border between them and even share a currency after so many years of hatred, occupation, and conflict? Horne posits that three preconditions must develop. First, the two sides must stop dehumanizing one another. Second, although they may still harbor ill feelings or have grievances against one another, they must stop being willing to kill and die over those grievances. Horne’s third point posits that the two sides must eventually develop a shared historical narrative of their conflict. France and Germany promoted such an understanding by placing the blame for the world wars on a fascism that no longer exists and a hyper nationalism that the multilateralism of the European Union now theoretically contains. This shared history, we should note, need not be accurate or balanced. A “mistaken view of the past” of the kind that Ernest Renan described might serve a vital political and social role if it helps people move forward. As a result of this process, understandings of history no longer fuel conflict in the states of the European Union, even if (or perhaps especially because) the two sides don’t always get their history right.⁶⁸ The shared Franco-German history textbook represents an example of this process at work.

These cases demonstrate that people often prefer views of the past that conform to their preexisting beliefs rather than face truths that conflict with those beliefs. Horne’s argument

⁶⁸ Historian Timothy Snyder criticizes what he derisively calls “the fable of the wise nation,” the idea that Europeans “learned” the right lessons from the Second World War. Rather, he argues, the states of Europe have falsely convinced themselves of their ability to learn from the past in order to avoid confronting the darker meanings and implications of their internecine history. See Timothy Snyder, “Europe’s Dangerous Creation Myth,” May 1, 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-creation-project-myth-history-nation-state/>

suggests that as long as the historical anchor points used by Israelis and Palestinians carry such mutually exclusive meanings, the two sides will not find terms to resolve their conflict. It further suggests that an understanding of history plays a critical, if usually overlooked, role in peacemaking. Land swaps, armistices, and pledges of cooperation are thus necessary but insufficient if the two sides lack historical empathy or a common historical narrative.⁶⁹

The exclusionary, even vengeful, uses of history in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict make that issue even more difficult to solve. Treaties and the presence of peacekeepers alone cannot craft a new narrative, although they might afford future generations the stability and the desire to understand the conflict differently than their parents and grandparents did. Horne argues that this process transpired in Northern Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 created an environment in which it became possible for young people to imagine a different history, and therefore to foresee a different future, from the generations that came before.

Conclusion: Intellectual Overmatch and Historical Mindedness in Action

In April 2001, Lin Wells, a well-respected senior Defense Department official who had served presidents of both parties, set down some ideas for the upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review. The document he wrote gives us a wonderful model of how to think historically. It also provides a masterclass in how to write precisely, concisely, and powerfully:


⁶⁹ John Horne, “Demobilizing the Mind: France and the Legacy of the Great War, 1919-1939,” George Rudé Society, 2019, <https://h-france.net/rude/vol2/horne2/>.

Lin Wells

CF: Andy

Thoughts for the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review

- If you had been a security policy-maker in the world's greatest power in 1900, you would have been a Brit, looking warily at your age-old enemy, France.
- By 1910, you would be allied with France and your enemy would be Germany.
- By 1920, World War I would have been fought and won, and you'd be engaged in a naval arms race with your erstwhile allies, the U.S. and Japan.
- By 1930, naval arms limitation treaties were in effect, the Great Depression was underway, and the defense planning standard said "no war for ten years."
- Nine years later World War II had begun.
- By 1950, Britain no longer was the world's greatest power, the Atomic Age had dawned, and a "police action" was underway in Korea.
- Ten years later the political focus was on the "missile gap," the strategic paradigm was shifting from massive retaliation to flexible response, and few people had heard of Vietnam.
- By 1970, the peak of our involvement in Vietnam had come and gone, we were beginning détente with the Soviets, and we were anointing the Shah as our protégé in the Gulf region.
- By 1980, the Soviets were in Afghanistan, Iran was in the throes of revolution, there was talk of our "hollow forces" and a "window of vulnerability," and the U.S. was the greatest creditor nation the world had ever seen.
- By 1990, the Soviet Union was within a year of dissolution, American forces in the Desert were on the verge of showing they were anything but hollow, the U.S. had become the greatest debtor nation the world had ever known, and almost no one had heard of the internet.
- Ten years later, Warsaw was the capital of a NATO nation, asymmetric threats transcended geography, and the parallel revolutions of information, biotechnology, robotics, nanotechnology, and high density energy sources foreshadowed changes almost beyond forecasting.
- All of which is to say that I'm not sure what 2010 will look like, but I'm sure that it will be very little like we expect, so we should plan accordingly.


Certified As Unclassified
January 9, 2009
IAW EO 12958, as amended
Chief, RDD, ESD, WHS

Lin Wells

Fascinated by the historical mindedness in this memo, I sought Wells out through a mutual acquaintance.⁷⁰ He told me that he came to realize that his background in engineering was necessary but not sufficient for him to advise the Secretary of Defense on major strategic

⁷⁰ <https://library.rumsfeld.com/doclib/sp/2382/2001-04-12%20To%20George%20W%20Bush%20et%20al%20re%20Predicting%20the%20Future.pdf>

issues. He earned a Ph.D. in International Relations with a heavy dose of history included in his program of study. He told me that this background and his travels around the world led him to the realization that major shifts in the global order were inevitable and normal; talk of perpetual peace and the “end of history” after the fall of the Soviet Union struck him as a highly flawed way of thinking about the past and its role in shaping the present.⁷¹ If planners could not predict specific changes, he believed, they should at least develop a mindset that took into account the reality of constant and dynamic change, both visible and invisible.

I particularly asked him about that last line, “I am sure that [the future] will look very little like we expect, so we should plan accordingly.” Did he mean that facetiously? How could strategists plan for something that will look very little like we expect? No, he assured me, he meant the line seriously. In his view of history, change (and unexpected change) remains a constant. Therefore, we set ourselves up for disaster when we make the mistake of assuming, as William Pitt did, that the future will look like more of the present. Nor should we put too many of our defense resources into solving any single problem because history will continue to throw surprises at us. Even if we cannot know the contours of those surprises in advance, we need sufficient intellectual flexibility and historical imagination to respond to them. We also need to avoid the comforting, but false, assumption that history leads us inevitably to a desired end state, like the triumph of democracy that the “end of history” scholars and pundits then promoted.

Just a few months after he wrote this memo, the wisdom of his approach became obvious. Although Wells did not, of course, predict the events of September 11, 2001, his mindset warned against believing that the future operating environment would look roughly the same as that of the recent past or that the fall of the Berlin Wall presaged a mostly peaceful future. Read from

⁷¹ For background, see Louis Menand, “Francis Fukuyama Postpones the End of History,” September 3, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/09/03/francis-fukuyama-postpones-the-end-of-history>

the perspective of 2022, Wells' memo also serves as a warning against drawing a facile conclusion that the terrible terrorist attacks of that day would forever shift American efforts toward fighting terrorists and the states that harbor them. I doubt that Wells would be surprised to see the United States shift back to great power competition against two states that as recently as the 1990s seemed positioned to become, if not exactly American allies, certainly not active adversaries. Changes aren't permanent, sang the rock band Rush, but change is.

Historians endeavor to identify those changes. In an ideal world, strategists would have unlimited resources to tackle a variety of challenges across a broad spectrum. In the real world, resource competition presents tremendous challenges. You as strategists will therefore have to make some educated guesses. Your choices will derive in large part from the assumptions that you have in your mind about how we got to this point in history. To allow these assumptions to remain unchallenged and unquestioned builds unacceptable risk into your strategic thinking. How you view the past conditions how you see the present and the future. The deeper and wider an understanding you develop of the past, the better place you create to improve your odds of making good choices about the future.

History is an excellent laboratory for strategists. It offers a way to explore how leaders developed good and bad strategies, how they communicated their ideas, how they built teams, and how they applied their ideas as operating environments changed. One of the most influential strategists in recent decades, the late Colin Gray, made this argument, as do more recent strategists like H. R. McMaster, Eliot Cohen, and Hew Strachan. They contend that while we cannot rerun history or go back in time to change a decision and see what happens, the past contains infinite raw material for gaining a much deeper understanding of the inner workings of strategy. Studying history provides the best way to sharpen your own judgments about strategic

problems you will face in the future. Gray argued that the past remains the only source of data for strategists because, as Wells also argued, the present and the future are ultimately unknowable.

Margaret Macmillan reminds us that, if done poorly, this process will produce simple results of little use to a serious strategist. But if done well, looking to the past can illuminate. In addition to seminar discussions, Army War College historians will explore at least two methods with you during this academic year. First, we will use case studies in history to examine how the process of shaping strategy unfolded. What major changes were occurring at the time? How aware were strategists of these changes? What ultimately drove those changes? What contextual factors influenced the way strategists perceived their environment? How important were individual leaders in shaping outcomes? What contingent or even accidental factors shaped events? What aspects of the case are so fundamental that Clausewitz or even Thucydides would recognize them? When done thoughtfully and placed in the proper historical context, these questions allow us to use history like a laboratory, changing data and testing hypotheses. The point, of course, is not to second-guess people in the past (we can never really walk in their shoes or feel the weight of the responsibility that they felt), but to better understand more clearly the factors that affected their decision making.

We can pursue a variant of the case study method on a battlefield as part of a second method, staff rides. One goal of a staff ride is to see the terrain and understand the Clausewitzian “character” of a given battle. We can ask some of the same questions that we ask in case studies. What did a given leader know about the battle, and the wider war, being fought around them? What, crucially, did they not know? What decisions did they make and why? The more research you do before a staff ride, the better the exercise. We can also use staff rides to ask questions

about the nature of war. A staff ride using this methodology explores the immutable principles of war. How did leaders envision the battle helping to advance their strategic goals? How did they communicate those goals? How well resourced were they for what they hoped to achieve? What second- and third-order effects did the battle have in the wider war and beyond? What role did chance and friction play? How well did leaders communicate their vision to their subordinates? How did they react when their initial plans unraveled? These questions apply to any battle and any war over space and time.

We do not, therefore, study the ground at Gettysburg or Normandy to learn how to refight Pickett's Charge or find the best way to seize a beachhead on the English Channel coastline. As Clausewitz reminds us, the character of war changes too much to make such an exercise useful to modern joint warfighting. We conduct staff rides and examine case studies because they provide the best, maybe the only, way to tinker with the dials of strategy. We need to accept the limits of such exercises, but if conducted properly they help strategists think through some of the same problems that they, too, may face. History can inspire people to reach back to the past, although, as Macmillan reminds us, it is dangerous to look only for historical examples that justify decisions we already want to make.

History can also provide inspiration, clarification, and guidance. Abraham Lincoln thought deeply about Pericles's funeral oration when he sat down to write his remarks on a similar occasion, the dedication of the Gettysburg Cemetery in November 1863. A century later, the equally well-read John Kennedy drew inspiration from Barbara Tuchman's history of the First World War, *The Guns of August*. Kennedy took away the lesson that he and his advisors needed to move deliberately and not make potentially catastrophic decisions in the heat of the moment. He did not, he told his team, want someone to one day write a book called *The Missiles*

of October. His reading of that one book, and his understanding of 1914 that flowed in part from it, might have had the most important of consequences.⁷²

A final example takes us to 1990 when British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher assembled a group of leading historians to help her think through her deep fears about the looming reunification of Germany. “History was a guide,” read the official minutes of that meeting, “but one could not just extrapolate.... It was important to get the balance right between the lessons of the past and the opportunities of the future.” Exactly so. The report noted that Germany “had allowed itself to be brainwashed into barbarism” in the past, but that democracy and, crucially, “the writing of [new] history” had produced “a sea change.” Postwar West Germany had abandoned its “ambitions for physical conquest,” its militarism, and its “sense of historic mission.” In other words, the historians argued that in this case change and context superseded as historical drivers the destructive continuities of German history of which the prime minister and her advisers were all too well aware.

The historians concluded by looking backward as George Kennan had, noting that “Anglo-German antagonism had been injurious to Europe as a whole and must not be allowed to revive once more.” They argued that Britain and Europe could safely embrace a unified Germany if it remained within an American-led NATO, followed the West German democratic model, acted multilaterally on the world stage, and disavowed itself of any kind of territorial expansion. This reading of history gave cause for optimism for the present, the near future, and “what might lie further down the road than we can yet see.”⁷³ Thatcher worried about a reunified

⁷² Kennedy was a serious student of history. His senior thesis at Harvard, *Why England Slept*, became a surprise best seller after the fall of France in 1940.

⁷³ Charles D. Powell, “Seminar on Germany: Summary Record,” March 25, 1990, available at <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/212302>.

Germany for the rest of her time in office, but the historians did their job by using the past to give her advice that saw accurately into the future without making specific predictions.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from this discussion is that all strategists, whether they realize it or not, use a version of history to inform their analyses, identify their analogies, and shape their conclusions. You should, therefore, take the time to do so as deliberately and carefully as your time and resources will allow. You can use this academic year to develop your historical mindedness and become that experienced woodsman who sees tigers where others do not. As Michael Howard argued, getting a strategy exactly right is less important (and less likely) than not getting it so wrong that you cannot recover. Separating out the parts of the forest with tigers from those without may be the best method for doing so.⁷⁴

Historical mindedness can also help you to avoid what Hans Morgenthau called “strategic narcissism,” which H. R. McMaster defines as “a preoccupation with self, and an associated neglect of the influence that others have over the future course of events.” McMaster, who himself holds a Ph.D. in History, contends that when we understand another nation’s history (as well as our own), we can see more clearly why and how states act as they do. When we fail to do so, he argues, we develop plans “disconnected from the problems they were ostensibly meant to address.”⁷⁵ An honest and sometimes painful understanding of the histories (both real and constructed) of ourselves, our allies, and our adversaries can help us avoid the mistakes of strategic narcissism and better understand the world as it is. Historical mindedness motivates lifelong learning and provokes questions about the variety of the human experience. The myriad,

⁷⁴ Michael Howard, “Military Science in the Age of Peace,” *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* 119, 2 (March 1974), 7.

⁷⁵ H. R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), 10, 16, and 92. McMaster argues that strategic narcissism’s elements include “wishful thinking, mirror imaging, confirmation bias, and the belief that others will conform to a U.S.-developed ‘script.’”

exciting, and sometimes inspirational echoes of the past have something to tell us today. Studying history reminds us that ours is not the first generation to deal with a complex and rapidly changing world that presents few clear answers. As the old saying goes, if you want a new idea, you should read an old book.

Historical mindedness provides a way to develop intellectual overmatch for yourself, your teams, and your organization. You have earned a chance this year to practice these skills and emerge as a better consumer of history. This academic year in Carlisle is crucial in the development of your education as a senior leader. You will have the opportunity to study at the graduate level from faculty dedicated to your intellectual development. Your nations need leaders who can think historically and analyze problems in their widest contexts. To become historically minded is to understand how we collectively came to this moment in time, recognizing both the lessons of the past and the opportunities of the future.

Finally, historical mindedness is an acknowledgment of your obligation as leaders, strategists, and national security professionals to use an understanding of the past to inform the critical decisions that you will make about the present and the future. We in the present have the invaluable gift of being able to learn from the successes and failures of those who came before us; strategic leaders have an obligation to their countries and to the men and women they lead not to squander this opportunity. Just as you deploy only after making sure that you have sufficient stocks of the materiel you need, develop the habit of ensuring that a sophisticated understanding of history aligns properly with your strategic plan. Remember to question your preconceptions and challenge your historical analogies. Above all, remember the words of the godfather of modern military history, Sir Michael Howard, who wrote that without proper intellectual preparation “the best technology and the best budget in the world will only produce

bigger and better resources for the wrong war.”⁷⁶ Your seminar historians and the faculty at the Army War College wait eagerly to help you to build your intellectual tool kit. Buying an old building presents challenges, but it can also begin a remarkable journey of discovery.

⁷⁶ Howard, “Military Science in an Age of Peace,” 5-6.