

PASSPORT



THE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIANS OF AMERICAN FOREIGN RELATIONS REVIEW



In this Issue

Video Games
and Teaching
History

The End of
Ambition

A Tribute to
Amy Sayward

The Impact of
The Cold War
History Project

...and more!

Passport

THE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIANS OF AMERICAN FOREIGN RELATIONS REVIEW



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Michael P. Brill is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. Between 2024 and 2025, he was a Global Fellow with the History and Public Policy Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. During the 2022-2023 academic year, he was a Cold War Archives Research Fellow with the History and Public Policy Program.

Alex Bryne is a Lecturer in History at De Montfort University. He specializes in the history of United States foreign relations during the early twentieth century.

Steven A. Cook is Eni Enrico Mattei senior fellow for Middle East and Africa studies and director of the International Affairs Fellowship for Tenured International Relations Scholars at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). He is an expert on Arab and Turkish politics as well as U.S.-Middle East policy. Cook is the author of *False Dawn: Protest, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East*; *The Struggle for Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir Square*, which won the 2012 gold medal from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; and *Ruling but Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey*. Cook is also the author of the recently published Oxford University Press book, *The End of Ambition: America's Past, Present, and Future in the Middle East*.

Julia F. Irwin is the T. Harry Williams Professor of History at Louisiana State University, and a specialist in the histories of U.S. foreign assistance and international humanitarianism. She is the author of *Catastrophic Diplomacy: U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance in the American Century* (University of North Carolina Press, 2024) and *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening* (Oxford University Press, 2013). She is a founding co-editor of the book series *InterConnections: The Global 20th Century* (University of North Carolina Press) and a co-editor of the *Journal of Disaster Studies* (University of Pennsylvania Press).

Peter L. Hahn published *Crisis and Crossfire: The United States & the Middle East since 1945* (2nd edition, Potomac Books) and *Libya and the West: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press), both in 2025. Also in Spring 2025, the Ohio State University Board of Trustees named Hahn a Distinguished University Professor—the highest faculty honor at the university. Hahn, who served as SHAFR's Executive Director in 2002-2015 and as President in 2018, retired from Ohio State in Summer 2025, after 34 years of service.

Hope M. Harrison is Professor of History and International Affairs at The George Washington University. Her work focuses on post-World War II Germany and the Soviet Union and particularly on the Berlin Wall. She has published 3 books: *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2003, also published in German as *Ulbrichts Mauer* by Propyläen Verlag, 2011); *After the Berlin Wall: Memory and the Making of the New Germany, 1989 to the Present* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019); and *The Berlin Wall: A World Divided* (Audible/Great Courses, 2021). Since 2020, she has been the Co-chair of the Advisory Council of the Wilson Center's History and Public Policy Program. In 2025, Dr. Harrison was awarded the Cross of the Order of Merit from the Federal Republic of Germany for her work on German history and her contributions to German-US relations.

Mateo Jarquín is Assistant Professor of History and Director of the Program in War, Diplomacy & Society at Chapman University. He is the author of *The Sandinista Revolution: A Global Latin American History* (University of North Carolina Press, 2024).

Steven L.B. Jensen is Senior Researcher at The Danish Institute for Human Rights. He holds a PhD in History from the University of Copenhagen. He is author of *The Making of International Human Rights. The 1960s, Decolonization and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (Cambridge UP 2016) which in 2017 was awarded the prizes both for Best Book on Human Rights and the Chadwick Alger Prize for Best Book on International Organisation from the International Studies Association.

Steven is also the co-editor of *Social Rights and the Politics of Obligation in History* with Charles Walton (Cambridge UP 2022) and *Histories of Global Inequality: New Perspectives with Christian O. Christiansen* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019). Most recently he has a chapter—co-authored with Kathryn Sikkink—in the anthology *Latin American International Law in the 21st Century* (Oxford University Press 2025)

He has been a visiting researcher at Yale Law School, History Faculty, University of Oxford, The Bonavero Institute for Human Rights, University of Oxford, the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights and the Norwegian Nobel Institute in Oslo.

Sandrine Kott is Professor of Modern European History at the University of Geneva and Global Distinguished Professor at New York University.

Her research focuses on the history of Modern European capitalist and socialist societies, as well as international organizations as venues for the circulation of economic and social expertise and knowledge during the Cold War. Her recent books include: *A World more Equal. An Internationalist Perspective on the Cold War* (Columbia University Press, 2004), *Day to Day Communism* (Michigan University Press, 2014); *Sozialstaat und Gesellschaft. Das deutsche Kaiserreich in Europa* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 2014). Ed. with Eva-Maria Muschik and Elisabeth Roehrlich, *International Organizations and the Cold War. Competition, Cooperation and Convergence* (London, Bloomsbury, 2025); ed. with Kiran Klaus Patel, *Nazism across Borders. The Social Policies of the Third Reich and their Global Appeal* (Oxford University Press, 2018); ed. with Michel Christian and Ondrej Matejka, *Planning in Cold War Europe: Competition, cooperation, circulations* (Oldenburg, De Gruyter, 2018).

Mark Kramer is Director of Cold War Studies at Harvard University, a Senior Fellow of Harvard's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, and Director of Harvard's Sakharov Seminars on Human Rights. He is editor of the *Journal of Cold War Studies*, published quarterly by MIT Press, and the editor of Harvard's Cold War Studies Book Series. His latest book is *The Fate of the Soviet Bloc's Military Alliance: Reform, Adaptation, and Collapse of the Warsaw Pact, 1985-1991* (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

Douglas Little is Robert and Virginia Scotland Professor of History Emeritus at Clark University. He is the author of *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945*, 3rd ed. (University of North Carolina Press, 2008), and *Us versus Them: The United States, Radical Islam, and the Rise of the Green Threat*, 2nd ed. (University of North Carolina Press, 2023). His next book, *The Reagan Mystique* (forthcoming, University of North Carolina Press, 2026) challenges the conservative "cargo cult" that has grown up around the "Great Communicator's" foreign and domestic policies.

Kelly M. McFarland is a U.S. diplomatic historian and the director of programs and research at Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy (ISD). At ISD, he oversees the institute's research agenda, manages its library of case studies in diplomacy, hosts its *Diplomatic Immunity* podcast, and teaches courses on history in Georgetown's School of Foreign Service. Prior to Georgetown, he worked for two years in the U.S. Department of State's Office of the Historian, where he compiled a FRUS

volume on the Carter administration's policy in the Arabian Peninsula. He then spent five years in the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research as an intelligence analyst. Just prior to joining Georgetown, he served a one-year assignment in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence as the Presidential Daily Briefing Book briefer for Secretary of State John Kerry and other senior State Department officials.

Aroop Mukharji is Assistant Professor of National Security Affairs at the U.S. Naval War College. He studies diplomatic history, decision-making, and international relations, specializing in the presidencies of William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. The views in his piece are his own and do not represent the position of the U.S. government or U.S. Department of Defense.

Eva-Maria Muschik is a historian and associate professor at the University of Vienna. Her first book, *Building States: The United Nations, Development and Decolonization, 1945-1965*, which focuses on the UN Secretariat, was published by Columbia University Press in 2022. Also in 2022, she convened a *Journal of Global History* special issue on the multiple roles that international organizations have played in processes of decolonization. Together with Sandrine Kott and Elisabeth Roehrich, she co-edited *International Organizations and the Cold War: Competition, Cooperation, and Convergence*, which was published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2025. More recently, she has been interested in the history of the North-South conflict and the era of structural adjustment in the long 1980s.

Leopoldo Nuti (Siena, 1958), is Professor of International History at Roma Tre University and Co-Director of the Nuclear Proliferation International History Project. From 2014 to 2018 he was President of the Italian Society of International History.

Tore Olsson is an associate professor of history at the University of Tennessee, where he teaches and researches modern U.S. history. His first book, *Agrarian Crossings: Reformers and the Remaking of the US and Mexican Countryside* (Princeton, 2017) was the winner of SHAFR's Stuart Bernath Book Prize. His most recent book is *Red Dead's History: A Video Game, An Obsession, and America's Violent Past* (New York, 2024). He is now at work on another public-facing book about video games and U.S. history, tentatively titled *Grand Theft America: Making Sense of a Divided and Unequal Nation through the GTA Video Games*.

Alanna O'Malley is Chair of Global Governance and Wealth and Head of Department, School of History, Culture and Communication at Erasmus University, Rotterdam. A historian of international relations, she is an expert on the United Nations, decolonization and the Global South. She is an ERC Laureate, having been awarded a Starting Grant as Principal Investigator of the project: 'Challenging the Liberal World Order from Within, the Invisible History of the United Nations and the Global South'. She held the inaugural Chair in United Nations Studies in Peace and Justice at Leiden University until 2021. She has also published her work widely in leading journals including *Humanity*, *International History Review*, *Past & Present* and *Journal of Cold War Studies*, among others. She is a regular contributor to national and international media including Al Jazeera, BBC and CNN and TRT World.

Meredith Oyen is an associate professor of history and affiliate of the Asian Studies Program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Her research explores how immigration, deportation, refugee policy, and transnational networks have shaped China's relationship with the world, and especially U.S.-China relations. Her first book, *The Diplomacy of Migration: Transnational Lives and the Making of U.S.-Chinese Relations in the Cold War*, was published in 2015 by Cornell University Press.

Stephen G. Rabe is the Ashbel Smith Chair in History (emeritus) at the University of Texas at Dallas. Rabe received his Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut, under the direction of Dr. Thomas G. Paterson. Dr. Rabe has taught in twenty countries and held the Mary Ball Washington Chair in American History at University College, Dublin and the Fulbright Bicentennial Chair in American Studies at the University of Helsinki. SHAFR has awarded him the Bernath Book Prize and the Bernath Lecture Prize. He has edited or written thirteen scholarly books. His latest book is *The Lost Paratroopers of Normandy: A Story of Resistance, Courage, and Solidarity in a French Village* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Gianna Sanchez is a history PhD candidate at the University of Michigan. Their work primarily focuses on the history of medicine in the twentieth century American West, with particular interest in folk healing, curanderismo, and women's health. Their dissertation examines medical regulation, midwifery, and women's health in 20th c. New Mexico. They are an editor at Nursing Clio and a Graduate Researcher for the Sterilization and Social Justice Lab at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Alexandra Southgate is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of History and is completing the Graduate Certificate in Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies. She received both her B.A. in History and M.A. in Contemporary International History from the University of Toronto. Alex is broadly interested in twentieth-century international relations and cultural history. Her dissertation research focuses on Quaker transnationalism during the early Cold War and explores the relationship between religious pacifism and diplomacy.

Alongside her historical research, Alex is passionate about editing and archival studies. She is currently an Assistant Editor for *Diplomatic History* and has previously worked for Rise Up! Feminist Digital Archive and Canada Declassified. In 2024 she edited a collection about feminist archives for Rejoinder, an online journal published by Rutgers' Institute for Research on Women, entitled "The Archival is Political."

Dr. Margot Tudor is a Senior Lecturer in Foreign Policy and Security in the Department of International Politics at City St George's, University of London. Her first book, *Blue Helmet Bureaucrats: United Peacekeeping Missions and the Reinvention of Colonialism, 1945-1971*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2023. She is currently working on a new book project on the entanglement of peacekeeping identities and patriarchal values during the first UN mission.

Robert Vitalis is a long-recovering Middle East expert and newly-emeritus professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. His most recent academic publication is "A Not So Protracted Conflict: War Over the University of Pennsylvania's Foreign Policy Research Institute and the Rise of the Militant Right in U.S. National Security Studies," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, forthcoming.

Emily Whalen is a Non-Resident Senior Associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. She has held fellowships at the Clements Center for National Security, Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, and Yale University's International Security Studies Program. She was an affiliated scholar at the American University of Beirut's Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies. Dr. Whalen earned her PhD in 2020 from the University of Texas at Austin. Her book on U.S. interventions in the Lebanese Civil War is forthcoming in 2026 from Columbia University Press.

ATTENTION SHAFR MEMBERS

The 2025 SHAFR election is upon us. As is traditional, *Passport* is publishing copies of the candidates' biographies and statements by the candidates for president and vice-president, as well as biographies for the candidates for Council and the Nominating Committee, as a way to encourage members of the organization to familiarize themselves with the candidates and vote in this year's elections. Additional information, including brief CVs for each candidate, will be available on the electronic ballot.

"THE EXERCISE OF THE ELECTIVE FRANCHISE IS A SOCIAL DUTY OF AS SOLEMN A NATURE AS [A PERSON] CAN BE CALLED TO PERFORM."

DANIEL WEBSTER

Nominating Committee, Justin Hart (justin.hart@ttu.edu), as soon as possible to ensure that you are able to participate in the election.

Passport urges each member of SHAFR to take the time to participate in our organization's self-governance this year. As we know, elections have consequences.

"ELECTIONS BELONG TO THE PEOPLE. IT'S THEIR DECISION. IF THEY DECIDE TO TURN THEIR BACK ON THE FIRE AND BURN THEIR BEHINDS, THEN THEY WILL JUST HAVE TO SIT ON THEIR BLISTERS."

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Passport would like to remind each member of SHAFR that voting for the 2025 election will begin in early August and will close on **September 30, 2025**. Ballots will be sent electronically to all current members of SHAFR. If you are a member of SHAFR and do not receive a ballot by the beginning of September, please contact the chair of the SHAFR

"WE DO NOT HAVE GOVERNMENT BY THE MAJORITY. WE HAVE GOVERNMENT BY THE MAJORITY WHO PARTICIPATE."

THOMAS JEFFERSON



2025 SHAFR Ballot

VP/President Elect

Nick Cullather (Indiana University) vs. Sarah Snyder (American University)

Council (3 at-large)

Sheyda Jahanbani (University of Kansas) vs. Ruth Lawlor (Cornell University)

Kyle Burke (University of South Florida) vs. Andrew Johnstone (University of Leicester)

Fabian Hilfrich (University of Edinburgh) vs. Jason Parker (Texas A&M University)

Nominating Committee (1 at-large)

Andrew Johns (Brigham Young University) vs. Ryan Irwin (University at Albany-SUNY)

Nick Cullather

I started going to SHAFR meetings, at least the Washington ones, while still a grad student at the University of Virginia. A few of us, unable to afford the expensive luncheon, would sit in the lobby with our sack lunches and to our delight star figures in the field, people whose books we had read, would sometimes come sit with us. I met Marilyn Young that way, and Doug Little, Richard Immerman, and Emily Rosenberg. They would ask us questions about the panels we saw, which papers interested us and why, and what we were researching.

This is an organization that welcomes its newest members and encourages them to think otherwise. Since those days, I have served on SHAFR prize committees, on the Program Committee, the DH Editorial Board, and with Anne Foster--another grad student with a sack lunch-- as a co-editor of *Diplomatic History*. In my research, I have been interested in how ideas about things, such as land, measurements, diets, machines, or time, shape the way officials think about foreign policy problems. Lately, I have been writing about mid-twentieth century databases, massive pre-computerized attempts to comprehend the world. The hype surrounding AI may be overwrought, but it is nothing compared to what was said about the vertical file.

I have taught History and International Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington for 32 years, while also serving in a number of administrative roles, including helping to found our international affairs school.

As you know, researching foreign relations today involves confronting a new set of discouragements. The closing of digital archives at the Wilson Center and USAID, the summary dismissal of State Department's Historical Advisory Committee, the cuts to Fulbright, and travel bans affecting international scholars are all signs that our work is seen by the administration as something to control rather than foster. Libraries and university presses are being cut back, making it harder for us to communicate in ways we are used to. SHAFR's prudence has kept our finances in good shape, but the support we receive from digital publishers peaked in the previous contract and is now headed downward while the price of conference venues goes up.

At the same time, our members' scholarship has never been more creative and important, its perspectives more varied. Something is going very right. Moving forward, SHAFR should continue to nurture our grad students. The workshops, scholarships and awards are having a brilliant effect. Secondly, it should stand fast for its principles of open documentation and freedom to research. And thirdly, it should enlarge its membership base. SHAFR once had a small but significant following among high school teachers, government workers, and the general public. We should try to regain those constituencies, and others. Mel Leffler recalled in a recent DH article that SHAFR was founded amid a "confusing, turbulent, disheartening world that became even gloomier in the early 1970s." SHAFR got a gifted generation of scholars through it, and it can again.

Sarah Snyder

My scholarship focuses on the influence of nonstate actors on U.S. foreign relations. My major publications include *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2018) and *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). I have also published thirteen journal articles, scholarly essays, and public commentary. My scholarship has garnered honors from both SHAFR and the Organization of American Historians.

I am a professor at American University's School of International Service (SIS). Before moving to SIS in 2014, I taught in the departments of history at University College London, Yale University, and Georgetown University, where I also earned my PhD.

I have served SHAFR extensively over the past two decades, including as a member of Council, as its representative to the Department of State's Historical Advisory Committee, and on its Committee on Historical Documentation, Robert H. Ferrell Prize Committee, Nominating Committee, William Appleman Williams Junior Faculty Research Grants Committee, and Dissertation Completion Fellowship Committee.

I served on the program committee for SHAFR's annual meeting three times and co-chaired it in 2014. I worked as a member of its *Passport* Editor Search Committee, its Public Engagement Task Force, and chair of its Legal History Task Force.

I have participated as a mentor in SHAFR's Second Book Manuscript Workshop and SHAFR's Jobs Workshop. Beyond SHAFR, I mentor through the *Global America* book series and the journal *Modern American History*.

Since I first attended SHAFR's annual meeting in 2001, the organization has become my intellectual home, and its members' scholarship and mentorship have been instrumental in shaping my career. The organization has become increasingly dynamic through internationalization, diversification, and a willingness to welcome new approaches.

SHAFR's vibrancy, however, is at risk. Many members have lost funding for research and conference travel, visiting the United States poses new risks for some, access to government records is under threat, and increasing portions of the public are skeptical of academia broadly and historians specifically. I believe SHAFR must be active in addressing each of these troubling trends.

We can better support our members who struggle to remain connected to the SHAFR community and conduct archival research in the United States given diminishing resources and heightened political scrutiny. Similarly, we need to expand existing accessibility efforts and support for those who are contingent, underemployed, or unemployed.

Looking outward, we must advocate for the relevance of history, and I am committed to facilitating avenues for SHAFR members to share our research outside academia. I support greater SHAFR advocacy on behalf of archives and libraries, and we need to press for a functioning declassification process.

The breadth of my experience – including expertise on documentation issues, teaching at an institution outside the United States, holding a series of short-term positions at the beginning of my career, and working in an international affairs school – make me well positioned to advance these efforts on behalf of the SHAFR community.

Council (3 at-large)

Sheyda Jahanbani

I am an Associate Professor at the University of Kansas specializing in US foreign relations and global history. My work explores the emergence of “global” thinking in the decades after 1945. SHAFR has been my intellectual home since I began graduate school.

My book, *The Poverty of the World* (OUP, 2023) received the Merle Curti Prize in Intellectual History from the Organization of American Historians, the Center for Presidential History’s Distinguished Book Award, and the Stuart L. Bernath Prize for Best First Book from SHAFR. I have also published widely on US relations with the Global South. I am currently working on a global history of “world citizenship.”

My research has been supported by the Charles Warren Center, the LBJ Presidential Library, and the JFK Presidential Library among others.

I teach undergraduates and graduates at KU and have received both the KU Chancellor’s Silver Anniversary Teaching Award (2009) and the William T. Kemper Fellowship for Teaching Excellence (2023).

My service to SHAFR has been varied but includes, most notably, serving on the Program Committee for several years, authoring a chapter for *The SHAFR Guide*, and serving on and chairing both the Ferrell Prize and Bernath Scholarly Article Prize committees.

Ruth Lawlor

I am an Assistant Professor of History at Cornell, where I am honoured to continue Walter LaFeber’s legacy of teaching U.S. foreign relations, with an emphasis on war and global history. My forthcoming first book, *Contested Crimes, Contested Lands: Rape, Race and Sovereignty in U.S.-Occupied Europe, 1942-46*—based on a dissertation which received an honorable mention in the Oxford University Press Dissertation Prize in International History, awarded by SHAFR in 2020—focuses on sexual violence and U.S. military law. My co-edited volume on the global Second World War—published by Cornell University Press this April—was also born of a serendipitous collaboration for SHAFR’s virtual conference that year. Previously, I was a Research Fellow at Cambridge and a member of SHAFR’s UK/ Ireland seminar series.

I joined SHAFR in 2016 (my first year of graduate school) and attended the annual meeting for the first time in 2017 (I’ve only missed one conference since then!). In 2024, I authored the report on UK/ Ireland historians for SHAFR’s taskforce on international members. SHAFR has been my intellectual home in the U.K. and the U.S., and I am eager to give back to the Society for its generous research support, advocacy, and camaraderie.

Kyle Burke

Kyle Burke is an assistant professor of history at the University of South Florida, which he joined in 2024. Before that, he was an associate professor of history at Hartwick College. His scholarship examines the interwoven histories of war, political violence, and radicalism in the United States and the wider world. He is the author of *Revolutionaries for the Right: Anticommunist Internationalism and Paramilitary Warfare* (UNC Press, 2018). He’s currently at work on his second book, a global history of the American white power movement. His scholarship has appeared in *Diplomatic History* and *The Global History of White Nationalism* (Manchester UP, 2020), and a new article is forthcoming in *The Journal of Right-Wing Studies*. He is a regular reviewer for *Diplomatic History*, and his other essays and reviews have featured in a wide range of venues including *The Times Literary Supplement*. He is a frequent participant and commentator at SHAFR, and the recipient of the 2014-2015 SHAFR dissertation fellowship. His work has also been supported by postdoctoral fellowships from Temple University’s Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy, New York University’s Tamiment Library, and Northwestern University’s Chabreja Center for Historical Studies.

Andrew Johnstone

I am an Associate Professor of American History at the University of Leicester. My research examines the interplay of state and non-state actors in influencing U.S. domestic opinion on foreign policy. My most recent books are *Spinning the World: The Public Relations Industry and American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, 2025), *Against Immediate Evil: American Internationalists and the Four Freedoms of the Eve of World War II* (Cornell, 2014) and, edited with Andrew Priest, *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy* (Kentucky, 2017). My articles have appeared in journals including *Diplomatic History*, the *Journal of Contemporary History*, and the *Journal of American Studies*. I first joined SHAFR as a PhD student in 2001 and I see it as my intellectual and organisational home. Since joining, I have attended nearly every conference, and I have seen SHAFR become more diverse in every way. I would like to help SHAFR continue on that path, while also meeting the fiscal and other challenges of our current moment. I was elected to a three-year term on the Nominating Committee from 2016-2018, and I currently serve on the Development Committee. I have contributed to the *SHAFR Guide* and *Passport*, and regularly attend SHAFR’s UK and Ireland online seminar.

Fabian Hilfrich

I am grateful for the nomination to the SHAFR Council. SHAFR has been my intellectual and organizational home since my days as a graduate student in the late 1990s and I have returned to conferences as frequently as possible from Europe. Definitely one of the highlights among my experiences has been the participation in SHAFR's inaugural summer institute in Columbus, OH in 2008. I have also served on a couple of ad hoc committees, published in *Passport* and *Diplomatic History*. It would be an honor to be more involved in the organization's running.

Professionally, I am a German who teaches the history of US foreign relations in Scotland, a constellation that has yielded interesting teaching and research insights over the years. As a researcher, I am interested in the mutual relationship between identities (national and otherwise) and foreign relations as expressed in and influenced by debates on American wars. My first publication dealt with the imperialism debate around 1900, whereas I am completing a book on the Vietnam War debate between 1965 and 1973. I have also taught and published on transatlantic relations in the Cold War and on Andrew Carnegie's foreign policy views, especially in the Scottish context.

Jason Parker

Jason Parker is Professor of History at Texas A&M University. He specializes in the history of the U.S. in the 20th-century world, especially the interactions of empires, nations, and peoples during Decolonization and the Cold War. His first book, *Brother's Keeper: The United States, Race, and Empire in the British Caribbean, 1937-1962* (Oxford, 2008), examined the actions of US-based actors in the decolonization of the British West Indies, and was awarded the SHAFR Bernath Book Prize. His second book, *Hearts, Minds, Voices: U.S. Cold War Public Diplomacy and the Formation of the Third World* (Oxford, 2016), explored U.S. efforts at «winning hearts and minds» in the Cold War global South. His current project is a global history of the “federal moment” in the era of postwar decolonization, from which he recently published a piece in the *Journal of Global History*. He has previously published in such journals as *Diplomatic History* and the *Journal of American History*. He has been a member of SHAFR for twenty-five years, and has served on the Nominating Committee, the 2020 ad hoc SHAFR Task Force committee, co-chaired the 2023 annual-meeting Program Committee, and currently serves on the Committee on Women in SHAFR.

Nominating Committee (I at-large)

Andrew Johns

Andrew Johns is a Professor in the Department of History and at the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies at Brigham Young University, as well as a Faculty Fellow in Constitutional Government at the Wheatley Institute. He is the author or editor of seven books on U.S. foreign relations and political history including, most recently, *Shaping a Peaceful World: The United States and Post- Conflict Diplomacy since 1789* (forthcoming) and *The Price of Loyalty: Hubert Humphrey's Vietnam War* (2020). His current research includes a global history of 1972; a reconsideration of Nixon's “madman theory” through the lens of poker; and an examination of the development of the imperial presidency. A life member of SHAFR, he has served the organization in a wide variety of elected and appointed roles, including as editor of *Passport: The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Review* from 2011-2025 and on Council from 2019-2021. He is general editor (with Kathryn Statler) of the “Studies in Conflict, Diplomacy, and Peace” book series published by the University of Notre Dame Press; is a past president of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association; and received SHAFR's Peter L. Hahn Distinguished Service Award in 2025.

Ryan Irwin

Ryan M. Irwin is an associate professor at the University at Albany-SUNY. He teaches classes on nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first US foreign policy, and writes about decolonization and global governance in the twentieth century. He wrote *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (Oxford University Press, 2012), which explored how African decolonization changed the fight against South African racism. His current book reinterprets containment as a legal doctrine. In general, Ryan's scholarship explores the relationship between nineteenth century political theory and twentieth century political practice. Since joining SHAFR in 2005, he has attended the conference annually and served on numerous SHAFR committees. Over the years, he has won several SHAFR awards. Most recently, he received the organization's Meritorious Service Award. Today, Ryan is an OAH Distinguished Lecturer and the co-editor with Terri Keeley of the *Cambridge Studies in US Foreign Relations*, and he recently finished a stint as the Fulbright-Mary Ball Washington Scholar. Ryan cares genuinely about the SHAFR family. If elected to the Nominating Committee, he would strive to bring new voices into the organization while honoring SHAFR's rich history, and he would work constructively to engage the crises that affect us all.

A Roundtable on Tore Olsson, *Red Dead's History*

Julia F. Irwin, Mateo Jarquín, Alex Bryne,
Gianna Sanchez, and Tore Olsson

Introduction

Julia F. Irwin

At my previous institution, I taught our department's required methods class for history majors more times than I can count. On the first day of each term, I asked my students a series of icebreaker questions, including this one: "What made you fall in love with history in the first place?" My students' answers naturally varied. Some reminisced about listening to the stories their grandparents told them or traveling to historical sites on family vacations. Others discussed particularly inspirational K-12 teachers, deep dives into sports trivia, and becoming immersed in the fictional historical worlds of novels or films.

Semester after semester, one additional answer came up repeatedly. For a sizeable number of my students, historically-themed video games served as the gateway, the spark that first fueled their passion for history. Students often seemed a bit embarrassed or reluctant to admit this interest. Video games, they seemed to sense, could not possibly count as a real, serious introduction to history. As I reassured them, however, this pathway from history-gamer to history-major was nothing to be ashamed of. As a kid in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I would go on to explain, I too was a big fan of history-themed video games. I was especially enamored with an early Nintendo game called *Pirates*. Transported back to the 16th and 17th centuries, I spent countless hours sailing around the virtual Caribbean Basin. While pillaging and treasure hunting, I absorbed some ideas (however questionable or imprecise) about European colonization, imperial conflict, global trade, and working-class politics. My knowledge of geography got a lot better, too. Video games were not the only thing that got me interested in history, as I told my students, but they definitely played a part.

Thus, when Tore Olsson suggested *Red Dead Redemption 2* (RDR2) to me a few years ago, I was keen to play it. It was still during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, so admittedly I was casting about for things to occupy my time. But Olsson also offered a pair of more compelling reasons for recommending this particular game. First, he observed, RDR2 does a remarkable job at getting history right. Even though the game presents a fictionalized (and sometimes flawed) portrayal of the late 19th century United States, its designers succeed in engaging with many of the key events, weighty issues, and thorny political debates

that defined that era. Second, as Olsson explained, the game franchise was wildly popular, with RDR2 arguably ranking as the best-selling history-themed video game of all time. A significant proportion of my students had either played the game or were currently playing it; even if they hadn't, there was a good chance they had at least have some familiarity with it. Playing RDR2 myself would give me a sense of the narratives about U.S. history and U.S. foreign relations that my students were encountering beyond the classroom.

Convinced, I bought RDR2. Before I knew it, I had spent countless hours riding horses and trains across the virtual United States of the late 1890s. As it turned out, playing the game came with yet another benefit: it gave me something fresh to talk about the next time I taught historical methods, an experience that was more relatable to my students than the 8-bit games of my childhood.

Given these personal experiences, it is a pleasure to introduce the roundtable to Tore Olsson's fantastic new book, *Red Dead's History*. The three contributors to this forum specialize in diverse areas of history, including U.S. imperialism and Pan-Americanism (Alex Bryne), medicine and Mexican-American communities in the U.S. southwest (Gianna Sanchez), and revolutionary politics in Nicaragua and the Americas (Mateo Jarquín). Drawing on their respective scholarly expertise, the three reviewers assess the key events, themes, and arguments that Olsson grapples with in his book, as well as its contributions to the historiography of the United States and U.S. foreign relations. Bryne, Jarquín, and Sanchez engage with Olsson's book not only as scholars, however, but also as teachers. They evaluate Olsson's unique pedagogical project and its implications for teaching history, both inside the college classroom and among the wider public.

All three contributors voice ample praise for *Red Dead's History* and for Olsson's ambitions in writing it. Jarquín calls it "a brilliant and important project that opens many doors – not only for teaching history, but for thinking about how historical narratives are produced in the 21st century." Complimenting Olsson for his "lively and engaging style," Bryne appreciates how the book "introduces non-specialists to the nuances of American history." Sanchez, similarly, commends the book for its "easy to follow" narrative and for providing a "compelling model for how historians can benefit from using games in their classrooms."

The three reviewers also note the vast array of topics that the book touches on, commending Olsson for tackling them so ably in a concise, accessible volume. The book "excels at offering a comprehensive history of the United States," as Sanchez writes, "posing historiographical arguments while maintaining language suitable for a broad audience." RDR2 is set mainly in the U.S. West, the Deep South, and the Appalachian Mountains during the late 19th century. Focusing on each region in the book's three parts, Olsson delves into issues surrounding race, class, gender, policing, sectional relations, Indigenous dispossession, rural-urban divides, and many more. A key unifying thread across the book's chapters – as Jarquín observes and as the book's subtitle suggests – is the exceptional violence at the heart of U.S. society and politics during this turbulent era. While Olsson speaks to many subjects that *are* present in RDR2, the reviewers also praise him for analyzing the omissions

and inaccuracies in the game's rendering of history. "Olsson's book shines," as Bryne writes, and shedding light on these topics and in "fill[ing] the gaps that the game did not present." Quipping that "[Michel-Rolph] Trouillot was not a hardcore gamer, as far as I know," Jarquín posits that the famous theorist would have undoubtedly been interested in Olsson's analyses of the game's silences and their implications for the production of history.

Across the reviews, there exists considerable enthusiasm for the book's potential uses in the classroom and in the realm of public history. "Red Dead's History serves best as a teaching tool," Sanchez writes, offering students and gamers "an entry point to better understand history." Jarquín, likewise, observes that the book's "principal intervention is pedagogical," adding that it invites "historians to think more expansively about how historical knowledge is encountered, processed, and shaped in the digital age." The book will be most valuable for general readers, Bryne adds, giving "players who may not have studied the history of the United States" a clear and thoughtful primer on the subject.

Though mainly complimentary, the three reviewers do offer several critiques and point to missed opportunities. Sanchez, for instance, observes that "the topic of gender and women in history is sparse" and laments Olsson's relative inattention to these issues. Jarquín wishes that Olsson had said more about how the game was actually produced, paying more attention to the writers and developers who created the game and the historical narratives that they crafted.

For readers of *Passport*, by far the most relevant and pertinent critique is the book's lack of sustained engagement with the histories of U.S. imperialism and foreign relations. Bryne raises this issue most directly in his review. "Although *Red Dead Redemption II* does not depict the expansion of the United States' colonial empire at the end of the nineteenth century," he writes, "*Red Dead's History* could have explored this important facet of U.S. history. It is worth echoing Daniel Immerwahr's concerns about mainstream narratives of U.S. history," Bryne continues, "which continue to overlook and fail to absorb research on U.S. territories." Adding to Bryne's critique, Sanchez observes that "the inclusion of Mexican and Mexican history is subdued in comparison" to other prominent topics. Even though Jarquín compliments Olsson for addressing such subjects as immigration, settler colonialism, and "the transnational reverberations of the Mexican Revolution," these issues receive less attention in the book than other, more purely domestic issues.

Olsson offers a thoughtful response to the three reviews, and particularly to the foregoing critiques. Indeed, as he concedes, the book is arguably "weakest from the perspective of foreign relations and transnational/diplomatic history." Olsson expresses regret at the relative inattention he paid to these topics in the book, adding that "I wish I had the chance to expand that element more." He also provides some background on his decision to omit or downplay these subjects, explaining that this choice was driven mainly by the constraints of length and organizational structure. For readers of *Passport* who want to use *Red Dead's History* in their own teaching, Olsson then offers some constructive ideas for incorporating topics like U.S. empire-building or the Mexican Revolution in their own lesson plans, helpfully drawing from his own experiences teaching with the game during a semester-length college course.

Even if *Red Dead's History* is more centered on U.S. domestic history than on foreign relations, it provides many valuable insights for *Passport* readers interested in engaging students through the medium of video games. Based on the positive responses it generated among contributors to this roundtable, *Red Dead's History* will likely serve as a model for similar studies in the future. In fact, as he teases at the end of his own response, Olsson is currently writing a follow-up book, based on a different historically-themed video game. I recognize that this is probably wishful thinking, but I really hope that it is about pirates.

Review of *Red Dead's History: A Video Game, An Obsession, and America's Violent Past*

Mateo Jarquín

Video games are big business. Every year, gaming generates more revenue globally than the music and film industries combined.¹ According to Pew Research data, 85% of U.S. teenagers play video games—and the numbers for adults are much higher than *Passport* readers probably assume.²

In U.S. universities and colleges, courses on "history and film" are commonplace. Museum trips are standard. So, where's the department Xbox? Tore Olsson was spot-on when he wrote in *The American Historical Review* that if we were to poll our majors, we should not be surprised "if a quarter or more named digital games as their onramp to our discipline."³

I am not an Americanist; my main research concerns Cold War-era guerrilla movements in Central America (yes, I have daydreamt about what a game inspired by that history might look like). For that reason, I am not the best person to assess Olsson's interpretation of U.S. history for a general audience through the lens of Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption* series. But as a historian who has played and thought about video games his whole life, I feel equipped to say that *Red Dead's History* is a brilliant and important project that opens many doors – not only for teaching history, but for thinking about how historical narratives are produced in the 21st century.

Red Dead Redemption II launched to huge anticipation in October 2018. My experience playing it – I was ABD in History at the time – mirrored Olsson's feelings about his playthrough, as described in a recent interview on a popular YouTube gaming channel:

It's basically an interactive HBO show that's 90 hours long. It's got really interesting storytelling and such incredible granular detail. And I'm not just playing as a videogame nerd at this point; I'm playing as a professional historian who works in this period. I came to realize that though this game is, of course, fictional—and certainly far more violent than actual American history—it's not stupid. It showcases many of the big dilemmas in American history.⁴

As Olsson outlined in a viral 2021 tweet (which caught the attention of major gaming media outlets like *Gamespot*), those historical dilemmas include the enduring myth of the frontier; the rise of monopoly capitalism; Gilded Age inequality; settler colonialism and Native dispossession; Jim Crow and racial violence in the South; the transnational reverberations of the Mexican Revolution; Civil War memory and the Lost Cause; women's suffrage; U.S.

imperialism circa 1898; immigration and American diversity; Appalachian stereotypes; and the privatization of policing.⁵

Red Dead's History rates the game's historical literacy relatively highly. The game does not deal with any of the above themes in any special depth, and it often indulges in stereotypes and clichés. But when “we balance the ledger book of good and bad,” the book's conclusion states, it “ultimately does far more to advance historical understanding than not” (242).

The book may be less about the game itself than some readers might expect. Its structure does not revolve around *Red Dead Redemption II* or its 2010 prequel, scene-by-scene; rather, the games' gunslinging, outlaw narrative serves as a jumping-off point for exploring “the backdrop, the setting, the deeper context that explains the action—but which the games couldn't possibly provide as commercial blockbusters” (4). The chapters—“The Idea of the West,” “The Pinkertons,” “The Paradox of Race,” to name a few examples—each tackle one major theme. Added together, they cover an enormous sweep of American history, blending crisp, accessible storytelling with thoughtful engagement in historiographical debates, research dilemmas, and contemporary connections. It bridges academic scholarship and popular culture with aplomb.

All the above-mentioned historical themes are contained within a broader framework: violence. As game developers sometimes call it, a game's “verbiage”—its core grammar—is what players do most often. In *Red Dead Redemption II* that means shooting. Your cowboy avatar rides horses, manages resources, explores landscapes, interacts with rural and urban townsfolk, changes outfits, and earns money—but he also kills hundreds of people, often to move the plot forward, sometimes in self-defense, sometimes to help others, and sometimes for no clear reason at all, depending on the whims of the person holding the controller. The relentless gunplay is not meant to simulate history accurately—it is there in service of the game's fun factor. But the exaggeration of violence in the imagined American West and South becomes, in Olsson's hands, a way to make a broader, more serious point.

“In late-nineteenth-century America,” he writes, “violence was usually not random or unpredictable. Nor was it a distraction from the defining political and social issues of the day. Instead, it was intimately wound up with them” (4-5). Specifically, Olsson means two things: first, that the failure of American society to live up to its constitutional ideals—especially around legal and racial equality—spurred enormous violence; and second, that violence often emerged as a byproduct of resistance to a rising capitalist elite that exercised increasing power over everyday people.

Violence in video games has long been controversial. In the 1990s, for example, the *Mortal Kombat* series triggered a national panic. More recently, critics—particularly those opposed to gun control—have blamed first-person shooters (FPS games) for mass shootings. Olsson's work flips the script. In *Red Dead's History*, he argues that “violence, long seen as the most toxic element in digital gaming culture, might in fact open a window to better understanding the defining features of modern American history” (5).

The book's principal intervention is pedagogical. Recognizing that the *Red Dead* series may be the only point of exposure to turn-of-the-century American history for millions of players, Olsson designed a course at the

University of Tennessee, Knoxville—the foundation for this book—that leveraged student enthusiasm for the games. Writing about the class in the *American Historical Review*, Olsson said the following: “if you have rejected the possibility of digital games serving as a bridge to serious history—perhaps due to negative first impressions made long ago—it may be time to reconsider.”⁶

The book makes the case brilliantly. It should be pointed out, though, that *Red Dead Redemption II* is unusual in its attention to historical detail and, more specifically, in its awareness of the kind of themes and dilemmas that professional historians care about. To give context to non-gamer readers, I would say that *Red Dead's* take on the nineteenth century is far more nuanced than, say, the portrayal of the American Revolution in Mel Gibson's *The Patriot*. I wonder, then, what Olsson thinks about other popular game series that engage with the past in far less sophisticated ways, and therefore present less obvious pathways to “serious” historical engagement. Consider *Call of Duty*, the top-selling video game franchise in the United States in 2024.⁷ Its latest iteration includes missions set during the Gulf War, adding to a catalog that has covered World War II and various Cold War-era hotspots. Or take the *Assassin's Creed* series, which draws on historical settings like Ancient Egypt, Renaissance Italy, and Feudal Japan. While these games gesture toward history, they rarely invite critical engagement. *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, for instance, offers little reflection on the origins or consequences of Viking expansion through Europe and says nothing about how people navigated life in 9th-century England, where the game is set (non-player characters [NPCs] more or less act and talk like inhabitants of Santa Monica or Montreal c. 2020). In those games, the past is just aesthetic window-dressing.

But do video games need to be “serious” history for historians to take them seriously? After all, these other titles are “making” history, one way or another. *Call of Duty* titles, for example, implicitly advance narratives—whether intentionally or not—about America's role in global affairs, the place of the military in national memory, and the moral clarity (or lack thereof) of modern warfare. In *Silencing the Past*, a book many of us teach in historical methods courses, Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us that history is made not just in archives and academic journals, but also in homes, museums, holiday rituals, and mass media.⁸ Trouillot was not a hardcore gamer, as far as I know, but I suspect he would have been intrigued by the questions Olsson's book raises—explicitly and implicitly—about video games and the production of history.

For example, how exactly was *Red Dead Redemption II's* historical setting constructed? Did the writing team include a bunch of history majors? Did Rockstar Games hire professional historians as outside consultants? Did they imagine that scholars would care about the game? These sorts of questions point toward another potential area of inquiry: not just how games represent history, but how they *produce* it.

The book also makes one wonder about how video games may be distinct from other media in how they weave historical narratives. In *History: A Very Short Introduction* (another popular assignment in introductory courses), John Arnold writes that part of what makes the past compelling is the tension between its strangeness and familiarity:

It has been suggested (by the writer L.P. Hartley) that ‘the past is a foreign country, they do things differently

there.' Douglas Adams, the science fiction author, posits an opposite case: the past is truly a foreign country, they do things just like us. Somewhere between these two propositions is the elusive element that attracts us to the past, and prompts us to study history.⁹

It strikes me that video games allow us to *do things* in the past. Players are not just observers, as they are with books or films. Instead, they act. They make decisions, fail missions, shoot enemies, raise armies, and topple empires. This active role is part of what makes historical video games so immersive—but it also raises profound questions. What are the implications of letting players “play” through history? What kind of agency is being offered—or denied? What does it mean to simulate morally complex pasts in systems built for entertainment?

Red Dead's History succeeds not only as a work of public scholarship but as a provocation inviting historians to think more expansively about how historical knowledge is encountered, processed, and shaped in the digital age. Olsson's book offers a model for engaging a massively popular medium, one where some of the most widely consumed historical narratives are being created seriously, and without surrendering critical rigor. For a discipline increasingly invested in questions of audience, accessibility, and relevance, that is a game worth playing.

Notes:

1. Krishan Ahora, “The Gaming Industry: A Behemoth With Unprecedented Global Reach,” *Forbes*, November 17, 2023.
2. Jeffrey Gottfried and Olivia Sidoti, “Teens and Video Games Today,” *Pew Research Center*, May 9, 2024.
3. Tore Olsson, “Teaching History with Video Games,” *The American Historical Review* 128:4 (December 2023): 1756.
4. “I interviewed THE REAL Arthur Morgan,” posted December 21, 2024, by TheActMan, YouTube, 0:05:00-0:05:40, <https://youtu.be/XSyDS6gBt00?si=W-fcP-67wGFgQEi7>. Emphasis added.
5. Hayley Williams, “Red Dead Redemption Is Being Used to Teach A College American History Class,” *Gamespot*, February 14, 2021.
6. Olsson, “Teaching History with Video Games,” 1756.
7. Rebekah Valentine, “Call of Duty: Black Ops 6 is the Best-Selling Game of 2024 in the U.S.,” *IGN*, January 23, 2025.
8. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995).
9. John H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.

Review

Alex Bryne

It is unlikely that the readers of *Passport* will glean many new insights about the history of the United States from Tore Olsson's *Red Dead's History*. However, this is not a criticism of the book – academic historians are clearly not the target audience. It is the general reader, particularly those who have played Rockstar Games' hit video game *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018), who will value Olsson's text. The content of *Red Dead's History* may not fulfill our appetite for voluminous studies based on a wealth of archival material, but its publication demonstrates that video games need to be taken seriously as cultural products because they can represent the past to a wide audience. For this pioneering historical angle alone, Olsson deserves praise.

Written in a lively and engaging style, *Red Dead's History* provides historical context to the setting of the latest entry in the *Red Dead* video game series. The open-world action-

adventure game is set in 1899 and takes place across several fictional yet historically grounded locales in the United States. Olsson praises *Red Dead Redemption II*'s developers for creating a game in which players can “explore some of the thorniest dilemmas of American history” through the life of Arthur Morgan, the game's player protagonist. During their time with *Red Dead Redemption II*, players will encounter the ways in which race, class, gender, capitalism, and violence shaped life in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, and Olsson situates the game's narrative, characters, and themes in the rich histories of the West, the Deep South, and Southern Appalachia.

However, the game is not without its flaws and inaccuracies. Several temporal dissonances muddy the historical context presented in the game. This is where Olsson's book shines – *Red Dead's History* aims to fill the gaps that the game did not present. For players who were drawn to the history of the United States after playing *Red Dead Redemption II*, Olsson's book is an essential read that contextualizes the player experience in historical reality. Take the presence of the Pinkertons and their role as antagonists in the game. Whilst most of the locales and individuals in *Red Dead Redemption II* are fictionalized, the Pinkertons were, of course, a real organization. Whilst the game's representation of the infamous agency “contains many nuggets of truth”, Olsson informs readers that by the 1890s the Pinkertons had “moved away from the pursuit of western outlaws and toward the violent work of repressing the budding American labor movement.” His critique of the “Appalachian hillbilly myth” is another important corrective and will cause players to rethink their experiences in the fictional region of Butcher Creek.

This is not a book specifically about video games, nor is it a study in ludology. Although Olsson occasionally touches on issues such as player agency, *Red Dead's History* is primarily dedicated to exploring the historical context of *Red Dead Redemption II* for players who may not have studied the history of the United States. It is a simple premise, but one that Olsson achieves effectively. By exploring the historical themes and contexts presented to players in the game, as well as those that are not, *Red Dead's History* introduces non-specialists to the nuances of American history.

Given how effective *Red Dead's History* is at contextualizing the historical setting of *Red Dead Redemption II* for the general reader, the absence of an exploration of the game's Caribbean chapter is disappointing. On his own admission, Olsson explains that he did not dedicate any specific part of his book to the game's Caribbean chapter because “it departs too radically from our U.S. foundation.” On the one hand, I can appreciate Olsson's decision. The game's fifth chapter is set on a fictional Caribbean island, and its inclusion in the book would have broken up its tripartite regional structure. However, the purpose of Olsson's book is to provide context for readers who are unfamiliar with the history of the United States, and its colonial territory in the Caribbean is very much a part of the nation's history.

For those unaware of the game's narrative, part way through *Red Dead Redemption II*, Arthur and several of his fellow gang members botch a bank robbery in the southern city of Saint Denis, a fictional location based on New Orleans. To escape retribution, the gang members sneak aboard a ship that is bound for the Pacific. A storm envelops the vessel shortly after its departure, and the

gang members find themselves stranded on the fictional Caribbean island of Guarma. The island is administered by Cuba and is primarily used for sugar plantations. However, most of the island's inhabitants are indentured servants and political prisoners who struggle to survive under the despotic rule of Alberto Fussar, a Cuban military leader. Arthur joins a band of local rebels in their fight against Fussar and manages to secure his return to the United States after dispatching the dictator.

I was always puzzled by Rockstar's decision to create a fictional Caribbean island under Cuban rule for *Red Dead Redemption II*. Given the events of the War of 1898, which are mentioned in newspapers throughout the game, a much richer story could have been told if Rockstar took the players to an island under United States occupation like Cuba itself or Puerto Rico. While I can imagine a U.S. proxy government in Cuba using a local elite to oversee sugar production on a remote island, it doesn't quite fit with the time period. The player could have encountered disgruntled Cubans admonishing the United States' occupation of the island after the long conflict against Spanish rule or spoken to Puerto Ricans debating the benefits of integration into the United States. Instead, the creators sidestepped these historical experiences.

This is where Olsson missed a trick. Although *Red Dead Redemption II* does not depict the expansion of the United States' colonial empire at the end of the nineteenth century, *Red Dead's History* could have explored this important facet of U.S. history. It is worth echoing Daniel Immerwahr's concerns about mainstream narratives of U.S. history, which continue to overlook and fail to absorb research on U.S. territories.¹ These territories are very much part of the "U.S. foundation" of the game, even if they are not depicted. Lynching is absent from *Red Dead Redemption II*, yet Olsson rightly draws readers' attention to this part of the nation's history. Why not address empire? Both Cuba and Puerto Rico were being Americanized in 1899 and hundreds of colonial officials, military personnel, missionaries, and business owners moved to these islands to shape them in the image of the United States. The history of the United States was not confined to the North American continent, and *Red Dead's History* would have done a great service had it introduced the history of U.S. colonialism to the general reader.

Note:

1. Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide An Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States* (London: Bodley Head, 2019).

Review

Gianna Sanchez

Red Dead's History: A Video Game, an Obsession, and America's Violent Past by Tore C. Olsson uses the video game *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018) to contextualize the history of the American West and South at the turn of the century. Throughout, Olsson evaluates the historical accuracy of the game and details how the setting and plot pull from history to craft a compelling world. In so doing, he asserts the game's value as an educational tool while delving into key historical concepts, including Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis; racial paradoxes and racial

categorization across the United States; and the violence and oppression of Black communities during the Jim Crow-era South. The book excels at offering a comprehensive history of the United States, posing historiographical arguments while maintaining language suitable for a broad audience. It convincingly presents *Red Dead Redemption II* as a piece of media that meaningfully engages with history and offers insight to understanding the past that players are tasked to explore.

Olsson specifies three intended audiences for *Red Dead's History*: gamers, general readers adverse to reading history books, and professional historians skeptical of video games that engage with history. To address each group, Olsson uses moments from the game to discuss a specific theme or historical event. For example, chapter three examines the history of the railroad in the American West by opening with a discussion of Leviticus Cornwall, a fictitious robber baron and antagonist players encounter in the game. As Olsson explains, the chapter details "how the video game captures many of the realities of this era, particularly the ways that big business was entangled with politics and government" (34). Each chapter follows this pattern, allowing the book to cover a wide range of topics, from western cowboys to southern chain gangs.

Indeed, those most familiar with the game and interested in learning more about its setting would enjoy *Red Dead's History*. The prose is easy to follow, and Olsson utilizes gameplay from *Red Dead Redemption II* to frame historical information. Anecdotes are presented as narratives to emphasize main points and maintain the book's tone. This is best illustrated in individual stories, as with chapter twenty's discussion of the actual conflict between the Hatfields and McCoys, so-called feuding families in West Virginia and Kentucky. More tragic and traumatic histories, however, can be a bit jarring in its level of detail and description. Chapter eleven on lynching opens with a picture of the burned body of Jesse Washington after being murdered by a lynch mob. Olsson then details the lynching of Sam Hose, a young Black man tortured, burned, murdered, and dismembered by thousands of white people. While it is important for readers to understand the violence and terror of lynch mobs, the scene-by-scene narrativization feels both jarring and excessive. These inclusions do illustrate the gruesome and cruel reality and contextualizes *Red Dead Redemption II*'s allusions to lynching. But it also leaves readers feeling unsettled as the next chapter immediately shifts to focus on agricultural work, plantation slavery, and sharecropping.

Historians interested in the game's depictions of history would find *Red Dead's History* serves best as a teaching tool. It is not a critique or evaluation of the game's historical accuracy. Olsson does not talk directly to game developers and rarely considers contemporary commentary about its release. Instead, he uses the game as an entry point to better understand history. As part of this approach, Olsson examines how the game leverages history and where it pulls from other popular representations of the American West and South. The game itself follows protagonist Arthur Morgan as he travels across the country with the van der Linde gang in 1899. While *Red Dead Redemption II* draws from stereotypical narratives about the Wild West and other mythologized histories, Olsson details moments when the game departs from this depiction and features a far more nuanced history. As such, Olsson demonstrates how the game can be used in the classroom, a point

informed by his own experiences teaching this material in his undergraduate course “Red Dead America: The Real History Behind the Hit Video Games.” Granted, using *Red Dead Redemption II* for any lesson plan would require a familiarity with the game and its plot. While *Red Dead’s History* does discuss aspects of gameplay, it does not provide a thorough synopsis for those who never played the game or are new to the world of gaming. That being said, Olsson does successfully demonstrate the value of the game and its educational potential for those already familiar with *Red Dead Redemption II* and its nuances.

Red Dead’s History is divided into three parts, roughly covering three of the four regional settings of the game: the American West, the Deep South, and the Appalachian Mountains. The total twenty chapters are short, averaging around ten pages per chapter. Each one addresses a particular component of history or theme illustrated in the game. Chapter three, for example, addresses how the railroad is depicted in the game and how the history of railroad construction in the American West was deeply tied to corruption, capitalism, and worker exploitation. It juxtaposes the conditions of actual work camps in California occupied by a primarily Chinese workforce with an in-game camp along the fictional “Central Union” railroad. This camp reflects the history it pulls from and features exploitative conditions reinforced by the greed and racism of white employers. As Olsson notes, this inclusion “does its small part to pay homage to the grimly unequal world of railroad construction” (38). At the same time, this chapter does acknowledge the game’s inaccuracies and achronological moments, such as the prevalence of passenger trains the player encounters, when railcars transporting resources and material goods would have been more common.

In terms of scope, the book covers roughly what could be expected in a general undergraduate survey course. For instance, Olsson explains the history of the American South before, during, and after the Reconstruction era without delving too far in the weeds. The short chapters provide just enough information to contextualize an aspect of *Red Dead Redemption II* without overburdening the reader. More theoretical discussions, such as on the myth of the West and Frederick Jackson Turner in the first chapter, are easy to follow as well. Olsson breaks down the historical point in which the theory emerged, its impact and significance on our own understanding of history, and how it is reflected in the game. These chapters best illustrate how using *Red Dead Redemption II* could be used in the classroom to teach complex material.

This broad approach makes *Red Dead’s History* an excellent introduction to the field, at the expense of more in-depth analysis. This structuring is by design. Olsson’s intervention is in asserting the legitimacy of video games for historical analysis and education. Through this, he presents a novel way to engage with history. The book also includes varied perspectives and conversations important for understanding key ideas in the field. For example, Olsson asks readers how we define “the West,” and what that implies for our own bias and positionality. Similarly, he challenges nostalgic depictions of the Old South and the issues inherent in attributing the cause of the Civil War to anything other than the continuation of slavery.

One major strength of *Red Dead’s History* is how it interrogates the issue of race and racism both in the game and in history. Olsson is critical of prior depictions of people

of color in earlier iterations of the *Red Dead* franchise (there are three games total, plus an online multiplayer game). He praises *Red Dead Redemption II* in its inclusion of a more diverse cast who join Arthur Morgan in the van der Linde gang. This point could be emphasized further if Olsson included additional details on the lack of representation of video games in general. He could also be more critical of the fact that, in spite of the varied cast of characters, Arthur (a white man), is the only character players control. And, while indigenous and Black histories are well represented, the inclusion of Mexican and Mexican American history is subdued in comparison.

Olsson’s chapter on women is, unfortunately, not as thorough as other sections of the book. While questions of race and racism are prevalent throughout the entirety of *Red Dead’s History*, the topic of gender and women in history is sparse. Chapter seventeen is the only section devoted to talking about women, centering on the women’s suffrage movement in the American South. Olsson does mention that Arthur “works and lives alongside a slew of richly textured female characters who transcend stereotype” (195). However, he does not discuss these women further and we are not provided the same level of detail in comparison to other male members of the van der Linde crew. Given general gaps in the field and issues of representation of women in video games broadly, this lack of engagement is sorely missed. Olsson mentions the controversial reputation of *Red Dead Redemption II* game developer Rockstar Games in regard to its treatment and depiction of women. But it functions more as a side note to lead into the chapter on women’s suffrage. Further mention of this issue or women in the game is absent. Regardless of the book’s shortcomings, it would still appeal to the audiences Olsson identifies in the introduction. If anything, these omissions suggest a need for other historians to weigh in with their own expertise to further contextualize the game.

Red Dead’s History concludes with Olsson praising *Red Dead Redemption II* for the ways it meaningfully engages with history while acknowledging the areas where it falls flat or strays into myth and stereotype. As he notes, “when we balance the ledger book of good and bad, the game ultimately does far more to advance historical understanding than not” (242). The previous twenty chapters attest to this assessment. This book successfully demonstrates the value of such games as worthy of historical inquiry and critique. General readers and undergraduate audiences who played the game will find reading this book a valuable and enjoyable experience, but non-gamers can also engage with its historical analysis. *Red Dead’s History* provides a compelling model for how historians can benefit from using games in their classrooms. Olsson ultimately presents a model for other scholars to tackle by considering games like *Red Dead Redemption II* for serious historical analysis.

Author Response

Tore Olsson

First off, let me express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to the *Passport* editors for featuring my work, and to the four participants for devoting their time and energy to a book that is admittedly rather unusual. This was not a roundtable that I was expecting. Historians of U.S. foreign relations, who were

crucial interlocutors in my scholarly work for so long, were admittedly not at the forefront of my mind as I was writing this book. As Alex Bryne rightly notes in his review, “it is the general reader, particularly those who have played Rockstar Games’s *Red Dead Redemption II*” who were intended as my primary audience for this book.

This was an unfamiliar undertaking for me, given that I had largely written for other scholars previously. Yet in the dark days of Covid, I came to realize the profound hold that digital games have on so many people. I also came to realize the tremendous historical curiosity many of these gamers have – yet most do not have the “appetite for voluminous studies based on a wealth of archival material” that Bryne describes as the usual output of academic historians (myself among them until recently). So, with this strange book project, I hoped to serve as an ambassador, repackaging the historiographical wealth of the academy and using the digital fiction of video games as a delivery vehicle. Mateo Jarquín’s praise that the book “bridges academic scholarship and popular culture with aplomb” is about the highest compliment I could receive.

Given the unorthodox mission of the book, it is a particular honor to have it featured in this scholarly forum. I will also say that it is rather embarrassing. I say so because I think *Red Dead’s History* is, in many ways, weakest from the perspective of foreign relations and transnational/diplomatic history. Two crucial topics that I devoted a great deal of time to in my original undergraduate class on the games were cut from the manuscript, in the interest of length and coherence. The first was the Mexican Revolution. The original *Red Dead Redemption* game, set in 1911, takes place partially in northern Mexico during the early revolt against Porfirio Díaz. The game provides a fantastical and sometimes bizarre portrayal of the Revolution, but one that allowed me a window for showing both the social upheaval of this great revolt, and the ways that the United States was implicated in the drama. Gianna Sanchez laments that “Mexican and Mexican American history is subdued” within the book. That’s unfortunately right, and I wish I had the chance to expand that element more – especially given the centrality of the Revolution to my first book.

The second topic left on the cutting-room floor is equally embarrassing in its absence: the U.S. push for imperial possessions that crested in 1898-1899. How could a book with such a vested interest in 1899 neglect the topic that dominated so many headlines that year? It’s not that the game steers clear of the topic – like Bryne describes, the Van der Linde gang is stranded on a strange Caribbean isle that both resembles Cuba but is paradoxically colonized by Cuba, rather than the United States (though it appears the U.S. industrialist Leviticus Cornwall is a partner to the Cuban sugar planters). And even within the United States, Arthur Morgan’s gangmates will unexpectedly ruminate on topics related to the imperial crusade. “Why are we fighting the Philippines, huh?” wonders Uncle, the gang’s resident ne’er-do-well, while sitting around the campfire. As such, I very much regret not foregrounding this topic within the book, because there are few topics that generalist readers understand less well than this geopolitical conquest. But my greatest obstacle in doing so was the organization of my book into three regional parts, which would have made a standalone chapter an oddity, while an additional multi-chapter section on the Caribbean would have overextended the length of the manuscript.

The reviewers raise such a wonderful diversity of

questions about the book, and though it won’t be possible for me to respond to each, I’ll address a handful. Sanchez hoped for “additional details on the lack of representation of video games” as a whole or an expanded critique of the fact that “Arthur (a white man), is the only character players control.” Sanchez is entirely right that the whiteness and maleness of video game protagonists is a long-standing pattern, though it has been slowly changing in recent years. Yet as I wrote the book, I wanted to ensure that it was a work of public-facing history rather than an entry in the established field of “game studies,” an interdisciplinary pursuit that places games under the academic microscope. I encourage Sanchez to look to a recent edited volume which does this task well: Esther Wright’s and John Wills’s *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West* (Oklahoma, 2023). Questions of race, gender, and representation are absolutely central to this work, and it is a highly critical study. But I ultimately wanted to write a very different book. I was anxious that if I leaned too heavily on familiar critiques of representation, generalists and gamers would be dissuaded from following me on the longer journey, given their emotional attachments to the game. It’s not that I wanted to avoid talking about race and gender, and any reader knows that each is fundamental to the analysis of *Red Dead’s History*. It’s that I wanted readers to engage these topics with an open mind, rather than shutting down defensively after my biting critique of their beloved game.

I so appreciate Jarquín’s impassioned plea that historians take video games seriously, not just for the potential audiences that they might open but for the unique possibilities that they present for exploring the past. Indeed, his review doubles as a manifesto for the future of digital games in our profession, and I hope he expands it and publishes it for a wider readership. Jarquín is also curious about what I think of games that are less serious and exhaustive in their approach to the past. I’ve largely stayed away from the *Assassin’s Creed* series, mainly because none of their games are set in the timeframe of U.S. history that I know best. As for the *Call of Duty* games, I had pondered exploring them as a follow-up to *Red Dead’s History*, given their parallel popularity and twentieth-century U.S. focus. But after dabbling with a few entries in the franchise, I recognized that writing something thoughtful about their world would be an uphill struggle. They just have so little to say about civilian life, and their basic ethos – militaristic, nationalistic, and masculinist to the extreme – had the simple effect of stripping any pleasure from my playing them. The thought of devoting years to their study nauseated me, and I looked to other prospects. But I very much hope that another scholar with a stiffer constitution will take up the task.

Jarquín also floats a fascinating question that I was unable to answer while writing my book: “Did Rockstar Games hire professional historians as outside consultants? Did they imagine that scholars would care about the game?” I neglected to address this in the book because I simply did not know. I had not had any contact with the developers, and they are famously secretive about their creative process, as is their right. But since the book has debuted, I’ve gotten a bit more insight. The actor Roger Clark, who played Arthur Morgan – and who was generous enough to serve as the narrator for the audiobook of *Red Dead’s History* – has told me multiple times that he had never imagined, while creating the game, that it would

turn up in a college classroom as a source of study. After the book's release, I also had a fascinating exchange with Dan Houser, one of the lead writers on both of the *Red Dead Redemption* games, though he left Rockstar a few years ago. His own background is in the social sciences; he has a geography degree from Oxford. Houser did tell me that they worked with many university-trained history majors in making the game, though I didn't get the impression that any PhDs were on the writing or development team. But I do believe that there's tremendous opportunity for trained historians to serve as consultants on such teams. I know the *Assassin's Creed* series has employed PhDs in the past, though as Jarquín notes, the results aren't always satisfying.

Ultimately, each of the reviewers provides such thoughtful and eye-opening commentary on the book, and I'm very thankful for the insights of all participants. I regret that I can't revise *Red Dead's History* in accordance with them. But if I can't change the past, these reviews will shape the future, for I've now embarked on a new public-facing book project that employs another popular game franchise as a vehicle for exploring a moment in U.S. history. I hope to learn lessons from this first experiment, and perhaps not repeat too many of my mistakes.

From the Chancery

Welcome to a new academic year! As the seasons turn and leaves switch color, you may have noticed a color change in *Passport* as well. Due to unprecedented developments across the academic printing industry this year, the cost to print *Passport* has increased substantially. We are working closely with Council and the printers to ensure that *Passport* reaches you in a timely manner. The new color scheme is part of that effort. Thank you also to everyone who filled out the *Passport* survey. This information is crucial for us as we plan on how to move forward, and ensure that *Passport* is serving you to the best of its ability.

Brian C. Etheridge and Silke Zoller

A Roundtable on Steven Cook, *The End of Ambition*

Emily Whalen, Peter L. Hahn, Douglas Little, Robert Vitalis, Kelly M. McFarland, and Steven Cook

Intro

Emily Whalen

Writing about U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is a thankless endeavor. No matter how anodyne or cursory one's observations, once in print, they inevitably spark passionate, occasionally captious, reactions. Events in the region have a way of overtaking analysis, too; satisfying concluding arguments get overrun as easily as certain political borders. Finally, there is Washington's deafening lack of interest in the region to contend with. For decades, U.S. policymakers have vacillated between pushing for a complete U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East and scattershot crisis management, sending mixed signals and seeding future conflagrations, all while avoiding any sustained engagement with the complexities of the region. Steven Cook gamely takes on these daunting challenges in *The End of Ambition: America's Past, Present, and Future in the Middle East*. The result, as this roundtable indicates, is a substantially qualified success.

Cook briskly lays out the problem—that the United States fell prey to “ambition-fueled delusions” in its Middle East policy for the past three decades—and obligingly proffers a solution: a framework of “prudential conservatism” that seeks to return to what he characterizes as the success of U.S. regional policy during the Cold War (126). Along the way, he criticizes the twin delusions of regime change and retrenchment (the fantasy of removing all U.S. involvement in the region), two sides of the same illusion of U.S. omnipotence. Cook admits a realist slant in his view, seeking to describe the “hard realities” of the world: the Middle East as it actually is, not as retrenchers or regime changers would believe it to be (8).

By the end of the book, the reader is left breathless by the tempo of the writing, its breakneck skim through history, the scope (and yes, ambition) of Cook's recommendations for future policy, and, perhaps most of all, by the wide, wild gap that separates the world of the present from the world Cook describes. He indicates that the book took shape during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, presumably between 2020 and 2022. In the summer of 2025, the words “prudential conservatism” seem like they come from another planet—or an alternate timeline in which the United States has not joined Israeli air attacks on Tehran, at the very least.

Still, there is—and the reviewers generally agree—real benefit in what Cook has done with this book, specifically in his detailed remedy for the United States's misguided

Middle East policy. As Kelly McFarland writes, more academics “should undertake research and writing that helps to answer deeper historical questions relevant to current policy.” Peter Hahn agrees, suggesting that even if there are issues with Cook's prescription, “the concept provides a benchmark against which various other policy options can be measured.” Douglas Little, who takes a more critical view of the book's conclusions, nevertheless notes that Cook's views land with “considerable authority,” given his professional experience in think tanks and in the Middle East.

Yet the book's contributions ineluctably highlight its shortcomings. It is a good thing that Cook wants to use scholarly knowledge to enrich policy, but, as Robert Vitalis points out in his review, there are some concerns about the scholarly knowledge presented. Cook does not respond directly to Vitalis's assertion that the book has a fundamental “internal validity problem.” He dismisses rather breezily Peter Hahn's concerns with the book's framing of the 1953 coup in Iran. These critiques are concerning not merely for reasons of pedantry but because they touch on the heart of the book's fundamental purpose. Cook's laudable effort at crafting actionable policy recommendations rests, ultimately, on a flawed foundation, a fragmented, one-sided view of U.S. Middle East policy in the Cold War.

Cook is not a trained historian, nor is this book designed as a book of history, but there are certain principles of historical work that I believe would have sharpened—and perhaps changed—his conclusions. One has to do with linking cause and effect in a more comprehensive way. As Douglas Little flags in his review, *The End of Ambition* defines success in narrow terms. The “costs” of realism in the Middle East during the Cold War were, for the United States, “mostly moral,” and not material (55).¹ Yet the long-term effects of many of these successes did eventually produce material costs for the United States. As Peter Hahn notes, U.S. involvement in the 1953 Iranian coup fanned the flames of anti-American sentiment, and likely shaped outcomes during the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis. U.S. funding of the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan in 1979—part of the Soviet containment strategy Cook applauds—helped lay the groundwork for Al-Qaeda to become a major threat to the United States. Lebanon's near-total absence from the text is another puzzle, given that U.S. involvement in the Lebanese Civil War was one of the most significant U.S. troop deployments overseas between Vietnam and the Gulf War. The October 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut killed 241 U.S. military personnel and sowed the seeds for what would become U.S. counterterrorism strategy—costs that can hardly be dismissed as merely “moral.”

Although a certain degree of polite dissembling is to be expected in a policy book, Cook's measured language contributes to this general air of imprecision. Israel's Kahan Commission Report did not merely find Ariel Sharon “at least indirectly responsible” for the Sabra and Chatila massacres, as Cook writes, but, in fact, attributed “personal responsibility” for the slaughter to Sharon (73).² The “authoritarian syndrome” that for Cook was a basic reality of Middle Eastern politics in the 1990s was hardly baked in. It was, in fact the intended outcome of decades of collaboration between U.S. officials and Middle Eastern strongmen (85). Saddam Hussein posed a threat in 2002 not merely

because of his megalomania, but also because the United States poured armaments into Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War.³

The walls that *The End of Ambition* runs up against are the vast, inert boundaries of consensus in Washington. Cook notes in his response that he has “a front row seat to the policymaking process,” implying that certain criticisms of the book simply lack Beltway-insider understanding. Yet, ultimately, Cook, like many realists, argues less for seeing the world as it is than for seeing the world as realists believe it to be.

One central question plays in the background of every essay in this roundtable: What is the purpose of a book like *The End of Ambition*? Each reviewer (and the author) has a perspective on this question. It is an important question—particularly in such uncertain times—because in its shadowy umbra a deeper question can take root: What is the purpose of *any* book we intellectuals write? Is it to confirm a viewpoint or to challenge it? Push for a return to the past or sketch out a more luminous future?

I found myself reflecting, while reading *The End of Ambition*, on Cook’s assessment of the acceptable “moral costs” of past U.S. policy in the Middle East. His calculations reflect the common sense of the 20th century liberal internationalist order, which attributes a different standard of morality to nations than to individuals.⁴ It is acceptable, in the world we inhabit, for nations to behave in ways we would term immoral if an individual undertook them. Cook is suggesting, ultimately, that the United States keep working within these parameters. We should continue, he argues—not without regret—to incur moral costs, and continue to offload material costs. Fair enough.

Perhaps, though, this moment of cascading crises could serve as an opportunity to imagine a different calculus. Recently, I returned to an essay John Higham penned in 1962. In it, he suggests a role for the intellectual—and specifically, the historian—as a “moral critic.” Rather than confining morality to narrow parameters, Higham argues, it is incumbent upon intellectuals to engage with a “whole situation in its authentic complexity,” using their work to develop “an enlarged and disciplined sensitivity to what [people] ought to have done,” and “what they might have done.”⁵ Must a book of policy recommendations adopt the viewpoint of its target audience? Or might we find a way to enrich both worlds, of policy and of academia, with a more comprehensive, but no less rigorous, perspective?

For raising these questions, for its thought-provoking conclusions, and for taking on a thankless task with verve, Cook’s *The End of Ambition* amply merits the lively discussion that follows here.

Notes:

1. Cook devotes some space to outlining the far more disastrous and material consequences of Washington’s Cold War realism in the Middle East for the inhabitants of the region, but his argument suggests that these consequences are, ultimately, outside the scope of policy consideration (35-6).
2. “Final Report of the Israeli Commission of Inquiry into the Events at the Refugee Camps in Beirut,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 12:3 (1983):115-6.
3. See Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, trans. Nicholas Elliott (Harvard University Press, 2015); Bruce W. Jentleson, *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush and Saddam, 1982-90* (W.W. Norton, 1995).
4. See E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016) 135-55.
5. John Higham, “Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic,” *The American Historical Review* 67:3 (1962).

Review of Steven A. Cook, *The End of Ambition: America’s Past, Present, and Future in the Middle East*

Peter L. Hahn

The End of Ambition is a concise, engaging, reasonable, and interesting analysis of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Steven A. Cook’s main purpose is not to present a comprehensive history of U.S. diplomacy in that region, but to dispense a prescription for a new U.S. policy principle that he believes would best protect the vital interests of the United States in the future. Cook writes that prescription in the final chapter, after providing a sweeping, selective overview of U.S. policy over many decades. His overview illustrates the flaws and faults that came to afflict U.S. policy in recent decades, which his prescription is designed to remedy.

Cook prescribes a principle he calls “prudential conservatism” (126) as a cornerstone of future U.S. policy in the Middle East. That principle has realism at its core, accepting the view that the international order is imperfect and imperfectible. Thus, U.S. officials should prudently and deftly defend their vital interests rather than try to resolve regional conflicts, promote human rights, spread democracy, reform authoritarianism, or pursue other idealistic objectives. Cook defines his policy principle as a balance between isolationism (which is inadvisable because other powers would corrode or seize U.S. interests) and progressive, reformist interventionism (which is destined to fail and undercut U.S. interests in the process). Achieving success in the Middle East, he writes, “will require policymakers to choose priorities based on interests that are achievable at an acceptable cost. That is the essence of prudential conservatism” (127).

In his final chapter, Cook elaborates how his remedy would protect the vital interests of the United States. Because the health of international capitalism will remain dependent on a steady supply of Middle East oil in the foreseeable future, he asserts, the United States must play the role of “regional sentry” (131) by deploying naval and air power to ensure freedom of the seas along major shipping lanes, while ignoring the authoritarianism of its regional partners. Because Israel remains the darling of public and congressional opinion, the U.S. government cannot abandon it. But the United States, he suggests, should replace the billions of dollars per year in foreign aid to Israel with “a series of military, diplomatic, and commercial agreements that will help ensure Israel can defend itself” (135), while refraining from advocating for Palestinian rights.

Cook calls for U.S. counterterrorism policy to diversify beyond its focus on muscular militarism against terrorist leaders and fighters by improving law enforcement and intelligence tactics. (I suspect that he would not object to adding vigilance, diplomacy, and economic reform to his list of tactics.) On the question of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, Cook recommends that the United States abandon efforts to rehabilitate the Iranian regime or block its entry to the nuclear club and instead adopt a policy to contain and deter it as a nuclear power. The United States, he says, should recognize that climate change is stressing the political, social, and economic infrastructure of the Middle East, and lend its expertise to mitigate the effects of intensifying heat and drought.

Finally, Cook asserts that the United States should tamp down the rising influence of China and Russia in the

Middle East by accentuating its own strengths and avoiding stumbles that provide openings to these global rivals. To offset China's emerging commercial and development gains, the United States should bolster its security apparatus protecting Middle East states (which those states value and which China cannot replicate) and compete smartly and deftly for technological and economic interests. Undercutting Russia's growing influence in countries like Syria, he claims, is possible if the United States stops overreaching and making errors that Russia can exploit for its own gain. (Cook apparently completed his book before Bashar Al-Assad fell from power in Damascus in late 2024.)

Cook rests his case for "prudential conservatism" on a sweeping overview of the history of U.S. diplomacy in the Middle East that makes three central arguments. First, the United States "successfully secured its interests in the Middle East throughout the Cold War" (4) by elevating realism over idealism and by managing the region from afar rather than trying to reform it through military intervention. To protect access to Middle East oil, the United States asserted its influence and power—most notably in the Carter Doctrine of 1980 and the liberation of Kuwait during the Gulf War of 1990-91—in partnership with undemocratic regimes. The United States, Cook concludes, ended up "in a strategically tenable, but morally questionable, position" (35). In the 1960s and 1970s, moreover, the United States embraced a special relationship with Israel for strategic, domestic political, and cultural reasons, equipping it to defeat Arab powers, providing it massive economic aid, stoking its economic development and technical prowess, and normalizing it within the international community. That such support caused the Palestinian people loss of land, denial of statehood, poverty, and oppression—and thus came at a "moral cost for the United States" (55)—did not deter U.S. leaders.

Cook's second major argument is that U.S. leaders shifted their foreign policy dramatically in the 1990s, to the detriment of their national interests. The stunning U.S. victory over Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War and the coincidental collapse of the Soviet Union inspired U.S. officials to dream of transforming the Middle East to democratic stability. President Bill Clinton pursued a vigorous course of Arab-Israeli peacemaking, but he was stymied by stubborn resistance to compromise on both sides. "American diplomats made little headway despite considerable effort," Cook notes, "because the 'peace processors' seemed to want a deal more than the recalcitrant parties." (72). Galvanized by the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush embarked futilely on a grandiose strategy of reforming the Middle East by exercising regime change in Baghdad through military invasion, by promoting Arab-Israeli peace and a Palestinian state through the Roadmap Plan, and by promoting democracy across the region through the Freedom Agenda. "By the time he left the White House in January 2009," Cook concludes, "each of these three components was a failure" (85).

Third, Cook observes that Presidents Barack Obama and Donald J. Trump (in his first term) aimed to retrench U.S. commitments in the Middle East, but both leaders pursued inconsistent if not contradictory goals and policies and therefore failed to establish a stable paradigm for U.S. policy. Flummoxed by the eruption of the Arab Spring uprisings, Obama articulated a call for democracy, which alarmed his authoritarian partners across the region. Then he intervened militarily in Libya to depose the dictator

Muammar Qaddafi but proved unable to achieve peace or democracy in that troubled land. Obama pursued the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran in hope of freezing its nuclear program, but in the process stoked extremism in Iran's sponsorship of radical militants and spooked U.S. partners across the region.

Trump was equally ineffective. Taking office pledging to end foreign entanglements and focus on domestic enhancements, he failed to extract U.S. troops from either Iraq or Afghanistan. He replaced JCPOA with a policy of "maximum pressure" that also proved ineffective at moderating Iranian foreign policy. While Trump made some gains with the Abraham Accords, his Peace to Prosperity plan for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement failed at its launch.

In Cook's view, U.S. policy in the region moved through two major stages. During the Cold War, policymakers succeeded at protecting vital interests because they practiced realism. Since the end of the Cold War, officials failed to defend vital interests because they pursued idealism. "The primary insight to be gleaned from these two track records," Cook observed, "is that when the United States sought to prevent 'bad things' from happening to its interests, it succeeded. However, when Washington sought to leverage its power to make 'good things' happen in the service of its interests, it often failed" (5). U.S. leaders stumbled because they wrongfully assumed that their good intentions, leadership, and creative thinking would sow the seeds of peace and democracy across the region despite the cultural, historical, and political factors militating against them.

Such failures have rendered U.S. interests in the Middle East to precarity, Cook asserts. Alarmed by such actions as Bush's opening of Iraq to Iranian influence, Obama's pressure on Hosni Mubarak to resign, Trump's non-response to the September 2019 Iranian attack on Saudi Arabia, and Biden's surrender of Afghanistan to the Taliban, such traditional U.S. partners as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates lost faith in the United States and began practicing neutralism reminiscent of Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s. Thus, these powers nurtured closer ties with Russia and China, maintaining the former even after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. A restoration of realism through "prudential conservatism," Cook concludes, is the best hope for restoring U.S. influence and preserving U.S. vital interests in the Middle East.

The central thesis of *The End of Ambition*—it is worth noting here its subtitle, *America's Past, Present, and Future in the Middle East*--is worthy of consideration by those U.S. policymakers, pundits, scholars, and citizens who are concerned about the *present* state and the *future* direction of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Clearly, the current situation is a mess: the peace process sputters, the Gaza war grinds on, Iran pursues weapons of mass destruction, Israeli-Iranian warfare looms, Syria smolders, and Russia and China probe for opportunities to gain influence at the expense of the United States. Cook provides a useful framework for analysis by those responsible for shaping U.S. policy moving forward. Even if "prudential conservatism" does not become the guiding light of U.S. diplomacy, the concept provides a benchmark against which various other policy options can be measured.

Regarding U.S. policy in the *past*, by contrast, *The End of Ambition* has limited value because its analysis of the historical record overlooks complexity and nuance. Because Cook focuses on defining the vital interests of oil and Israel during the Cold War, he neglects to tease out the indirect

costs of U.S. policy decisions. Did the 1953 Iranian coup, undertaken to secure access to oil, aggravate the intense anti-U.S. fervor of the 1979 Iranian revolution and Iran Hostage Crisis? Did U.S. support for authoritarians crush the spirit of their citizens until their rage exploded in Arab Spring? Did the bolstering of Israel contribute to the emergence of Hamas and thus help cause both *intifadas* and the multiple Gaza wars? Are these ripple effects simply the “cost of doing business” in the Cold War realist mindset, or are they dire consequences with the potential to return to haunt the United States and threaten its vital interests? I wish Cook had probed such questions as these.

In addition, Cook’s discussion of the special relationship between the United States and Israel begs for deeper analysis. The author accurately conveys that the relationship blossomed in the 1960s and matured in the 1970s, but his analysis of the reasons is unsatisfying. The central question is whether the United States embraced Israel for cultural/political or strategic reasons. Cook concludes that President John F. Kennedy’s “embrace of Israel was the result not just of political calculation, but also of statecraft” (43), but this statement is not sustained by the evidence that he presents over the preceding pages illustrating Kennedy’s attraction to Israel. Nor does it conform to his prior observation that President Dwight D. Eisenhower remained cool to Israel precisely because it complicated U.S. relations with Arab states and thereby imperiled vital interests in those states.

Moreover, Cook inadequately probes the cultural impulses that stoked ardor for Israel in U.S. public opinion. His acknowledgement that religious factors influenced U.S. policymakers (63) warrants closer examination. On a basic level, it would be useful to explain the varying theological and political ideologies among American Jews and (especially) Christians, how those ideologies shaped thinking in the White House and the Capitol, and how that thinking influenced the policy emanating from the State and Defense Departments. On a deeper level, I wish that Cook had addressed whether strong support for Israel, if driven by domestic cultural and political calculations, was genuinely a vital interest of the United States in a realist’s understanding of that term.

By crafting his historical analysis to sustain his futurist prescription, Cook occasionally oversimplifies complex situations. For example, his discussion of the second Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq underscores regime change and democracy promotion as major motives by way of casting the decision as too idealistic and ambitious. By conveying that Bush exploited popular fears to garner support for a war he wanted to start for other reasons, the author downplays the competing view that Bush acted out of genuine fear generated by the 9/11 and anthrax attacks. Cook’s interpretation runs contrary to recent works by Joseph Stieb and Melvyn P. Leffler that make convincing cases that realism (as well as other impulses) coursed through U.S. decision-making.¹

Finally, Cook posits a plausible but one-dimensional thesis that U.S. peacemaking can lead to warmaking. As evidence, he points out how the peace process of the 1990s “stirred Israeli and Palestinian extremists to action precisely because compromise threatened their unbending world-views” (72). The Hebron mosque massacre, the numerous bus bombs, the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, and the Ariel Sharon visit to the Temple Mount illustrate that extremists used violence to kneecap the peace process. In fact,

the author could have made a similar case about the Alpha Peace Plan of 1953-55. When that Anglo-U.S. comprehensive blueprint for an Egyptian-Israeli peace settlement was unveiled to Israeli and Egyptian leaders, the result was not peace, but a series of border skirmishes in February and September 1955 that culminated in the Suez-Sinai War of 1956-57.²

The author’s focus on the limits of peacemaking, however, contradicts evidence of such peacemaking achievements as the Egyptian-Israeli treaty of 1979, brokered by President Jimmy Carter, and the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty of 1994, facilitated by President Bill Clinton. Whatever their flaws, these accords resolved points of conflict, pacified international frontiers, and thereby curbed the cycle of *interstate* Arab-Israeli hostilities, but the author mentions the first only in passing and he entirely neglects the second. Moreover, I wish the author had balanced his critique of peacemaking with an assessment of non-peacemaking. There have been several instances, most recently the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, when acute violence erupted at a time when U.S. officials refrained from peacemaking. In the historical record, the question of whether peacemaking is productive or counter-productive is more complicated than the author’s overview indicates.

These criticisms should not be construed to mean that Steven Cook’s work lacks merit. *The End of Ambition* offers a clear and reasoned prospective remedy to what ails the United States in the Middle East at the quarter-century mark. Policymakers and citizens who value reasoned debate, contrasting judgments, and informed decision-making should carefully and critically ponder Cook’s ideas.

Notes:

1. Joseph Stieb, *The Regime Change Consensus: Iraq in American Politics, 1990-2003* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); Melvyn P. Leffler, *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq* (Oxford University Press, 2023).
2. Peter L. Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East: U.S. Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1945-1961* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 182-85.

Review of Steven Cook’s *The End of Ambition*

Douglas Little

The morning after I finished reading *The End of Ambition*, Steven Cook’s primer on how to fix America’s broken policies in the Middle East, Israel resumed its air strikes on Gaza, killing another four hundred Palestinians. A few hours later, F-18 warplanes launched from the USS *Harry Truman* rained bombs down on Sana’a, the Yemeni capital controlled by Iranian-backed Houthi extremists. Shortly afterward, Donald Trump reiterated that “all hell would break loose” unless Hamas released its remaining Israeli hostages. Then he warned the Houthis that they would be “completely annihilated” unless they ceased their attacks on merchant shipping in the Red Sea and notified the Ayatollah Khamenei that Iran would face “dire consequences” unless it stopped running guns to its Yemeni clients. With a wider regional war a very real possibility, few observers would disagree with Cook’s summary of the crisis or his assertion that a course correction in Washington’s

approach to the Middle East is long overdue. I have some questions, however, about his diagnosis of the problem and his prescription for a cure.

Cook has spent most of the past two decades monitoring developments in the Middle East, first from the streets of Cairo during the Arab Spring and then from his perch at the Council on Foreign Relations, where he serves as a senior research fellow and compares notes with friends and colleagues like Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh. Cook makes frequent visits to the region, he speaks Arabic and Turkish, and he knows the landscape extremely well. He is also well-connected with U.S. government officials and inside-the-beltway think tanks like the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP).

So, when he describes what has gone wrong for America in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War, Cook speaks with considerable authority. His master narrative will be quite familiar to readers of *Passport*. Giddy from a splendid little victory in the First Persian Gulf War in March 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union nine months later, George H.W. Bush envisioned a “new world order” whose chief operating system would be democracy, American style. Bill Clinton doubled down on Bush’s approach and pursued a policy of “enlargement,” with the United States relying on its soft power to nudge Arab moderates in a democratic direction while resorting to armed force to contain rogue states like Iraq. Shocked and enraged by the 9/11 attacks, George W. Bush launched a global war on terrorism, announced a “freedom agenda,” and set off on a fool’s errand to bring democracy to the Middle East, arguably the most autocratic region in the world, only to find himself trapped in a quagmire on the Euphrates. Barack Obama saw the forever war in Iraq as an unforced error that he would not repeat and then went on to make a big mistake of his own by embracing the “false dawn” of democracy during the Arab Spring which quickly faded into the twilight of Arab Winter.¹

The moral of Cook’s story is quite simple. For a quarter-century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Republican and Democratic administrations alike persuaded themselves that they could and should “make good things happen” in the Middle East when, in reality, U.S. interests would have been far better served by doing what America’s cold warriors had done so well between 1945 and 1989: preventing bad things from taking place. A blend of hubris and idealism convinced U.S. policymakers to export democracy as the antidote to what ailed the Arab world when they should have recognized that democratic values like faith in free elections and the rule of law cannot be imposed at gunpoint or by bullhorn but must be grown at home by the peoples of the region and their leaders.

Fair enough, but Cook’s recipe for fixing what is broken rests on some flawed assumptions about the “success” of America’s approach to the Middle East during the Cold War. Looking “back to the future” through rose-tinted glasses, he reminds us that the United States achieved its three most important goals—preserving access to Persian Gulf oil, protecting Israel, and preventing Soviet inroads in the region—with minimal losses of American blood and treasure. “There were setbacks and significant—mostly moral—costs,” Cook writes, “but from the perspective of America’s elected leaders, officials, foreign-policy analysts, and other elites, the price was worth paying” (5).

Things looked very different, however, from the perspective of the peoples of the Middle East. Although Cook

downplays the CIA’s role in the overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh in August 1953, the Eisenhower administration helped snuff out democracy in Iran to keep the oil flowing and curb the left-leaning Tudeh Party. The “unbreakable bonds” between Washington and Tel Aviv ensured that the “peace for land” principle that might have led to Palestinian self-determination was dead on arrival the moment the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 242 in November 1967. And the cynical logic of the Cold War—“the enemy of my enemy is my friend”—led the Reagan administration to embrace “friendly tyrants” like Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak whose vocabulary did not include words like democracy or human rights.

During the book launch for *The End of Ambition* in June 2024, Jim Lindsay, the moderator for the Council on Foreign Relations, asked Cook whether these had been the right things to do. Cook’s answer was a qualified “yes.” He acknowledged that America’s special relationship with Israel was not cost-free. “To help prevent threats to Israeli security,” he told Lindsay, “we helped enable the continued displacement and statelessness of the Palestinian people.” Cook also admitted that many saw America’s special relationship with the House of Saud as problematic. Yet even though candidate Joe Biden had called Saudi leaders “pariahs” back in 2020, POTUS 46 recognized that “authoritarian stability was something that helped the United States achieve its goals relatively easily and less expensively than it would otherwise be.” Looking back, Cook explained, “we got thirty years of help from Hosni Mubarak” and “thirty-five years of help from the Shah of Iran.” It would be nice if America’s partners in the Middle East were always democracies, but “they’re not, and we can’t make them democracies,” he sighed. “Only the people of the region can make those countries democracies.”²

What Cook does not say, however, is that when forced to choose between democracy and material national interests like access to oil or regional security, Cold War policymakers almost always chose the latter. In *The Struggle for Egypt*, a prize-winning account of the Arab Spring in Cairo that appeared thirteen years ago, Cook recalled a harsh truth that Hassan Nafaa, an Egyptian political scientist, delivered at WINEP’s symposium on the Bush administration’s “Freedom Agenda” a few months before the United States plunged into Iraq on a mission to impose democracy. “Everyone would like to see democratic rule, not only in Arab and Muslim countries, but everywhere,” Nafaa told his listeners. “You will nevertheless find a lot of skepticism, because once you have democratic ideals that conflict with other objectives of American foreign policy—such as oil supply or Israel—the United States sacrifices the former, being much more keen to achieve the latter.”³

If, as Cook implied back in 2012, this was an accurate appraisal of traditional U.S. priorities, one must question the wisdom of his “back to the future” prescription in the final pages of *The Ends of Ambition*. To oversimplify just a bit, Cook recommends doubling down on two of the most important U.S. objectives during the Cold War—ensuring Western access to Persian Gulf oil and strengthening Israel—while maneuvering to keep China, which has replaced the Soviet Union as America’s greatest rival in the Middle East, at bay. To be sure, Cook is spot on when he says that in recent years, “America’s political divisions [have] contributed to wild swings in policy” and that, as a result, there has been “far too much crisis management and far too little policy planning” in Washington (117). He’s also right to

insist that now “is not time for retrenchment,” but his call for “a renewal of American purpose in the Middle East” (6) will ring hollow if U.S. policymakers follow his advice and pursue an “old wine in new bottles” approach that is likely to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the region’s problems.

Take the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Cook says that once the war in Gaza ends, the United States should adopt “a more realistic approach, based on the world as it is,” and restructure America’s relationship with Israel by scaling back military aid and instead negotiating “a series of treaties and agreements that forge strong bilateral ties well into the future” (135). Now that Israel, with help from the United States, has achieved a permanent “qualitative military edge,” however, deeper bilateral ties between Washington and Jerusalem would only confirm Arab suspicions that the Jewish state has become America’s chosen instrument in the region. Indeed, with Bibi Netanyahu and his right-wing allies seemingly determined to push the Palestinians out of Gaza and with Donald Trump evidently eager to step in and establish the “Riviera of the Middle East,” a formal Israeli-American alliance would merely invite another round of chaos and instability and make U.S. military involvement more, not less, likely.

Or take the tattered U.S. relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Cook blasts the Obama administration for negotiating what he sees as a badly flawed five-power nuclear deal with Tehran back in 2015. The Israelis and their Republican friends on Capitol Hill vehemently opposed any rapprochement with Tehran and insisted that the White House abandon the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) because it did not require the Iranians to halt their support for the “axis of resistance”—Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis. Most experts agree, however, that the JCPOA did dramatically slow Iran’s quest for weapons of mass destruction and that Donald Trump’s withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 has increased the likelihood that Tehran will “go nuclear” during the next decade. Noting that even American or Israeli air strikes could probably not prevent Iran from fulfilling its nuclear ambitions, Cook turns again to his Cold War playbook for a solution. “It is possible to discourage the Iranian regime from using its presumed nuclear weapons through the threat of dire consequences should Tehran unsheath its arsenal,” he explains. “In other words, deterrence” (141). Yet Cook is not confident that deterring Iran from using its nukes would prevent Saudi Arabia from acquiring unconventional weapons of its own, a nightmare scenario that could easily spiral into a regional nuclear war.

Cook’s call for “prudential conservatism” (126), for “containment” rather than “rollback” in the lingo of the Cold War, is commendable at a moment when the Trump administration seems inclined to shoot first and ask questions later in the Middle East and elsewhere. It is always good to be reminded that there are limits to American power and that Uncle Sam’s ambitions have too often morphed into hubris before curdling into catastrophe. Nevertheless, in the spirit of looking back to the future, I wish that Cook had considered two questions that went largely unasked during the past eighty years. Are American interests in the Middle East always well served by aligning U.S. policies closely with those of Israel and the Arab petrostates? Do Israeli security and secure access to Persian Gulf oil require the United States to cast a blind eye to democracy, human rights, and self-determination in the Arab world?

Steven Cook’s meta-message is that, going forward,

American policymakers should be “realistic” and accept the Middle East as it is, not as they might wish it to be. As I put down *The End of Ambition*, however, I recalled that pivotal moment in the Peloponnesian War 2500 years ago when, according to Thucydides, the Athenians explained “the world as it is” to their Melian adversaries: “You know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” It’s worth remembering that although Athens won the battle for Melos, it eventually lost the war.

Notes:

1. For a detailed critique of Obama’s policies, see Steven A. Cook, *False Dawn: Protest, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 209-23.

2. “CFR Fellows’ Book Launch: The End of Ambition by Steven Cook,” (June 13, 2024),

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjU84RO-WkQ>

3. Steven A. Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir Square* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 257.

The Unyielding Nature of Facts

Robert Vitalis

Professors don’t normally start books with themselves at the center of the action, in this instance, in 2019, wandering in “ankle-deep mud” in the Bardarash Refugee Camp in Northern Iraq, not unless they are anthropologists doing what one of the tribes in the east, frequently warring four-field confederation calls “autoethnography.” Cook does, in his compact 156-page, cry from the heart, *The End of Ambition*. He adopted a similar style in his last book, *False Dawn*, about the Arab uprisings of 2011, which Middle East reviewer John Waterbury of Foreign Affairs called both “chatty” and “pessimistic.”¹ That pessimism stretched from Cairo, Tunis, Benghazi, and Ankara, where Cook found myriad institutional obstacles in the way of lasting political reform, to Washington, D.C. where Cook believes hubris led the Barack Obama administration astray. I taught that book at the University of Pennsylvania where, full disclosure, I was on Cook’s 2003 dissertation committee.

End of Ambition traces American hubris farther back to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Clinton administration’s efforts to, as he sees it, create a Palestinian state.² The failure of the peace process should have served as a warning about the limits of U.S. power, but it didn’t, and the deepening disaster of post-9/11 policy, which sought to remake the Middle East, from Afghanistan and Iraq to the Arab Spring and the Libyan and Syrian civil wars reveal the ideas driving Washington to have been “little more than ambition-fueled delusions” (p. 4). In his further reflections on the Obama years and fresh account of the Donald Trump and Joseph Biden administrations, Cook finds their otherwise laudable efforts to reverse course beset by contradictions due to the influence of misguided advocates of “retrenchment, reduction, and withdrawal” from the Middle East.

He spends a page or two discussing the emergence of the heterodox Quincy Institute, which he says was a mostly unwelcomed addition to the “Washington ideas industry” (108) but doesn’t identify their thinkers since they “made

little headway inside the Beltway's foreign policy community" (106). In discussing the Trump years, he fails to consider any of the alt-right-friendly thinkers who circulate among the Claremont Institute, the Conservative Political Action Conference, the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, the Institute for World Politics, and Steve Bannon's War Room, including Michael Anton, Angelo Codevilla, Frank Gaffney, Reuel Marc Gerecht, Caroline Glick, Sebastian Gorka, Victor Davis Hansen, and Yarom Hazony. It turns out that the ideas that matter most to Cook, the ones he believes led the United States astray and drove U.S. Gulf allies into the hands of the Russians and Chinese, are mostly found in the same magazines he writes for.³

Cook dreams of a policy of "renewal of American purpose" (6) in place of retrenchment, one governed by "prudential conservatism" (126), which boils down to securing the free flow of oil and guaranteeing Israel's survival. He argues that American administrations were "overwhelmingly successful" at both during the decades of the Cold War, with some moral costs (backing dictatorships, overthrowing governments, ignoring the toll on civilians, and dispossessing Palestinians are the main ones) to the contrary notwithstanding. The dividends outweighed the costs once you consider the means and ends for having checkmated the Soviet Union's geopolitical masterminds along the way.

Let's concede at the outset all the conventional criticisms going back decades about professors producing jargon-filled papers disseminated in peer-review publications that attract a handful of readers or worse on average.⁴ Let me also specify that I have no beef with those who write to instruct the public. For the past twenty years, I have taught and learned a great deal from new books every semester like Cook's on U.S. Foreign Policy and U.S.-Middle East relations. Authors have included government officials, journalists, Cook's colleagues in the Council on Foreign Relations, and an ideologically diverse lineup of professors with crossover appeal.

I can't remember another book that set its critical sights overwhelmingly on (11) "[j]ournal articles, opinion pieces, editorials, blog posts, and podcasts."⁵ MIT's Barry Posen, a defense department and RAND consultant, and someone who actually studies the military for a living, published *Restraint* in 2014, his acclaimed book-length account of the excessive ambition of U.S. administrations and what Washington needed to do going forward to solve the problem of overstretch.⁶ A redoubling of efforts to secure the flow of oil wasn't one of them. Cook doesn't discuss it nor a dozen other key books and papers of the past two decades—on OPEC, the 1973 price shock, and the evolution of international oil markets that question his basic assumptions.⁷

I also can't remember a book with so many factual errors in so few pages. I stopped counting after the first two dozen, which means on average one every six pages. These include straightforward errors; some I believe are wrong but go unfootnoted; clichés that specialists have falsified; and facts that, to give him the benefit of the doubt, are subject to scholarly dispute, about which he appears unaware. This is true whether he is discussing Soviet plans for seizing the oil resources of the Gulf or Saudi Arabia's miraculous ability to "control" the price, which it employs for political ends. *End of Ambition* fails an academic's test of rigor. Then again, plenty of others whose footsteps he follows were also "groping in the dark" when supplying political elites "with the fictions used to give meaning to

policies for the public."⁸

While the largest number of my post-it notes cluster in his chapter on oil policy ("Prime Directive"), the chapter on Israel ("Unbreakable Bonds") didn't inspire confidence either. In discussing its founding in 1948, he writes (38) "just twelve countries around the world extended recognition... and three—Costa Rica, Czechoslovakia, and Uruguay—established relations" during the war. After the 1949 armistice, he says twenty-nine more countries "extended recognition" and six established diplomatic relations.

What drew my attention to the passage is that we know that the Soviet Union was the first country to extend *de jure* recognition to Israel, two days after the United States extended *de facto* recognition on May 15, 1948, which President Truman did in order to get the jump on the communists. The future Israeli prime minister Golda Meir took up her position as the first Israeli ambassador to the USSR in September, in the midst of the war.⁹ Cook is thus wrong about the Soviets. He is apparently wrong about Costa Rica too.¹⁰ I couldn't replicate his country count either, which appears to conflate *de jure* recognition with diplomatic relations.¹¹

A few pages later, when discussing the Eisenhower administration's attempt to balance relations with Israel and the Arab states, he includes Libya, important because, he says (40), it was a major oil producer. Libya would become one eventually, once oil exploration began about the time John F. Kennedy replaced Ike in office and production started about the time Richard Nixon defeated Hubert Humphrey. In the meantime, Libya's Wheelus Air Base, one of the country's largest USAF overseas facilities, served in the Eisenhower years as a forward operating base for the Strategic Air Command in targeting the Soviet Union.¹² Back then, Bernard Brodie, the naval strategist and architect of the nuclear deterrence doctrine that upended traditional views of strategy and statecraft, showed why it was both unnecessary and quite likely futile to deploy U.S. force to protect the Persian Gulf.¹³

For examples of the Kennedy administration's pro-Israel positions, he says (43) that JFK had "blocked pro-Palestine efforts at the UN, designated Fatah—the main faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—as a terrorist group, and sold Israel the Hawk air-defense system." Cook again doesn't provide a source. The claim about the weapons sale is unarguably correct. I have been unable to confirm the one about blocking UN efforts. However, the PLO was not founded until May 1964, that is, six months after Lee Harvey Oswald shot Kennedy in Dallas. Fatah emerged around 1959, but famously opposed the founding of the PLO and would have carried out its first attack against Israel (or the "armed struggle" as its ideologues imagined) in September 1964, in order to undermine its rival, only the would-be terrorists failed to follow orders, and a second planned operation in December was aborted. As a result, January 1, 1965, when infiltrators crossed the border near Lake Tiberias and planted explosives that failed to detonate, has been celebrated ever since as the beginning of "the armed resistance" and "the start of the revolution."¹⁴

There are plenty more mangled facts—about (20) the "disruption" to oil production caused by Iran's nationalization, (24) the gas lines in 1973, (52) Israel only recently escaping its "global isolation," and (135) the canard that Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser once threatened to push the "Jews into the sea."¹⁵ Troubling presumably in and of themselves, the fact is that many of these instances are the surface manifestation of the deeper failure to confront

the possibility that his causal claim—that U.S. military dominance of the Gulf accounts for uninterrupted oil supplies—is spurious.¹⁶

Academics refer to this most basic issue of analytical inquiry as the “internal validity problem” or the possibility that our causal claims are wrong and that we have missed the factor that actually matters. We teach graduate students to think in terms of the “null hypothesis,” the baseline assumption that no relationship exists between two phenomena. The challenge is to use tests of statistical significance to disprove the null hypothesis. Historians of course don’t run regression analyses, but they rely on evidence from the archives, together with their up-to-date knowledge of other scholars’ work, to rule out alternative explanations and to increase confidence in their own account.¹⁷ Cook dismisses (33) the null hypothesis out of hand without ever engaging with the arguments and evidence of those historians and political scientists who confirm it. He just doubles down on his bet that the timeless verities of geopolitics are correct and that American resolve “kept the Soviets out of the Gulf” and “safeguarded the free flow of oil for the West.”

So, he calls the Carter Doctrine a success while ignoring the work of the MIT-trained strategist Ronnie Lipschutz who shows it to have been an “empty threat.”¹⁸ The findings of The Naval Postgraduate School’s Emily Meireding led her to describe the beliefs that animate the defense of the Carter Doctrine as myths: that “fighting for oil pays, strategically or economically.” The puzzle for her is why, despite the many skeptical voices in the past few decades and inconsistent empirical evidence, these beliefs remain, for Cook and for many others, “a taken for granted story about how the world works.”¹⁹

Surely, the key finding of intellectual historian Bruce Kuklick’s study of Cold War civilian strategists, that they “regularly overestimated the power and malignity of the Soviet adversary,” explains a significant part of the variance. “Much of the time,” Kuklick says, “fashion was more important than validity.”²⁰ *The Washington Post* reported that political scientists were purposely exaggerating the Soviet threat to the oil of the Persian Gulf.²¹ A key source for those who traced the centuries-old roots of Soviet designs on the Gulf, the so-called Last Testament of Peter the Great, was a forgery, which wouldn’t surprise Meireding.²² Let’s just say that when Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev tried to disabuse the Carter and Reagan administrations of their views of Soviet designs—“We don’t need the Persian Gulf. All of this is made up, it’s lies.”—and proposed demilitarization, their disbelief was overdetermined.²³

Cook though isn’t making a claim about what leaders believed, rationally or no, for a few short years in the 1970s-1980s. He is arguing in the first quarter of the twenty-first century about what Soviet leaders actually intended in the last quarter of the previous one. His problem is that the accumulation of historical evidence—from technical studies of the Soviet energy sector to its Middle East policies to the big new books about Soviet grand strategies—provides scant evidence in support, while Cook parrots secretary of state Zbigniew Brzezinski’s view of an “arc of crisis.”²⁴ Still, the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies historian Sergey Radchenko is clear: “There simply was no Soviet plan for southward expansion.”²⁵ That sounds a lot like confirmation of the null hypothesis to me.

Cook would have future policymakers follow his prudential conservative approach to the Middle East, distinguishing it from “conservatism in its contemporary par-

lance,” while touting its key advantage of “seeing the world as it is.” I don’t know. I put the book down thinking that a Council’s somewhat disillusioned globalist has a view of the past that is as imaginary and nostalgic as any championed by less prudential conservatives wreaking havoc on the liberal order while making America great again. *End of Ambition* is in the end a testament to the power of conventional wisdom. Yet MIT’s brilliant oil economist M.A. Adelman, whose work on the petroleum industry is foundational for today’s historians and social scientists alike, reminds us, “conventional wisdom ‘knows’ many things that are not true.”²⁶

Notes:

1. John Waterbury, review of Steven Cook, *False Dawn: Protest, Violence, and Democracy in the New Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2017) in *Foreign Affairs* 96:5 (September-October 2017): 191.
2. We have to assume, because he doesn’t say, that he disagrees with those historians who find that the U.S. strategy was to prevent rather than encourage the creation of an independent state in territories occupied in 1967. See for one Seth Anziska, *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo* (Princeton University Press, 2018).
3. The foreign policy academics who hail from departments of political science and international relations, among them those that Cook fraternizes with at the Council on Foreign Relations, have for decades focused on their critics to the left, same as he (104-108). In Cook’s map of the ideational universe, the right that matters (although not much he says) ends at the CATO Institute and with Doug Bandow. For a rare exception, see Rita Abrahamson et. al., *World of the Right: Radical Conservatism and Global Order* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).
4. See, however, Rose Evelev, “Academics Write Papers Arguing Over How Many People Read (And Cite) Their Papers,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 25, 2014, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/half-academic-studies-are-never-read-more-three-people-180950222/>, and Cass Sunstein, “In Praise of Law Books and Law Reviews (And Jargon-Filled Academic Writing),” *Michigan Law Review* 114:6 (2016):833-45.
5. By journal articles he means overwhelmingly ones in magazines that pay writers, if not at the rate of the *New Yorker*. My rough count is that just under 5% of his roughly 270 works cited are articles in double-blind, peer-reviewed publications.
6. Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2014).
7. A short list would include Emma Ashford, *Oil, the State, and War: The Foreign Policies of Petro States* (Georgetown University Press, 2022); Jeff Colgan, “The Emperor Has No Clothes: The Limits of OPEC in the Global Oil Market,” *International Organization* 68:3 (Summer 2014): 599-632; Giuliano Garavini, *The Rise and Fall of OPEC in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2019); Sebastian Herbstreuth, *Oil and American Identity: A Culture of Dependency and US Foreign Policy* (I.B. Tauris, 2016); Michael Lynch, *The “Peak Oil” Scare and the Coming Oil Flood* (Praeger, 2016); Leonardo Maugeri, *The Age of Oil: The Mythology, History, and Future of the World’s Most Controversial Resource* (Lyons Press, 2006); Victor McFarland, *Oil Powers: A History of the US-Saudi Alliance* (Columbia University Press, 2020); Emily Meireding, *The Oil Wars Myth: Petroleum and the Causes of International Conflict* (Cornell University Press, 2020); Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (Verso, 2011); and Roger Stern, “Oil Scarcity Ideology in U.S. Foreign Policy, 1908-97,” *Security Studies* 25:2 (2016): 214-57.
8. Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 15.
9. <https://www.israelhayom.com/2024/12/06/new-photo-emerges-of-golda-meirs-historic-1948-moscow-visit/>
10. Costa Rica Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship, “Relación de Costa Rica con Israel,” Costa Rican Government, <https://www.rree.go.cr/index.php?sec=exterior&cat=politica&cont=522&pais=IL>

11. "Israel International Relations: International Recognition of Israel," Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/international-recognition-of-israel>
12. Walter J. Boyne, "The Years of Wheelus," Air & Space Forces Magazine, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/0108wheelus/>
13. Bernard Brodie, "Foreign Oil and American Security," Memorandum no. 23, Yale Institute of International Studies, September 15, 1947, 1.
14. Yezid Sayigh, *The Armed Struggle and the Search for the State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1963* (Oxford University Press, 2004) is the so far unsurpassed history of these matters. Details are from Chapter 7, The Watershed. See also, <https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/122671>.
15. See Michael Sharnoff, "Defining the Enemy as Israel, Zionist, Neo-Nazi, or Jewish: The Propaganda War in Nasser's Egypt, 1952-1967," *Posen Papers in Contemporary Antisemitism* 14 (Jerusalem: The Vidal Sassoon Center for the Study of Antisemitism, Hebrew University, 2012), 1-24: 3.
16. I leave to the side the problems with Cook's second and, minimally, exaggerated claim about the U.S. repeatedly protecting Israel's existence, given, for example, Henry Kissinger's conclusion in the 1973 war that its destruction was not a remote possibility. See Robert Vitalis, "Henry Kissinger and the Middle East," Review of *Master of the Game: Henry Kissinger and the Art of Middle East Diplomacy* by Martin Indyk, *Catalyst* 6:4 (January/February 2020), 128-145: 135. Historians have insisted the same, in fact, about the 1948 and 1956 wars as well.
17. Robert Vitalis, "The Past is Another Country," in Ellen Pechman and Sara R. Curran, eds, *Finding a Method in the Madness: A Bibliography and Contemplative Essays on Method in the Social Sciences* (Sage, 2006), 5-17.
18. Why empty? The logic updates Bernard Brodie's classic 1947 account, because the export of oil from the Gulf is virtually impossible to maintain by military means in the case of internal upheaval, let alone in a war against a major adversary. The Carter Doctrine is better understood as having trapped U.S. administrations (and many a would-be influencer) by "declaring vital an interest that might be gotten along without and is almost impossible to protect." Ronnie Lipschutz, *When Nations Clash: Raw Materials, Ideology, and Foreign Policy* (Ballinger, 1989), 111. MIT's Barry Posen came to the same conclusion about the build-up of armed forces in the Persian Gulf against threats to access that are either "not compelling" or "that cannot be dealt with efficiently by military power." Restraint, 1
19. Meireding, *Oil Wars Myth*, locations 465 and 295 of 7511, kindle ed.
20. Kuklick, *Blind Oracles*, 14-15.
21. Robert Kaiser, "Memo Sets Stage in Assessing U.S., Soviet Strength," *Washington Post*, July 6, 1977, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1977/07/06/memo-sets-stage-in-assessing-us-soviet-strength/079e53ff-0d84-48ba-81c1-b890f0412a5d/?utm_term=.65112f51846c.
22. Sergey Radchenko, *To Run the World: The Kremlin's Cold War Bid for Global Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 452-53.
23. Ibid., 473.
24. Jeronim Perovic, "The Soviet Union's Rise as an International Energy Power: A Short History," in *Cold War Energy: A Transnational History of Soviet Oil and Gas*, ed. Jeronim Perovic (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 26; and Jeronim Perovic and Dunja Krempin, "'The Key Is in Our Hands': Soviet Energy Strategy During Détente and the Global Oil Crises of the 1970s," in Frank Bösch and Rüdiger Graf, eds., "The Energy Crises of the 1970s: Anticipations and Reactions in the Industrialized World," special issue, *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 39:4 (2014): 138; Alexei Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin* (Routledge, 2018), 241-42.
25. Radchenko, *To Run the World*, 473. When I asked him directly, Radchenko confirmed that there is "zero evidence" for the idea that the Soviet Union had a plan to seize control of the Persian Gulf. "Zbig Brzezinski in particular was just completely wrong about this." Email to author, April 3, 2025.

26. M.A. Adelman, "The Real Oil Problem," *Regulation* (Spring 2004):16-21: 16.

Review: *The End of Ambition: America's Past, Present, and Future in the Middle East*

Kelly M. McFarland

The international order is at an inflection point. Shifts in order and balances of power are also playing out at the regional level. Europe, for instance, is reeling from the ongoing war in Ukraine and Vladimir Putin's revanchism, rising populist and right-wing political parties, and a second Trump administration.

Nowhere is this upheaval more evident than in the Middle East. Since America's 2003 invasion of Iraq, and exacerbated by the Arab uprisings of 2011, the region's tectonic shifts are more pronounced than anywhere else in the world. This reordering again picked up pace following Hamas' horrific attacks of October 7, 2023, and the Netanyahu government's vicious response. Today, the region is a microcosm of the larger international order, as the United States hems and haws over its role, China and Russia seek advantage when it suits them, and middle powers more boldly follow their own path.

The ongoing changes in the Middle East were on full display in May 2025, when President Donald J. Trump travelled to the Gulf monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE on the first overseas trip of his second term (not counting his trip to Rome for Pope Francis's funeral). Trump travelled to the region without meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, snubbing him while the war in Gaza still rages.¹ He ended sanctions on Syria's new leader and former terrorist Ahmed al-Sharaa, touted billions of dollars in military sales and other economic deals, and verbally battled with Republicans and Democrats alike over whether or not he would accept a \$400 million gilded 747 from Qatar.² Time will tell what, exactly, the second Trump administration sees as its major interests in the region (beyond personal financial gain for the president and his cronies), but, for the moment, it seems like some of them are still to be determined.³

As we try to discern what Trump 2.0 views as America's national interests in the Middle East, and what policies it will unveil to try and secure those interests, it's an apt moment to look at Steven A. Cook's new book, *The End of Ambition: America's Past, Present, and Future in the Middle East*. As the author demonstrates in his concise and well-argued book, the United States played an increasingly important role in this region in the decades since World War II, and it has, and will continue to have, a number of key national interests at play there, regardless of who is in control in Washington. What has mattered the most over the years, in Cook's estimation, is not only what national interests Washington deems key in the region, but how the United States goes about securing those interests.

With that in mind, Cook seeks to understand how things went so terribly wrong for the United States in the Middle East over the past three decades. Just as important is his claim that the United States had been successful in the region up to that point. What changed, why, and what should the United States do to rekindle the past flame of success?

Cook makes three straightforward arguments in his

book. “First, the United States successfully secured its interests in the Middle East throughout the Cold War” (4). “Second, beginning with the Clinton administration, American officials and the foreign-policy community sought to transform politics and society in the Middle East, which led to policy failures” (5). And third, even though the past three decades have been a failure, “withdrawal or retrenchment from the region is too radical a solution” (5).

Passport readers will be most familiar with the book’s early chapters, where the author discusses U.S. policy priorities during the Cold War. Some readers may find grounds for disagreement over what he views as America’s three main interests in the Middle East during the Cold War, which Cook sees as “preventing the disruption of oil exports from the region, helping to forestall threats to Israeli security, and, during the Cold War, containing the Soviet Union” (4). Cook makes a strong case for these three criteria, arguing that the United States was successful in achieving them. During this era, he wrote, the special sauce of success was that “the United States sought to prevent ‘bad things’ from happening to its interests” (5).

Cook covers the Cold War and America’s core interests during that era over two chapters, with one focusing on oil and one on the growing U.S.-Israeli relationship. Cook chose not to include a chapter specifically on the U.S.-Soviet rivalry in the region to avoid repetition and not overwhelm the analytical throughline. This is understandable, as most readers will have this background knowledge at hand, and, as the author notes, some of the key Cold War events are covered in the chapters on oil and Israel. Overall, though, more insights into the U.S.-Soviet regional competition, especially in light of Cook’s “realist-tinged” approach, would have strengthened his conception of what U.S. interests (and success) looked like. In a new era of great-power competition, this would have also provided a useful perspective for today’s policymakers as they shift away from their post-9/11 laser focus on counter-terrorism. Moreover, Cook makes note on more than one occasion that while U.S. policy during this period was successful overall, it was not “cost-free. Washington has been complicit in human rights violations, the denial of Palestinian rights, and has spilled a significant amount of blood” (128). More coverage of these failures during the Cold War would have provided a holistic picture of what “success” looked like. Likewise, discussing some of the successes of the post-Cold War period would provide the needed nuance of history to paint a more realistic or balanced picture of each period.

This book makes its most important contributions to the literature as it moves into more contemporary history and the current state of affairs. Conventional wisdom faults 9/11 and the George W. Bush administration’s disastrous invasion of Iraq and its policy of promoting regional democracy as the seeds of recent U.S. failures in the Middle East. While these decisions were obviously momentous, Cook, correctly, finds the origins of “Washington’s transformational vision for the Middle East” in the Clinton administration (7). The apparent U.S. victory in the Cold War and the relatively easy liberation of Kuwait “encouraged policymakers, analysts, journalists, and editors that made up the foreign-policy community to think in more ambitious terms: using American power to drive positive change” (66). It would have been interesting to consider in more detail how much of this attitude began with the George H.W. Bush administration.

Not only would this newfound desire to actively change

the region lead American policymakers to lose sight of the nation’s historical priorities in the Middle East, but it was also “based on a set of ideas about the Middle East that was deeply appealing to Americans. These assumptions placed a premium on economic development, averred that culture did not matter, claimed that democracy did not require democrats, and understood that Israel-Palestinian peace correlated with democracy and prosperity” (69). The issue with this, though, was that the leaders “of the region were hardly willing to reform themselves out of power through the changes that Washington was advocating” (7). This shift in American policymakers’ thinking was the set-up for failure over the next three decades.

Moving beyond the Clinton and Bush years, Cook notes that President Obama had a strong desire to retrench from the Middle East, especially with the “Pivot to Asia” policy articulated in his first administration. The Arab uprisings, however, changed things. Instead of “seeing the world as it is,” Obama began to fall into the trap of his two predecessors and “pursue the world as it should be” (89). This was most apparent “when he committed forces to what was essentially a NATO-led effort at regime change in Libya and the renewal of democracy promotion after the Arab uprisings.” Even the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear agreement with Iran was driven, according to Cook, in part by an American transformational vision. The unwillingness of America’s regional partners to accede to the agreement and its weaponization in U.S. domestic politics aided in its failure. But, as Cook argues, “implicit in the nuclear agreement was the idea that it could mitigate the threat of conflict, diminish the incentive for mischief-making on the part of all the relevant actors, and break Iran’s isolation, leading to a regional balance so that all countries could ‘share’ the region” (92-94). The United States was seeing the world as it should be once again.

Donald Trump hammered the U.S. foreign policy community and past presidents for their folly in the Middle East and was adamant in his desire to divest from the region. But, even his “record on retrenchment is decidedly mixed” (102). At times bombastic and potentially reckless—as with the assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani—he also chose to back away from a decades-long U.S. defense of Gulf oil supplies when he did not “respond to Iranian destruction of oil infrastructure in Saudi Arabia” (102). This decision, coupled with what regional allies viewed as American meekness toward Iran, went a long way to reinforce to “Washington’s regional partners that the United States, beset with its own problems, was exhausted and unwilling to play the role it had claimed for itself as the provider of regional security. In turn, Saudis, Emiratis, Israelis, Bahrainis, and Egyptians decided to try to resolve regional problems on their own” ...“America’s confusion about its role and the incoherence of its half in, half out policies yielded an entirely predictable result: the big hedge” (104).

Today the region is in flux. A number of Middle East regional powers seek hegemony, America’s biggest rivals, namely Russia and China, look to gain advantage when and where they can, and the United States remains confused as to its priorities and how to achieve them. One of the highlights of *The End of Ambition*, to my mind, is the author’s explanation of today’s realities, and his illustration of the different theories on how America should respond in the region. Even with an underlying belief in “the need for fundamental change in the American approach to the

region,” as Cook explains, many “mainstream analysts had a hard time shedding their liberal-internationalism” (109–110). Cook pushes back against notions of retrenchment, reduction, and withdrawal, though, in large part because the arguments for those policies lack historical depth.

Cook is at his best when providing readers with the book’s ultimate goal, which is to use historical analysis, combined with viewing our current “world as it is,” to provide policymakers and the foreign policy community with recommendations. He does so by first identifying the United States’ key regional interests moving forward. “Oil will remain central to the health of the global economy, the wealth of the United States, and the well-being of the American consumer,” according to the author (130). Likewise, Israel will continue to be important for the United States, but that does not mean it should be business-as-usual moving forward. In a post-9/11 world, countering terrorism will continue to be in the United States’ best interests, as is a continued policy of non-proliferation. An interesting, new, and important interest that Cook highlights is the need for U.S. policymakers to prioritize regional climate change issues. Poorly mitigated climate change in the region will almost certainly lead to millions of climate refugees in the coming decades, with massive repercussions for Europe, and, ultimately, the United States. We saw this happen in the last decade with the massive migrant flows to Europe due to the Arab Uprisings, and the political retrenchment to nationalism and populism in Europe that ensued. Finally, the United States must also prevent Russia and/or China from becoming the dominant external force in the region.

This seems like a daunting list of to-dos, especially when compared to America’s Cold War agenda, but it’s not when considered in light of what Washington has tried, and failed, to accomplish in the decades since the Cold War’s end. As Cook notes, the keys to America’s regional interests include “judiciousness, discretion, and efficiency,” and, most importantly, a return to “seeing the world as it is,” i.e. “prudential conservatism” (126). Maintaining the free flow of oil is a much cheaper and attainable goal for the United States than the regime change of the previous decades. Dealing with the on-the-ground realities in the region enables the United States to better position itself vis-à-vis Russia and China, and, seeking a new relationship with Israel that enables the Israelis to still defend themselves will strengthen the United States not only in the region, but internationally as well.

I worked in the Department of State on Middle East issues during the Arab Uprisings as both an intelligence analyst in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research and as a policy practitioner in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, and I remember the desire throughout the State Department and in the White House to push for reform in places like Bahrain and Yemen, among others. These policies emerged from intentions to make positive change, but they were naïve. While the United States should always champion reforms that make life more equitable for all of a country’s citizens, I agree with Cook’s assessment that regional authoritarian and/or monarchical leaders are never going to reform themselves out of power. Given these circumstances, Cook’s recommendations, for the most part, are a good place to start as the United States looks to find its new regional footing.

Ultimately, *The End of Ambition* is an important mix of history (both decades old and more contemporary), current theoretical arguments, and historical analysis that works to

elucidate possible current pathways for policymakers. As a U.S. diplomatic historian working at a policy school, I’d like to see more historians undertake work akin to this. To be clear, I don’t mean that every historian should provide policy recommendations, but more of us in this field should undertake research and writing that helps to answer deeper historical questions relevant to current policy. Oftentimes, but certainly not in this case, historians bemoan the historical research and analyses of political science and international affairs, but do nothing to intervene with better methods. It is important for us to remember, that if for nothing else, we study history to better understand the present.

Notes:

1. “Trump Shrugs Off Netanyahu on Gulf Tour,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 2025.
2. “5 Takeaways From Trump’s Gulf Tour, Beyond the Lavish Receptions,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 2025.
3. “Trump’s Pledge to the Middle East: No More ‘Lectures on How to Live’,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 2025.

Author’s Response

Steven Cook

I want to thank Brian Etheridge for organizing this “roundtable” on my book *The End of Ambition: America’s Past, Present, and Future*. I am particularly grateful to Kelly M. McFarland, Douglas Little, and Peter L. Hahn for the detailed and careful discussion of the manuscript. *The End of Ambition* is my fourth book and it never ceases to be a thrill to engage with readers, especially those with significant expertise in the subject matter.

Perhaps because Kelly McFarland and I are both based in Washington D.C. and, therefore, have a front row seat to the policymaking process, he immediately grasped what I was trying to do in *The End of Ambition*: critically assess the American approach to the Middle East against the background of recent history, ponder questions about America’s role in the region and in the world, and analyze the contemporary debates—especially inside the Beltway, but not exclusively—about the nature of U.S. interests in the Middle East and how to protect them. His primary critique concerning my decision not to include a chapter specifically about the Cold War is insightful. I would add that chapter if I were writing *The End of Ambition* now. I agree that such an addition would have sharpened my conception of American interests and what success looked like.

I very much appreciated Peter L. Hahn’s contribution to the discussion. Perhaps it is a function of where I sit and how debates in Washington are often flattened through the prism of America’s dysfunctional politics, but I was under the impression that I was providing nuance and complexity to the U.S. encounter with the Middle East. Hahn posits a number of questions that he suggests might have offered more of both. Fair enough, but the underlying logic of these questions are inconsistent with the historical record. For example, the 1953 coup in Iran was a far more complex political episode than Hahn’s assertion that it was undertaken to secure oil. I recommend that he (and Douglas Little for that matter) read my colleague Ray Takeyh’s excellent book *The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty*, which provides a more complex and nuanced account of Mossadegh’s ouster than the standard academic or journalistic accounts. I spent time in Tahrir Square during the uprising against Hosni Mubarak. Not a single protester with

whom I spoke during those incredible days mentioned the United States. As Glenn Robinson explicates in his extraordinary book, *Building A Palestinian State*, Hamas' emergence in the late 1980s had nothing to do with U.S. support for Israel, but was rather part of a struggle between Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Palestine branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. My point here is to suggest that perhaps there were questions that I should have addressed in *The End of Ambition*, but those Hahn poses are not the correct ones.

Another issue which I wish I had addressed more fully are the religious factors that contribute to American support for Israel. I referenced this issue a number of times in the text, but Hahn is correct, the topic requires a fuller explanation. The manuscript could have provided greater context to the "unbreakable bonds" and how Israeli security became an American interest in the Middle East. For those readers interested in this topic, I recommend Walter Russell Mead's, *The Arc of A Covenant*, which I read in both draft and its final form. It is quite long, but well worth the time.

Douglas Little's review was gratifying for the way he encapsulated the central argument of *The End of Ambition*, which is a signal that as an author, I did my job. That said, it is important for me to correct the record given a range of dubious assertions Little offers throughout his review. First, George H. W. Bush did not envision " 'a new world order' whose chief operating system would be democracy." As my mentor Richard N. Haass, who served President Bush, pointed out to me while I was doing research for the book, the new world order that Bush envisioned was one in which states adhered strictly to certain principles and norms, principally the illegitimacy of the acquisition of territory by force. After Bush's presidency, political entrepreneurs used Bush's new world order speech in pursuit of their transformational goals in the Middle East. Second, I believe I did say throughout the manuscript that policy makers often chose national interests over democracy. This was particularly the case during the post-WWII period, though even George W. Bush, who pushed a "Freedom Agenda" in the Middle East, blinked when he refused to recognize the outcome of the 2006 Palestinian elections.

Third, I did not recommend "doubling down" on the flow of oil from the Middle East or "strengthening Israel." I merely pointed out the fallacy of decarbonization (though that would be nice), which means that energy resources from the region will continue to be important to the United States. When it comes to Israel, my recommendation was to alter the way Washington and Jerusalem work together by phasing out the foreign military financing and memorandums of understanding that govern this assistance within a decade. I am not sure how that is doubling down, but I

am happy to be in bipartisan company advocating this idea including former U.S. ambassador to Israel, Daniel Kurtzer, and former National Security Council officials from President Donald Trump's first term, Victoria Coates and Robert Greenway. The idea has also caught the attention of the Likud Party's Amit Halevi and Shimon Peres's former advisor, Yossi Beilin. Finally, I was one of few D.C.-based analysts who did not get worked up about President Barack Obama's 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—a.k.a. the Iran nuclear deal. It was an arms control agreement that by all measures was working. President Trump left it in 2018, and during President Joe Biden's term, the Iranians made significant strides toward nuclear development. My critique was focused on the hunch at the heart of the JCPOA, which posited that the agreement was a pathway to better relations between the United States and the Islamic Republic. As I point out in the book, important players such as Obama-era deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes and the National Security Council's coordinator for the Central Region (which in the Obama administration comprised the Middle East plus Afghanistan) Philip Gordon made that clear. The problem was that there was no evidence that Iran's leaders wanted a new relationship with Washington or how the JCPOA was a route toward this goal.

Finally, when it comes to Bob Vitalis's review, I am convinced that this is the first time—and likely the last—that anyone will criticize me for trying to write in an engaging way at the expense of rigor. This is classic Bob, however. Indeed, it is part of his brand or more accurately, his schtick. Both Rachel Bronson's *Thicker than Oil* and Kiren Aziz Chaudhry's *The Price of Wealth* were generally well received except by Bob whose reviews were dripping in condescension, derisiveness, and outright cruelty. In Bob's most recent book, *America's Kingdom* (2007), he more than implies (without receipts) that the late George Lenczowski was in the pay of the House of Saud and suggests that Thomas Lippman was lazy and dim. This kind of writing may titillate some readers, but it hardly serves the broad scholarly enterprise to advance knowledge. That's too bad given Bob's fertile mind and interesting worldview. One correction: I am not a professor and have never been one, though I have taught a variety of courses at all levels at American University School of International Service, George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, and Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management.

I very much appreciate the important insights and questions from Professors McFarland, Hahn, and Little. It is exercises like this roundtable that in part made working on *The End of Ambition* worth it.

2026 Conference of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations

Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, June 25–27, 2026

The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) invites proposals for its 2026 annual conference. The deadline for proposals is **December 1, 2025**.

2026 marks the **250th anniversary** of the Declaration of Independence. In historian David Armitage's construction, it was a declaration of interdependence as much as independence: a strategic and legalistic move aimed at securing international recognition of the rebelling colonies as legitimate members of the global community of states. As a foundational act, it inspired numerous emulations abroad, while at home, it was also always partial and exclusionary, necessitating continual rearticulation under the pressures of violence, racism, empire, and capitalism. Special consideration at the 2026 conference will therefore be given to panels that consider questions of independence, sovereignty, and interdependence in the context of the United States' relationship with the world.

The Program Committee is particularly interested in proposals that address the following topics as they relate to the 250th anniversary: independence, sovereignty, and interdependence; environment and extraction; geographies/boundaries; violence and legitimacy; capitalism; colonialism; foundations and re-foundations; memory and



Courtesy National Archives. Berryman, Clifford. July 3, 1939. "Waiting for the New Declaration of Independence." NAID: 6012195Local ID: H-051. This cartoon by Clifford Berryman is a direct depiction of an opinion expressed in a *Washington Post* article which claimed that the actions taken by Congress at the time were essentially like creating a new constitution. Congress was able to pass or deny various legislation that then removed financial powers previously held by the President and gave it to the Congress.

commemoration; technology; practice and performance; democracy and authority; power and diplomacy.

SHAFR is dedicated to the study of the history of the United States in the world, broadly conceived. This includes not only foreign relations, diplomacy, statecraft, and strategy, but also heterogeneous approaches to Americans' relations with the wider world, including but not limited to global governance, transnational movements, religion, human rights, race, gender, political economy and business, immigration, borderlands, the environment, empire, and – more broadly – the projection of U.S. power and the various ways it has been received, negotiated, contested and resisted. SHAFR welcomes those who study any period, from the colonial era to the present. Given that the production, exercise, and understanding of U.S. power takes many forms and touches myriad subjects, the Program Committee welcomes proposals reflecting a broad range of approaches and topics.

The Program Committee welcomes panels that transcend conventional periodization, challenge received categories or otherwise offer innovative approaches and fresh thinking. SHAFR 2026 is particularly open to **sponsorship** of panels with professional associations. Please provide a letter of support from the sponsoring organization with your proposal.

Please visit the conference website (<https://shafr.memberclicks.net/shafr2026>) to access the application portal, Panelists-Seeking-Panelists Forum, and criteria for travel awards.

Proposals

All proposals should be submitted via Google Forms, with the proposal submitted as a single PDF document.

Traditional Panels allow scholars to share their research via a paper presentation. Panels consist of a chair, commentator, and three participants (20 minutes per presentation). Occasionally, a panel may have a fourth presenter, requiring presentations to be shortened to 15 minutes. One person may serve as both chair and commentator. Following the individual presentations, the commentator offers remarks.

- Title of panel and a short, one-paragraph description
- CV for each participant (1-2 pages)
- Email address of the designated contact person
- Description of papers (50-100 words each)
- Brief statement detailing how the submission advances SHAFR's commitment to equity, access, and representation (encouraged, but not mandatory)

Roundtables consist of a chair and 3-4 participants. This format can be used to discuss research, edited volumes, historiographical trends, or professional concerns. After the chair's introduction, each participant provides opening remarks of at least 5 minutes. Roundtables do not include individual presentations; instead, they focus on fostering a conversation among panelists.

- Title of panel and a one-paragraph description of the roundtable's topic AND the expected contribution of each participant
- CV for each participant (1-2 pages)
- Email address of the designated contact person
- Brief statement detailing how the submission advances SHAFR's commitment to equity, access, and representation (encouraged, but not mandatory)

Lightning Rounds are a fast-paced take on a traditional panel discussion. Participants on a lightning round are expected to pitch their research in 5-10 minutes, rather than deliver a full paper. Lightning rounds consist of a chair who introduces participants, keeps everyone on time, and moderates Q&A, alongside 5-7 participants. Lightning rounds are great opportunities for graduate students or those in the early stages of a project to share their work and receive feedback.

- Title of panel and a short, one-paragraph description
- CV for each participant (1-2 pages)
- Email address of the designated contact person
- Description of papers (50-100 words each)
- Brief statement detailing how the submission advances SHAFR's commitment to equity, access, and representation (encouraged, but not mandatory)

Fishbowls consist of a chair and several participants. This format is similar to a roundtable, but with greater fluidity and audience engagement. After the chair's introduction, each participant provides opening remarks of at least 5 minutes. Fishbowls are particularly effective for memorial sessions and anniversaries.

- Title of panel and a one-paragraph description of the roundtable's topic AND the expected contribution of each participant
- CV for each participant (1-2 pages)
- Email address of the designated contact person
- Brief statement detailing how the submission advances SHAFR's commitment to equity, access, and representation (encouraged, but not mandatory)

Individual paper proposals are also welcome, though complete panels with coherent themes will be favored over single papers. Those seeking to create or fill out a panel should use #SHAFR2026 on social media or consult the Panelists Seeking Panelists forum on the conference website.

SHAFR is committed to the values of equity, access, and representation. The organization invites proposals from all, especially scholars of color, those who identify as women, individuals residing outside the United States, junior and contingent faculty, scholars working in other fields and disciplines, and those who work in less commonly studied chronological periods or who engage with less traditional methodological approaches. The Program Committee welcomes—but does not require—proposals that include a statement detailing how their submission advances SHAFR's commitment to these values.

The Program Committee will develop a pool of potential commentators/chairs for panels constructed from individual proposals. If you are interested in volunteering for this pool, please contact the program co-chairs, Mario Del Pero and Tamson Pietsch, at program-chair@shafr.org. Senior scholars, in particular, are encouraged to volunteer.

Policies

Each conference participant may only serve on the program twice, each time in a different capacity. For example: one may serve once as a chair and once as a commentator; or once as panelist and once as chair or commentator. **No participant may appear on the program more than twice.** Any special scheduling requests (e.g., that a panel not take place on a particular day) must be made at the time of application and included in your proposal.

All proposals and funding applications should be submitted via the procedures outlined. Applicants requiring alternative means to submit the proposal should contact the program co-chairs via email at program-chair@shafr.org.

Generally, annual membership in SHAFR is required for those participating in the 2026 meeting. The president and Program Committee may (upon request) grant a few exemptions to scholars whose specializations are outside the field. Membership instructions will be included with notification of accepted proposals. Everyone appearing on the program must be registered no later than 30 days prior to the start of the conference.

SHAFR and the media occasionally record conference sessions for use in broadcast and electronic media. Presenters who do not wish for their session to be recorded may opt out when submitting a proposal to the Program Committee. An audience member who wishes to record audio or video of a panel must obtain written permission from panelists. SHAFR is not responsible for unauthorized recording. SHAFR reserves the right to revoke the registration of anyone who records sessions without appropriate permissions.

Funding Opportunities

SHAFR offers a variety of travel awards to help offset the cost of attending its annual conference. These awards, which vary in amount, are intended to support members who might otherwise face financial barriers to participation.

Funding requests will have no bearing on the committee's decisions on panels/papers, but funds will not be awarded unless the applicant's submission is accepted by the Program Committee in a separate decision. All travel awards are distributed on-site during the conference upon submission of receipts.

International members are especially encouraged to apply for travel funding; thanks to the generous support of donors, SHAFR has increased the number of awards available to global scholars.

Application deadline: **January 1, 2026.**

Divine Graduate Student Travel Grants

SHAFR will award several Robert A. and Barbara Divine Graduate Student Travel Grants to assist graduate students presenting papers at the 2026 conference. No award will exceed \$500. Priority will be given to graduate students who receive no or limited funds from their home institutions.

Applications must include: a copy of the individual paper proposal along with a short cv (2-page maximum), a 1-page letter from the applicant, proposed budget, and an email from the graduate advisor that confirms the lack of departmental travel funds.

SHAFR Global Scholars and Diversity Grants

These grants are aimed at scholars whose participation in the annual meeting helps to diversify the organization. Preference will be given to individuals who have not previously presented at the annual meeting. The awards are intended for scholars who represent groups historically underrepresented at SHAFR, scholars who offer diverse and complementary intellectual approaches, and scholars from outside the United States. "Scholars" includes faculty, graduate students, and independent researchers. To further integrate grant winners into SHAFR, awards include a one-year membership to the organization, with subscriptions to *Diplomatic History* and *Passport*.

Applicants should submit a copy of their individual paper proposal along with a short cv (2-page maximum), proposed budget, and a 2-3 paragraph essay addressing the fellowship criteria (including data on previous SHAFR meetings attended and funding received).

Leffler Scholars Travel Grants

Leffler Scholars grants subsidize SHAFR conference attendance by members who hold a Ph.D. and who aspire to attend the conference but lack professional funding to do so. This includes contingent faculty, K-12 educators, independent scholars, and those working off the tenure track.

Applications must include: a copy of the individual paper proposal along with a short cv (2-page maximum), proposed budget, and a 1-page letter from the applicant addressing the fellowship criteria.

A Roundtable on the Cold War International History Project

Mark Kramer, Leopoldo Nuti, Hope Harrison, Alexandra Southgate, and Michael P. Brill

By executive order the Trump administration defunded the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars earlier this year. Passport asked historians familiar with the Wilson Center, and its Cold War International History Project in particular, to reflect on the impact of its decades-long work on their careers.
-BCE and SZ

A Tribute to the Woodrow Wilson Center

Mark Kramer

In mid-March 2025, I was dismayed to learn that President Donald J. Trump had signed an executive order providing for the closure of several highly esteemed U.S. government entities, including broadcast stations that played important roles in U.S. foreign policy both during and after the Cold War. Among the targets for closure was the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (WWICS), a think-tank set up by the U.S. Congress in October 1968 under the broad auspices of the Smithsonian Institution. The founding legislation called for the WWICS to serve as an autonomous, bipartisan source of analysis and advice, “strengthening the fruitful relation between the world of learning and the world of public affairs” and promoting the “diffusion of knowledge.” Over the next six decades, the Center splendidly fulfilled that goal, becoming one of the world’s most prestigious institutes dealing with foreign policy, international history, and other such topics.

My own close ties to the WWICS, especially to the Center’s Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) and History and Public Policy Program, date back nearly 35 years. I was one of the founding scholars of the CWIHP and have remained staunchly supportive of it to this day. In early 1992, someone from Washington, DC, who identified himself as Jim Hershberg called me at my Harvard office and asked whether I could meet with him to discuss a project that might be intellectually rewarding. Not knowing quite what to expect, I met Jim a few days later at a dingy restaurant in Harvard Square. He insisted that, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the demise of Communist regimes in East-Central Europe, valuable opportunities were opening for scholarly research in formerly closed archives. He explained that he had been appointed

director of a new project at the Woodrow Wilson Center that would seek to encourage archival research and thereby enhance the “diffusion of knowledge.” He said he had heard that I know all the languages of the former Warsaw Pact (and later noted that I “speak all of them with a Boston accent”), and he wondered whether I would be interested in pursuing archival research in those languages. Despite some initial misgivings (my training was originally in mathematics, languages, and international relations, not in history), I found Jim’s enthusiasm contagious. It proved to be the start of a wonderful friendship — and the start of a new academic orientation for me.

Under Jim’s expert leadership, the CWIHP made immense contributions to the study of the Cold War. I was among the younger scholars who received grants and administrative support from the CWIHP to pursue archival research in all the countries of the former Soviet bloc as well as numerous other repositories around the world. Working both separately and together, we amassed enormous quantities of photocopied documents and gave copies to the CWIHP, which served as a clearinghouse for recently declassified items from all sides of the Cold War. In the 1990s, Jim frequently put out a publication known as the *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, which grew steadily in size over time, at one point reaching 1,200 densely printed pages. The *Bulletin*, which was circulated all over the world and was avidly read by established scholars as well as graduate students, journalists, and policymakers, featured translations of recently declassified sets of documents along with commentaries and analyses by scholars and reminiscences by former public officials. Occasionally, a longer overview piece or forum would appear.

The production schedule of the *CWIHP Bulletin* in those days was delightfully chaotic. I remember one time when Jim phoned me in my office in the wee hours of the morning and asked, “Mark, would you be willing to review a couple of books for the next issue of the *Bulletin*? I have some blank space I need to fill.” I told him I was willing to do it, and I asked when he would need it. He replied: “How about later today?” In the end, I sent the review a few days later, and it appeared in *Bulletin* no. 6/7 (Winter 1995), pp. 277, 294 (pagination in those days was sometimes chaotic, too).

Jim set up extremely fruitful partnerships for the CWIHP with both the National Security Archive (a private, non-governmental organization based in Washington, DC) and, a few years later, the newly formed Cold War Studies program at Harvard University, which was carefully designed to complement rather than duplicate the functions of the CWIHP and National Security Archive. The CWIHP and National Security Archive cosponsored conferences and other events that brought scholars together to focus on a particular event or theme. Those events gave rise to cutting-edge scholarship, systematic declassification of archival evidence, and new topics for researchers to explore. The CWIHP and National Security Archive also worked diligently to collect and make available vast quantities of documents from other sources, generating a wealth of material that was eagerly examined by scholars, journalists, public officials (current and former), and the wider public. It is hard to imagine a better fulfillment of the U.S. Congress’s declared aim in 1968 of setting up a research center that

would contribute to “the increase and diffusion of knowledge.”

The CWIHP got started in the early years of the Internet, before the World Wide Web was opened to the public in 1993-1994. During that initial period, copies of documents came mostly in the form of photocopies and microfilms, which were stored (sometimes chaotically) at the Woodrow Wilson Center’s offices for scholars to consult and reproduce on-site. By the time Jim Hershberg’s tenure as director of the CWIHP was ending in the late 1990s (he moved on to become a professor of history at George Washington University, where he still is today), the scholarly world was entering the digital age. Jim’s successor, David Wolff, served only briefly as director of the CWIHP, but he was instrumental in expediting the project’s transition into the digital era, setting up new electronic platforms for the *CWIHP Bulletin*, CWIHP Working Papers, and other resources.

After David moved on to become a professor of history at Hokkaido University in Japan, the CWIHP came under the leadership of Christian Ostermann, who served as director for nearly a quarter century, fully completing the transition to the digital world. Christian, like Jim and David, is a top-notch scholar himself, and he set a standard of professionalism in the running of the CWIHP that is hard to overstate. The digitized dissemination of newly declassified and translated archival materials brought scholarship to a whole new level. Under the combined leadership of Jim, David, and Christian, the CWIHP gained a legendary reputation among scholars of the Cold War.

The Woodrow Wilson Center’s History and Public Policy Program, chaired by Christian, spawned other invaluable projects that supplemented the CWIHP, especially a project on the history of nuclear weapons and nuclear proliferation and another project on the history of the North Korean Communist regime and its fractious relations with external powers, including South Korea. All of these offshoots, under Christian’s guidance, produced reams of historical evidence and analysis that are a lasting gold mine for experts, students, journalists, and everyone else with an interest in the history of the 20th century and the implications of past events for U.S. foreign policy and global affairs in the 21st century. The Woodrow Wilson Center’s various programs also offered invaluable internships and research opportunities for Ph.D. candidates and even undergraduates who wanted one of the most intellectually rewarding experiences a student could ask for. Numerous first-rate scholars emerged from the ranks of those who once worked as interns at the CWIHP (indeed, Christian himself had started out as an aide to Jim during the early years of the project).

Much as I admired all the programs and branches of the Woodrow Wilson Center over the years, my heart was always with the CWIHP most of all. That will remain the case in whatever incarnation the project takes in the future outside the federal government. Jim Hershberg, David Wolff, and Christian Ostermann — and all the first-rate assistants who worked with them over the years — lived up to exactly what the founding legislation of the Woodrow Wilson Center envisaged. They deserve gratitude from everyone who values academic achievement and the highest standards of scholarship. But after a 30-year career as a distinguished public servant and scholar who solidified “the fruitful relation between the world of learning and the world of public affairs,” Christian was rewarded with a terse notice from the federal Office of Personnel Manage-

ment (on behalf of the so-called Department of Government Efficiency) telling him that he was immediately being put on paid administrative leave for three months and then would be dismissed altogether. No explanation was offered, and no legitimate rationale would have been feasible.

Although many events in the United States in 2025 have marked surprising departures from the past, perhaps the most baffling for me has been the sudden, pointless decision by the Trump administration in March to disband one of the world’s most prominent and highly regarded research institutes. The lack of any real congressional pushback has also been baffling — and dismaying. Someday in the future, new members of Congress may well recognize the folly of what was done with the Woodrow Wilson Center in 2025, and they might try to reestablish an autonomous think-tank to produce high-class scholarship and advice on a bipartisan basis. If that happens, the entities that are set up should examine the record of the CWIHP and the History and Public Policy Program for useful guidance on how to excel at the legislative mandate they have been given.

Leopold Nuti on the CWIHP

My experience with the CWIHP coincided with my coming of age as a scholar. When the project was launched in 1991 I was a post-doc at the Kennedy school and about to take up my first job as associate professor at the University of Catania, in Italy, the following year. As it happened to most Cold War historians of my generation, CWIHP was a transformative experience. It shaped the way we thought about our craft so profoundly that it affected not only the way we worked but to a large extent the way we looked at the world.

Back then Cold War historians were trained to rely on Western sources and enjoy the relative availability of Western archives. As late as in the mid-1980s Cold War history was still being written mostly on a national basis, at best comparing the different national approaches of the Western countries or, in the case of some of us, by studying transatlantic relations or European integration. That was as transnational as you could be, at the time. None imagined that the way we studied the Cold War would one day be based on the access to the archival sources of the other side.

I was lucky enough at the time to be involved with two large international projects, namely “Power in Europe” and the “Nuclear History Program”, which were the state of the art in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Both were based among some of the best research centers in Western Europe and in the United States. The first was based entirely on the exploration of how four Western European countries (France, Great Britain, the Federal Republic of Germany and Italy) dealt with the transition from World War II to the birth of a new international system — and the very idea of expanding the scope of the project beyond the Iron Curtain was just plainly unthinkable. The second had been conceived when the Euromissile crisis was winding down and it was mostly focused on the history of the nuclear choices of the Western alliance: its approach to nuclear history was to study — at least in its early years — *Western* nuclear history.

Then sometime around 1990 and 1991 some exotic figures began to appear at some of the NHP meetings — Russians! And those who had the linguistic skills to do so began to explore the archives of the other side. Soviet archives? Really? You mean you could *actually* read and study what the other side thought? When the Wilson Center

launched the Cold War International History Project and started an organized effort to promote the new scholarship, it completely transformed the way historians thought, studied and wrote about the Cold War. The availability of this historiography and of the sources on which it was based, generously shared by the CWIHP, challenged old interpretations and made old Western debates look suddenly somewhat archaic. By showing what was happening on the other side and revealing an infinitely more nuanced and sophisticated picture of the Soviet Union and its allies, it forced us to rethink our own approach and revisit our entire understanding of the second half of the Twentieth century.

The transformation looked so shocking at the time that it took several years to absorb and metabolize its full impact. I still remember how many European scholars of the older generations approached the novelty with skepticism, dismissing its findings as irrelevant and for a long time failing to understand the effect which this cultural revolution was going to have on the way we worked.

Not my mentor, Ennio Di Nolfo, a man whose superb intelligence was matched by an inexhaustible curiosity for the new and the original, and who shared my own eagerness to keep abreast of what was being produced by the new wave of historical research. For him, myself, and those of us in Western Europe who began to appreciate what was happening, the Cold War International History Project and, above all, its precious Bulletin became the fundamental pillar of our research. In a pre-digital age, when the circulation of news was still mostly relaying on printed paper, the Bulletin was the coveted gate to a whole new world of dizzying vistas which completely reshaped the way we studied the international system of the last forty years. I still remember the pride with which I walked into the classroom with the latest copy freshly (so to speak) delivered and enjoyed using it as the coolest teaching tool one could think of. Reading the *Bulletin*, and then the *CWIHP Working papers*, gave you the feeling that you were ahead of the curve, that an entire new world of research was unfolding before your eyes and that you could be a part of it. And ever since the CWIHP was created, you simply could no longer write about the history of the Cold War without taking advantage of its ever-growing treasure trove of documents, articles and working papers. Not to mention the fact that CWIHP also created a new way of writing international history and an entire community of scholars who eagerly looked forward to exchanging ideas and information about whatever new documents they had come across.

As for how all this affected my own personal research, in the 1990s I was working on a book on US-Italian relations in the Eisenhower and, above all, in the Kennedy years. It was an attempt to explore how, and to what extent, US foreign policy affected the evolution of Italian domestic politics by going beyond the platitudes of the all-powerful hegemon and the similarly useless framework which minimized the US impact on the Italian domestic scene. CWIHP's new findings and, above all, its new methodological approach deeply affected the way I conceived of my own work. The steady stream of new revelations about the Eastern bloc and its policies altered the context in which my own story was based and helped me develop a sense of the intricacies and the nuances of Cold War politics. And by setting such a high methodological standard with its insistence on multi-archival research, CWIHP challenged me to keep looking for more sources – not in those Eastern

European archives which my limited linguistic skills never allowed me to make use of, but both in the US and across Western Europe.

Gradually the impact of the historiographical revolution that rotated around the CWIHP began to spread beyond the initial inner circle. A major role in Italy was played by the crucial new textbook that Ennio Di Nolfo first published in 1994, *Storia delle relazioni internazionali 1918-1992*, which was the first college level textbook to incorporate some of the CWIHP's early findings. For the next 30 years, regularly updated by Di Nolfo until he passed away in 2016, this textbook became the standard reference work which introduced several generations of Italian students and scholars to the new perspective on the Cold war that the CWIHP had created. Its impact on Italian historiography cannot be underestimated.

By the end of the 1990s, thanks to our mutual friend Hope Harrison, I got to know the new Director of the CWIHP, Christian Ostermann, and this started an academic cooperation and a close personal friendship that continues to this day and that has led us to many joint academic initiatives. Beginning in 2002, we began a series of joint conferences which brought together large group of scholars. We tried to apply the lessons of the new historiography to the late years of the Cold War, from the origins of détente to its unfolding, its crisis and up to the end of the Cold War.

My personal connection with Christian then moved into an entirely new direction when we started thinking about how we could apply the methodology and the approach of the CWIHP to a new field of historical research that would trespass the chronological boundaries of the Cold War. By the end of the first decade of the new century we began to discuss our ideas with a group of advisers (Marty Sherwin, David Holloway and Joe Pilat) and we launched the Nuclear Proliferation International History Project, which was largely based on Christian's experience as CWIHP Director. For the next 15 years, NPIHP has tried to encourage a new generation of historians to look at the impact of nuclear weapons on the evolution of international history by expanding archival research beyond the traditional scope of Western sources (although by no means discouraging their use!). NPIHP has created a network of historians that have written about South Africa, India, Pakistan, Brazil, Ukraine and many other countries, often digging out fresh new sources that have contributed to promote a better understanding of nuclear history on a truly global scale. In the meantime, the staff of the History and Public policy program at the Wilson Center created a wonderful digital archive where the many primary sources collected by both CWIHP and NPIHP could be made available to thousands of scholars worldwide.

Hope M. Harrison

For nearly my entire professional life, CWIHP has been a key part of my research and teaching. It has long provided three essential services to the profession, to scholars and students alike: access to troves of translated and untranslated documents from the communist world (most of which are accessible via the Digital Archive of CWIHP's broader home base, the History and Public Policy Program, HAPP, at the Wilson Center); conferences related to key aspects of the Cold War; and publications in the

form of Working Papers and articles in the CWIHP Bulletin. These publications have been invaluable for providing an outlet for the speedy dissemination of new information about the Cold War (in comparison to the much slower turn-around time of peer-reviewed journals) gleaned from archives on the other side of the former Iron Curtain. This has benefited everyone interested in Cold War history from senior scholars to students to the general public and the media. CWIHP's Working Papers and Bulletin series have also provided young scholars making their way in the profession a very helpful platform for connecting their name to their research, myself included.

In 1992, while conducting dissertation research in archives in Moscow and Berlin on the origins of the communist decision to build the Berlin Wall, I received an email from the first CWIHP director, Jim Hershberg, asking me to write a diary of my experiences in the archives. Since I was one of the first Western historians to be working in the former top-secret party and government archives in both cities, Jim thought many would be interested in my experiences. I gladly complied with Jim's request, and my diary was published in CWIHP Bulletin No. 2 in fall 1992.

Shortly thereafter, CWIHP came to an agreement with the Central Communist Party Archive in Moscow, allowing me and other scholars to gain access to important documents and present our results at a conference in Moscow in January 1993. Bringing us all together to share our results was an extraordinary experience. We all learned so much from each other and from what we were finding in the archives. As a result, I had the material to publish CWIHP Working Paper No. 5 in May 1993, "Ulbricht and the 'Concrete Rose.'" Over the course of 55 pages, this paper described East German leader Walter Ulbricht's policies which pushed Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to acquiesce in sealing the border in Berlin, something Khrushchev had long resisted. The Working Paper was followed by appendices with my translations of nine top-level Soviet and East German documents, including letters between the two party chiefs, their speeches at the early August 1961 Warsaw Pact meeting, and a memorandum of their lengthy conversation in Moscow in late November 1960.

New findings published in the early 1990s in CWIHP Working Papers inspired SHAFR's leadership in 1994 to invite a few of us to present our work at the opening plenary session at the annual conference. The impact of that on my career was astonishing: I was approached by a publisher from Princeton University Press who said, "I want to publish your book." I will never forget that day, and without CWIHP, it may not have happened. Princeton did indeed publish my book in 2003: *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961*.

Between the 1993 conference in Moscow (the year I also completed my dissertation) and the publication of my book ten years later, I made frequent return trips to the archives in Moscow and Berlin, living in both cities for months or even years at a time, and participated in many CWIHP conferences, including in Berlin, Budapest, Beijing, Prague, Warsaw, Washington, DC, and elsewhere. These conferences offered me crucial opportunities to present and get feedback on chapters or sections of the book manuscript I was writing as I revised and added to my dissertation. The conferences also created a strong network of Cold War scholars around the world and made us feel we were part of a community, and a globe-trotting one at that. It was a dream-come-true for a young scholar such as myself (actu-

ally, when I started my dissertation work in the late 1980s, I could have never dreamed that anything like this would happen). Once we had access to email (a new thing for most of us in the 1990s!), we could follow up more easily on the connections we made at conferences.

In 1994, CWIHP co-sponsored a conference in Essen, Germany on the Berlin Crisis of 1958-61. Joining scholars from all over the world in presenting new research on this was invaluable and helped me start revising what would become the last two chapters of my book manuscript. The same was the case at another CWIHP co-sponsored conference in Potsdam, Germany in 1996, this time with the focus on the June 1953 East German Uprising, the subject of a key section of Chapter One of my manuscript. Likewise, the CWIHP co-sponsored conference in Budapest in 1996 for the 40th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution offered me a great chance to present parts of Chapter 2 about the significant impact of the Hungarian Revolution on developments in East Germany. The opportunity to take a tour of the city with someone who experienced the revolution and showed us key sites connected to it was unforgettable and has inspired my teaching on 1956 ever since. Similarly, in Beijing in 1997, it was very useful for me to present sections of Chapters 3 and 4 of my manuscript on the ways the East German leaders tried to use their relationship with Mao's China to put pressure on Khrushchev not to be too friendly to the West and to agree to seal the border in Berlin. In 2000, many of us were back in Moscow for a conference on "The New Cold War History," and in 2001, I presented at another CWIHP co-sponsored conference on "The Rise and Fall of the Berlin Wall," marking the 40th anniversary of the erection of the Wall. This allowed me to present a nearly final version of the climactic chapter of my manuscript on the building of the Wall. All of these conferences pushed me to complete drafts of chapters and gave me invaluable feedback.

After the 2003 publication of my book, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961*, the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (now the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies) awarded the book the 2004 Marshall Shulman Book Prize for "an outstanding monograph dealing with the international relations, foreign policy, or foreign-policy decision-making of any of the states of the former Soviet Union or Eastern Europe." It would have never been possible for me to write this book if the Cold War hadn't ended and CWIHP hadn't been created to move quickly and creatively to reach out to the leaders of the communist party archives in Moscow and elsewhere to get access and organize conferences. The CWIHP conferences also added some great fun along the way, since it was often quite stressful working in the archives, particularly those in Moscow. Having the chance to compare notes with others and gripe about problems we faced was something we all needed. And the publications of the CWIHP Working Papers, Bulletins, and conference proceedings always gave us lots of productive reading material, allowing us to see how our research results compared with those of others.

After benefiting from Jim Hershberg's leadership of CWIHP (and then joining him as a professor at George Washington University) as well as David Wolff's leadership, I was delighted when Christian Ostermann became the director. With both of us working on East Germany, albeit he on US policy toward East Germany and me on Soviet-East German relations, we had spent much time together over

the years talking about our research, including during my multiple short-term stays at the Wilson Center as a public policy scholar and my year-long stint as a Wilson Center Fellow. In fact, Christian was the primary critical reader of my book manuscript, giving me countless good ideas to make it better. He continued in that role with my second book, *After the Berlin Wall: Memory and the Making of the New Germany, 1989 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2019).

Since 2020, I have had the honor of serving as co-chair, together with Melvyn P. Leffler, of the Advisory Council of the Wilson Center's History and Public Policy Program, of which CWIHP is an essential part. At the core of HAPP and CWIHP is the Wilson Center's Digital Archive of documents from former communist archives, to which I and so many others have contributed. These documents, many in English translation as well as in the original, are invaluable teaching tools for professors and learning tools for students. I use them extensively in the courses I teach on international Cold War History, Germany since 1945, and the Soviet Union and Russia since 1917, as do professors around the world. The documents have formed a core foundation for countless senior theses, MA theses and doctoral dissertations.

Having worked closely with CWIHP and the Wilson Center for more than 33 years, I believe it is essential that they and their unique resources continue to exist far into the future. I know that I am not alone in being prepared to do whatever I can to help make that possible.

Reflections on the Wilson Center from a Student Perspective

Alexandra Southgate

It feels almost redundant to say that the Wilson Center has been an invaluable resource and support for young historians. I have been using Wilson Center materials for what feels like the whole of my time as a history student, before I even thought of myself as a historian. While digging in my Google Drive, I even found an assignment from a third-year digital history course where I analyzed Cold War digital archives, including the Wilson Center Digital Archive. (In that assignment I wrote: "Archives are useful and powerful tools and should not be entombed in inaccessible institutional catacombs." A bit inelegant, perhaps, but I stand by it). More importantly, during my MA at the University of Toronto I used materials from the Digital Archive while writing papers during coursework and for my final major research project. This was crucial as I completed my MA at the height of the 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns. Simply put, I could not have finished my masters without access to digital archival sources such as the ones hosted by the Wilson Center's Digital Archive. And I know that I am not alone in this; many of my peers studying the Cold War, and foreign relations more broadly, regularly make use of these materials. These digital resources are particularly important for students and contingent scholars who are not always able to plan major research trips. The impacts of cuts to publicly accessible archival sources will be most keenly felt by these scholars for whom digital archives are not supplementary but integral.

As well as using the digital resources created by the Wilson Center, I have also been fortunate enough to participate in one of their many programs. In 2021–2022 I was a Cold War Archives Research (CWAR) Graduate Fellow.

This program brought together a group of graduate students for a year of monthly seminars on archival methods and culminated in a trip to Budapest to research the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at the Central European University and present research at the Corvinus University International Student Conference. I participated in the program during my first year of my PhD program and it shaped how I approached putting together a dissertation project. The seminar sessions with historians and archivists encouraged me to think broadly about sources and methods and to internationalize and pluralize Cold War history in practical ways. (It was also in one of these sessions that I learned about using a scanner app rather than just my phone camera to scan archival documents which changed my life!) I went to Budapest with some ideas for my dissertation but no clear picture and came away, not with all the answers, but having had meaningful conversations that pushed me in the right direction. It was a wonderfully nerdy week of exploring the city, conducting research, and making lasting friendships. For graduate students, opportunities such as the CWAR Fellowship have a serious impact on how we approach our studies and, perhaps more importantly, allow us to build community.

Historians aren't always inclined to think collaboratively. Archival research is usually a solitary task and the pressures of academia can easily foster a scarcity mindset—it's easy to guard our archival findings like a dragon's hoard and view peers as competitors. The CWAR Institute, and the Wilson Center more broadly, encouraged us to break from this mold. We worked together in the archive, talking and sharing boxes, and having fun. It felt like the community building was just as important as the academic work we were there to complete. This cooperative approach to research and to history was impactful for me as I was just starting out in graduate school and trying to make sense of my place in the field. I continue to be very grateful to the Wilson Center, and the other hosts of the CWAR Institute, for making this space for connection and collaboration.

Bridging "the world of learning with the world of public affairs": The Tragedy of the Wilson Center and the Legacy of the Saddam Files and Cold War International History Project

Michael P. Brill

On March 14, 2025, President Donald Trump signed an executive order titled, "Continuing the Reduction of the Federal Bureaucracy." Among the listed "elements of the Federal bureaucracy that the President has determined are unnecessary" was the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in the Smithsonian Institution. The Wilson Center was named alongside the Institute of Museum and Library Services and several other agencies. The order required the listed entities to eliminate their "non-statutory components and functions" to "the maximum extent consistent with applicable law," and instructed their heads to submit a plan for compliance to the Director of the Office of Management and Budget within seven days.¹

The sweeping nature of the order and the limited time provided for complying with it hardly accounted for the many distinguished programs at the Wilson Center, which had their own staffs, operations, and donors. Among the

programs was the History and Public Policy Program, home of the Cold War International History Project and the Digital Archive, which made thousands of pages of formerly classified documents from around the world freely available in English translation, usually accompanied by the original sources as well. Despite the project's origins in the archives of the former Soviet Union, the Digital Archive's holdings expanded to include many regions, including the Middle East, under the leadership of Director Christian Ostermann, Deputy Director Charles Kraus, Program Associate Kian Byrne, and Program Coordinator Pieter Biersteker. Between 2024 and 2025, I had the privilege of working with them as a Wilson Center Global Fellow.

For more than a decade, the Digital Archive hosted a selection of translated documents related to Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) programs and the Iran-Iraq War. The visibility and accessibility of these records led Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author Steve Coll to partner with the History and Public Policy Program after obtaining a related trove of Iraqi records in a settlement with the Department of Defense in 2022.² Between early 2024 and early 2025, beginning with the publication of Coll's book *The Achilles Trap: Saddam Hussein, The C.I.A., and the Origins of America's Invasion of Iraq*, Iraqi records were added to the Digital Archive in five releases.³ The two remaining releases were abruptly delayed until both the Cold War International History Project and History and Public Policy Program have settled into their new institutional settings.

At the time of the executive order in March, the History and Public Policy Program was preparing to release its first collection of translated and redacted documents from the security services of Bashar al-Assad's regime, which was overthrown in a rebel offensive only a few months prior in December 2024. Gareth Browne, reporting for *The Economist*, was one of the first Western journalists to enter Damascus in the wake of the rebel offensive and photographed a trove of General Security Directorate documents he found after arriving at the headquarters building.⁴ In April, during the same week that the political storm clouds were beginning their final descent on the Wilson Center, the History and Public Policy Program obtained several thousand pages of digital and photographed Assad regime documents from *The Times*.⁵ Like the remaining Iraqi records, which included audio files of Saddam's meetings, the release of these sources on the Digital Archive awaits the next chapter in the History and Public Policy Program and the Cold War International History Project.

The Wilson Center Besieged

Under President and CEO Mark Andrew Green, a former Republican congressman from Wisconsin, US ambassador to Tanzania, and Director of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) during Trump's first term, the Wilson Center quickly submitted a plan to comply with the executive order. Hoping the center could maintain a low profile and taking some comfort in the fact that two-thirds to seventy percent of its funding came from private donors, Green attempted to safely navigate the war on federal government bureaucracy that had accompanied the beginning of Trump's second term. Congressionally chartered and "fiercely nonpartisan," as was the Wilson Center's motto, the institution had existed since 1968 as a public-private think-tank and memorial to Presi-

dent Woodrow Wilson, receiving an annual appropriation from Congress that amounted to a minority of its overall funding. Home to a growing list of regional and thematic programs and institutes, it was under the leadership of President and CEO Lee Hamilton, a former Congressman who had represented Indiana for 35 years, that the Wilson Center was deliberately oriented towards foreign affairs and policy relevance in close collaboration with Congress.⁶ Hamilton was succeeded by Jane Harman, previously a Congresswoman from California and veteran of all House security committees, who in turn further strengthened the Wilson Center's ties to Congress and the policy world during her tenure as the institution's first female leader.⁷

An ominous foreshadowing from the first day Trump returned to the White House was his announcement that he had fired Brian Hook, the special envoy for Iran during his first term, from the Wilson Center's board of trustees.⁸ The next warnings were the Department of Government Efficiency's (DOGE) destruction of USAID under Elon Musk's direction between January and February,⁹ followed by the newly established agency's hostile takeover of the non-profit United States Institute of Peace (USIP) under President and CEO George Moose in March.¹⁰ Easily overlooked and barely reported on amidst this cascade of events, Trump quietly continued to remove members of the Wilson Center's bipartisan board of trustees, staffing the body with officials from his administration and other partisan political loyalists.¹¹

The quiet remaking of the Wilson Center's board of trustees was the prelude to an attack on the institution by DOGE.¹² Members of Musk's outfit arrived at the Wilson Center on March 31st, completely and willfully ignorant of the fact that most of the center's funding came from private sources, along with the most basic information about its functions and operations. On April 1st, members of DOGE informed Green that he could resign or the newly installed board of trustees would vote for his removal. Green opted for the former and left quietly without a fight, in sharp contrast to his counterpart Moose at USIP, whose fierce resistance to DOGE depredations resulted in a protracted legal battle.¹³

Despite the Center's best efforts to stay out of the DOGE crosshairs, the conservative Heritage Foundation, which played a leading role in shaping the second Trump administration's policy agenda, had previously advocated against the Wilson Center. In the Heritage Foundation's budget blueprint for fiscal year 2023, a policy recommendation read "No new appropriations should be provided for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars." While going on to note that a majority of the Wilson Center's funding came from private donors and that the institution "can thus clearly operate without federal funds," the Heritage Foundation recommendation justified its position on the basis of "Funding the operations of a general think tank that engages in independent research is outside the proper scope of the federal government." Perhaps most consequentially though, the policy recommendation was titled "Eliminate Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars," which may very well have been the only line anyone in the White House or DOGE read in the early months of 2025.¹⁴

On Thursday April 3rd, 130 Wilson Center employees were placed on leave and told they would no longer be able to access their offices or email accounts after the end of the day.¹⁵ I arrived at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center that morning on a previously

planned visit to the Wilson Center's History and Public Policy Program. However, the building's Triple Canopy private security guards were already taking their orders from DOGE. When I provided the names Christian Ostermann and Charles Kraus, the director and deputy director of the History and Public Policy Program, respectively, one guard told me they were busy packing up their things and could not see me. I was only able to enter after calling Joby Warrick, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author at *The Washington Post*, who was a research fellow at the Wilson Center working on his next book project. Escorted into the elevator by Warrick, I was then able to be a first-hand witness to the senseless vandalism and destruction of decades worth of accumulated work at the hands of people proudly ignorant of the most basic details of what they were destroying.

On April 4th, Congresswoman Chellie Pingree, a Maine Democrat and the ranking member on the House Appropriations Subcommittee, which oversees the Wilson Center, released a statement strongly condemning the actions of DOGE and the Trump administration. Pingree stated, "The illegal closure of the Wilson Center is the latest public-private partnership to be dismantled by the Trump Administration. Congress created this institution to advance independent thinking and thoughtful debate." The Maine Democrat concluded, "Unless this action is reversed, our country—and our policymakers—will lose a valuable resource that bridges the world of learning with the world of public affairs."¹⁶

With no will among Congressional Republicans to challenge Trump and DOGE under Musk, the depredations against the Wilson Center could not be reversed. Although the aggressing parties lacked the ability to destroy the individual programs supported by private donors, they did eliminate their ability to thrive under one roof, the space for which was quickly eyed as the new headquarters building for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.¹⁷ Pingree's words on the loss to policymakers were prescient given the direct interest many took in the research of the Wilson Center's programs, which often had direct bearing on their own work.

Saddam, Iraqi Records, and the Future of the Cold War International History Project

In addition to generating considerable interest among scholars and students of history around the world, the release of Iraqi records on the Digital Archive received questions and supportive comments from current and former members of the U.S. military, the departments of Defense, State, Justice, and Homeland Security, along with the Central Intelligence Agency. Even when the documents were not directly related to investigations undertaken by the departments of Justice and Homeland Security, they were often still very useful for understanding the military and security bureaucracies of Saddam's regime. And in contrast to many other institutions, which focus their efforts primarily on acquiring archival collections, the History and Public Policy Program went to great lengths in hosting events with scholars and policymakers. This approach also included publishing papers and posts on the program's *Sources and Methods* blog, introducing and contextualizing archival records.

During the brief life of the Conflict Records Research Center at the National Defense University between the 2010

and 2015, which was the original source of Iraqi records from Saddam's regime on the Digital Archive, the History and Public Policy Program and Cold War International History Project sponsored events such as the "International History of the Iran-Iraq War," "Archives in Wartime: From WWII to the Invasion of Iraq," and "Deterring New Nuclear Weapons States?"¹⁸ Then, for the better part of a decade, when most of the records in this archive were closed to researchers, the History and Public Policy Program helped keep the issue alive, hosting the only records from the archive still online, while publishing articles about the records and continuing to host events related to them.¹⁹ Steve Coll's settlement with the Pentagon and sharing of the trove of records he obtained for release on the Digital Archive generated renewed interest and attention to the matter, helping to facilitate the release of the full archive.²⁰

Although the senseless destruction of the Wilson Center in spring 2025 halted the work of the History and Public Policy Program and Cold War International History Project with respect to both Iraqi and Syrian records, along with their many other projects, the disruption was destined to be only temporary. The archival sources, publications, collective expertise, professional contacts and relationships, and private funding sources all remain. The work will continue elsewhere and be animated by the same commitment to freedom of access to all, academic rigor, and nonpartisan applied historical and policy analysis that made both the program and project fixtures of the Wilson Center.

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APPLY FOR THE SHAFR-IN-ASIA PACIFIC WORKSHOP 2026

Call for Applications

SHAFR-in-Asia Pacific Workshop March 3–4, 2026, Singapore Management University

Application Deadline October 1, 2025, 5:00pm (Singapore Time)

On behalf of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR), the College of Integrative Studies at the Singapore Management University, with support from the Department of History of the National University of Singapore, is pleased to host the inaugural SHAFR-in-Asia Pacific Workshop for scholars of U.S. foreign relations and/or international history based outside of North America and Europe and in institutions of the Asia Pacific.

The two-day workshop will take place March 3–4, 2026, on the campus of the Singapore Management University (SMU).

The organizing committee welcomes applications from authors who intend to both workshop their works-in-development as well as serve as discussants of other participants' works-in-development. Additionally, we welcome applicants who wish to serve only as discussants, though author-discussants will be prioritized. Works-in-development could consist of full drafts of a journal article or edited volume chapter, up to two chapters of a book manuscript in progress, or a dissertation chapter.

The workshop will pair each author with one discussant for an in-depth critique of their works-in-development. To ensure the workshop's effectiveness, participation is capped at 20 authors/discussants.

In addition to the workshops, there will be plenary sessions scheduled for participants to discuss possible collaborative research projects and publications as well as plans for future workshops in the region.

The deadline for applications is October 1, 2025.

More details about the materials required for the application and information about the workshop can be found at: <https://cis.smu.edu.sg/events/call-application-shafr-asia-pacific-workshop-2026>

Should you have any queries, please email: cis_events@smu.edu.sg

Organizing Committee/Co-convenors:

Wen-Qing Ngoei, Singapore Management University

Brian Cuddy, Macquarie University

S.R. Joey Long, National University of Singapore

A Tribute to Amy Sayward

This summer marked the end of Amy Sayward's time as executive director for the SHAFR. To recognize her long period of significant service to the organization, we solicited tributes from the presidents who worked with her during her term. Thank you for your dedication to SHAFR, Amy!
– BCE and SZ

I pen these thoughts on working with Amy Sayward during my term as SHAFR president just days after my penultimate Council meeting as past president, a meeting that lasted more than four hours. The agenda was long and detailed, and many of the issues discussed were weighty, befitting an organization as vibrant and multifaceted as SHAFR. Amy's mastery of every item on the agenda was indicative of the attention to detail and deep and broad knowledge she brought to her decade as Executive Director. But Amy also brought patience, fairness, integrity, wisdom, good humor, and even more patience to her work on behalf of the Society. Serving as SHAFR president is not only an honor and privilege but also a heavy responsibility. Amy made the enormity of the job manageable for me (and for many others, I suspect), and I am grateful to have had her unflagging assistance and support during my term.

Thank you, Amy, for all of you've done for SHAFR, and for me personally. My only question regarding your future is what you'll do with all the free time you'll now have at annual meetings!

Mary Ann Heiss

You don't know what a person is truly like until you go through a crisis with them, and the Covid pandemic was the crisis of a lifetime, certainly for an organization like SHAFR. I became VP right before the pandemic began, and then took over as President in the fall of 2020 with the task of cancelling the in-person arrangements for the 2021 annual meeting and replacing it with SHAFR's first (and hopefully only) online conference. Being a part of the SHAFR leadership team suddenly became a full-time job. Amy Sayward had been a familiar, friendly face at SHAFR for years, and after my election I was looking forward to working with her more regularly. Little did I know how lucky I was! During those anxious months, Amy's unflappable disposition was as invaluable as her experience and ideas; she worked long hours to confront fast-moving challenges, all while teaching a full load. The pandemic posed unknown problems and required imaginative solutions, but Amy never once lost her cool. Her even-tempered, steady hand at the tiller ensured SHAFR's safe passage through the crisis and was a major factor in the success of the online 2021 conference and the continued success of the organization. But what I'll perhaps remember most clearly is a vital intangible: her indefatigable cheer. Each time I opened up Zoom for the latest in a series of endless meetings, the first thing greeting me was Amy's friendly smile. Her professionalism and sense of calm made sure we all kept our heads in the intense heat of the crisis. She set the tone for the rest of us and I'll never forget the camaraderie and dedication SHAFR members showed during the crisis.

Andrew Preston

One of the great joys of being a SHAFRite has been working alongside Amy. The more I have worked with her, the more my appreciation has grown. She is thoughtful, judicious, meticulous, patient, creative, and diplomatic. Her kindness to all has made SHAFR a more welcoming organization. When planning the 2020 conference, I marveled at her logistical genius; when taking that conference down due to COVID-19, I realized that it was not just years of experience that explained her leadership capacities, it was also her capacity to navigate unprecedented events. When facing administrative challenges, we would all do well to ask: What would Amy Sayward do? And then to remember: She would prep in advance, schlep the boxes, listen to everyone, work with the team, stay until the end, do the follow-up, and register the lessons learned, all the while manifesting good cheer, excellent judgment, and unsurpassed devotion to SHAFR. Thank you Amy!

Kristin Hoganson

Thank you, Amy!

I was pleased to hear the news in 2015 that SHAFR had appointed Amy Sayward as my successor as Executive Director. I had known Amy since she earned her Ph.D. at Ohio State and had watched her develop quickly as a scholar and a teacher. Amy also proved to be an organizer: she was always putting together study groups and social events for students and faculty of the diplomatic history program. Everyone at Ohio State was proud when she landed her post at MTSU and it has been a pleasure to watch from afar as she demonstrated excellence there.

My high confidence in Amy's abilities at the time of her appointment has been justified by her record as Executive Director over the last decade. When I was president in 2018, I counted on her to organize council meetings, operate the annual conference, wrestle the budget numbers, and otherwise ensure the short-term success and long-term viability of our beloved organization. And she delivered. Amy leaves her post with SHAFR in great shape. Thank you, Amy!!

Peter Hahn

In my years of working with Amy Sayward as SHAFR's Executive Director, especially during my presidency, there is one thing about her that I have never been able to understand: her relentless cheerfulness in the face of all the stress of the annual meeting. Amy's kind and upbeat spirit is not simply a nice thing to have around. Her reservoir of good will and optimism has smoothed SHAFR's path through the inevitable SNAFUs. She has been a welcoming presence for new members and anxious presidents alike. There must have been times that her smile faded, but I just don't remember them. Thank you, Amy, for your thoughtful and important contributions to SHAFR.

Mary Dudziak

Amy Sayward deserves our immense gratitude for her steady efforts heading the SHAFR office over the last decade. She has helped maintain our organization's momentum amid an increasingly challenging environment for academic life, journal publishing, and scholarly societies. At the same time she has helped keep SHAFR on course through the turbulent gales of politics and foreign policy. Her hard work has insured that SHAFR is able to do so many of things we value - the annual conference, support for younger scholars, the journal even amid these challenges near and far. It was a privilege to serve with her.

David Engerman

For a decade now, Amy has been the smiling, warmly welcoming, and deeply committed heart of SHAFR. She has worked tremendously hard to make SHAFR's daily business happen, helping to do *everything* from organizing the conference to suggesting committee members to keeping the books. I know for certain that she has worked *way* too many hours for this organization, and we are all very much the beneficiaries of her hard work and good sense. We have been very lucky to have her! I am very grateful to know Amy, and I hope and trust that she will be a central figure at SHAFR for many years to come.

Melani McAlister

Resistance

Rewarded: Madame Marthe (Rigault) His, 92, Presented Les Insignes de Chevalier de la Lēgion d'Honneur

Stephen Rabe

On October 21, 2024, a grand, emotional ceremony took place in the Marriage Salon in the City Hall of the inland port town of Carentan-les Marais, which bisects the D-Day invasion beaches of Utah and Omaha. Approximately 250 Norman citizens and French government and U.S. Embassy officials squeezed into the room. I and Genice, my wife, as well as Frank and Pat Naughton were guests of honor. Frank, Pat, and I are the children of paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division, Colonel Frank Naughton and Staff Sergeant Rene E. Rabe. At the outset of the ceremony, we were introduced, and the crowd cheered wildly. The exploits of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions are perpetually memorialized in this part of Normandy. Members of the 82nd liberated the nearby crossroads town of Sainte-Mère-Église on June 6, 1944, and, after several days of intense combat, the 101st freed and secured

Carentan. Appreciative Normans refer to the paratroopers as the “liberators” or our *paras*. But the paratroopers also owed their survival to the villagers of Carentan, including many of its women, who risked their lives in the 1940s to save downed Allies from Nazi capture.

The awarding of the Legion of Honor would normally take place in Paris with the President of the French Republic greeting the recipients of a ceremony initiated by Napoleon Bonaparte. In the words of Jean-Pierre Lhonneur, the Mayor of Carentan, the Legion of Honor has continued to signify “the highest distinction of the French Republic.”¹ But at the age of 92, it would have been difficult for Marthe (Rigault) His to travel to Paris. As such, Paris came to Marthe. Government officials, members of the French Parliament, local mayors, and representatives of the U.S. embassy journeyed to Carentan. Admiral Pierre Le Roux, an officer of the Legion of Honor, presided over the ceremony.

All had assembled to commemorate the role that Marthe and her family had played in the village of Graignes between June 6 and 16 1944. Graignes, an ancient and isolated settlement of 900 people, is about 6 miles south of Carentan. In the very early hours of June 6, about 170 paratroopers, mainly from the 82nd Airborne Division, but also including a planeload of troopers from the 101st Division, landed in the *marais* (swamps) that surrounded Graignes. A few paratroopers became entangled in their parachutes and drowned. The occupying Germans had blocked the flow of the surrounding rivers to the English Channel and flooded the *marais*. The men were nearly twenty miles from their intended drop zone, a situation that caused the ranking officer to decide his unit could never reach the designated target and carry out the assigned mission. Instead, he ordered the paratroopers to stay in Graignes, situated on a hill overlooking the *marais*, where they established a defensive perimeter, protected the villagers, and waited for the invading Allied forces from Omaha Beach to reach them.

The commanding officer’s decision was facilitated by the enthusiastic reception of the villagers to the paratroopers. Graignes was an unoccupied village, although there were German forces throughout the region. Discontent over occupation had mounted as the Nazis placed increasing demands on Normans for supplies and manpower. For example, the occupiers demanded the daily output of one of the two cows on the Rigault family farm. The fiancé of the middle daughter, Odette Rigault, 19, went into hiding, because the Germans were rounding up young men and dispatching them to Germany to work in war factories. Despite the oppression, the villagers avoided overt resistance, heeding the advice of the parish priest, Abbé Albert Le Blastier, who had served as a medic during World War I. But seeing U.S. forces floating down from the sky both astonished and inspired them. The citizens of Graignes were politically and socially conservative Roman Catholics who believed that the Almighty, at times, spoke to believers. Indeed, at one subsequent commemoration of Graignes’s moment in history, a priest drew an analogy between the coming of the paratroopers and God sending his only son, Jesus, to earth.²



Legion of Honor winner Marthe (Rigault) His surrounded by French officials, legislators, mayors, and a U.S. diplomat. Admiral Pierre Le Roux is to the right in uniform.



Gustave and Marthe Rigault with Jean-Claude in 1943. The couple had four children. The eldest, Marie-Jean, worked as a nurse in Saint-Lô. (Photograph courtesy of Marthe His.)

clock cooking campaign and provide two hot meals a day for their guests in uniform. Led by Madame Germaine Boursier, the owner of the local café, women drove horse-driven wagons into occupied towns, obtained supplies, hid them under straw, and evaded German check points. Women, both young and old, also retrieved the white-silk reserve chutes of the paratroopers and saved the material for dress making. The children brought the hot food to the paratroopers ensconced in their foxholes. Bonding took place, with the men and the children teaching each other songs. Marthe Rigault, then 12, learned *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*. Genice and I memorialized that past, when we sang the marching song with Marthe and her family one afternoon in her home.

Graignes came under furious Nazi attack on Sunday and Monday, June 11-12. The paratroopers of the Catholic faith were attending Mass with the villagers on Sunday morning, when German troops stationed in Normandy approached the village. The paratroopers, who had established aiming points with their two 81mm mortars and five light machine guns, easily repulsed the attack, inflicted massive casualties, and suffered no losses. But on Sunday afternoon and then again on Sunday night into early Monday, the paratroopers confronted overwhelming forces from the 17th Division *Waffen-Schutzstaffel* (SS) who were tasked with recapturing Carentan. They besieged the village with mortar and artillery fire before storming into the village. Despite suffering over thirty battlefield deaths, the paratroopers repeatedly repulsed the enemy. But they exhausted their ammunition and had no choice but to withdraw from the top of the hill.

As defined at the Nuremberg Trials, the *Waffen-SS* was not a regular military unit but a "criminal organization." In historian Steven Remy's characterization, the *Waffen-SS* perpetrated "terror war," massacring, for example, over eighty-four U.S. prisoners of war at Malmedy, Belgium, during the Battle of the Bulge.³ On June 10, 1944, a *Waffen-SS* Division also massacred 642 civilians in the rural community of Oradour-Sur-Glane in central France for allegedly collaborating with the enemy. They crammed citizens

On June 7, the men of the village, many of whom were veterans of the Great War, met in their magnificent twelfth-century Romanesque Church and unanimously vowed to back the paratroopers. Their support included carrying out reconnaissance missions and serving as scouts for U.S. patrols. They also joined with women and children and went out into the *marais* in their flatboats and retrieved equipment—machine guns, mortars, ammunition, medical supplies—that had landed in containers known as "parapacks." The women of the village outdid the men in their enthusiasm for liberation. They vowed to carry out a round-the-

into the village church and then set fire to it, trapping them inside. The *Waffen-SS* also carried out heinous war crimes in Graignes. Battalion surgeon Captain Abraham Sophian, Jr. and his medics, aided by Father Le Blastier, another cleric, and two church housekeepers tended the wounded in the church sacristy. All were unarmed. The Nazis murdered them all. In another case, the Germans moved nine captured paratroopers to a field, forced them to dig their own graves, and shot them in the back of the head. The *Waffen-SS* murdered nineteen paratroopers and four civilians. German forces subsequently set fire to the village, destroying or damaging almost every structure. The church was in total ruins. The Germans also forced the villagers into exile. Most would not be able to return to their damaged homes until August 1944.⁴

About 110 paratroopers survived Graignes. They remained in the same unit—Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 507th Regiment—and subsequently saw six more weeks of intense combat in Normandy, participated in the Battle of the Bulge for two months, jumped over the Rhine River on March 24, 1945, and engaged in several weeks of urban combat in the Rhineland area. Perhaps their finest hour was when they liberated thousands of Eastern European "slave laborers" from war factories in the Rhineland region. A handful of the veterans of Graignes, including my father, also pulled occupation duty in Berlin in the second half of 1945. Whereas most suffered battlefield wounds, remarkably only a couple of the paratroopers died during this most epic of journeys—from Normandy to Berlin.

The people of Graignes continued to prove resistant and courageous. In the chaos that followed the Nazi seizure of their village, they hid paratroopers in their homes and cellars and lied to the *Waffen-SS* about their complicity. They guided paratroopers down local paths and helped assemble them into larger groups. Moving at night, Captain David Brummitt ultimately led a group of almost 90 men to the safety of U.S. forces near Carentan. French villagers provided intelligence information and foraged for food for Captain Brummitt's group. Other paratroopers hid in the brush along the *marais*. Odette and Marthe Rigault individually found ten paratroopers hiding and guided them to the loft of the family barn. The girls then informed their parents Gustave and Marthe. Gustave, who carried shrapnel in his knee from the battle of Verdun and had aided fleeing British soldiers in 1940, did not chastise his daughters. Instead, he too guided paratroopers to the barn. Soon there would be twenty-one paratroopers huddled in the



S/Sgt. Rene E. Rabe in occupied Berlin in September 1945. From June 1944 to May 1945, he earned four Bronze Stars, three battlefield promotions, two Purple Hearts, and lost part of a frostbitten toe during the Battle of the Bulge. Most of the 110 paratroopers who the people of Graignes saved had similar service records. Indeed, other survivors of Graignes won Silver Stars for exceptional gallantry.



The “Silk from the Sky” Rigault family wedding in 1945. Odette to the left and eldest daughter Marie-Jean to the right wear wedding dresses fashioned out of parachute silk retrieved from the marais in 1944. Young Marthe sits three places to the right of Marie-Jean, next to little Jean-Claude. The parents of the brides are standing behind Marthe. (Photograph courtesy of Marthe His)

loft of the Rigault’s family barn.

The Rigault family withstood days of unimaginable tension. Twice, German units approached the barn, but Madame Marthe Rigault shrewdly persuaded them that following a different path, away from the barn, would keep their feet dry. Two uncurious German soldiers entered the barn, asked Gustave questions, but chose not to climb into the loft. Odette and Marthe surreptitiously delivered what little food the family had to the ravenous paratroopers. S/ Sgt. Rabe would later remember that the boiled cabbage with melting butter was “the best meal that I ever had.” On the evening of June 15, the Rigault family helped the paratroopers push off in a large flatboat, locally known as a *gabare*, on a nearby canal. The family had secured the help of a family friend to guide the *gabare* toward safety. By midnight, the boat had reached the outskirts of Carentan and the paratroopers soon encountered a U.S. sentry. By the end of June 16, the men were reunited with the 82nd Airborne Division.

The villagers risked everything when they assisted the great escape, since the Nazis would have executed any citizen caught aiding the paratroopers. The Germans would have even slaughtered the Rigault family’s toddler, little Jean-Claude. When pressed to comment on where they found their courage, villagers have customarily responded that the paratroopers came to help them. As such, they had a responsibility to assist their American friends. They added that they also believed in *liberté, égalité et fraternité*. In Mayor Lhonneur’s words, the citizens were “quiet heroes.” It was, as Admiral Le Roux put it, an example of “ordinary people who did extraordinary things together.”⁵

In his proclamation, Admiral Le Roux appropriately noted that the Legion of Honor bestowed on Marthe recognized not just her but also her parents, Odette, and the village of Graignes. As to those who wondered how a young girl could deserve such an award, he had a ready answer. The erudite admiral quoted from *Le Cid*, a work of Pierre Corneille, a seventeenth-century dramatist and contemporary of Molière and Jean Racine. As Corneille’s character observed: “True, I am young, but for souls nobly born, valor

doesn’t await the passing of years.”⁶

In honoring the valor of Graignes, eighty years after D-Day, the French were following in the wake of the U.S. government and its citizens. General Dwight D. Eisenhower signed a letter of “gratitude and appreciation” to Gustave Rigault for aiding the escape of Allied forces. In 1949, U.S. Ambassador to France David K. E. Bruce attended a ceremony to establish a Franco-American memorial in the ruins of the church. Thereafter, the bell tower of the church was preserved and a plaque with the names of the soldiers and civilians who died defending the village was erected. Abbé Le Blastier, the martyred priest, was buried nearby. In the mid-1980s, Colonel Naughton and Lt. Colonel Earcle, another veteran of Graignes, launched a campaign of remembrance. On July 6, 1986, as recommended by Naughton and Earcle, Secretary of the Army John O. Marsh and U.S. Ambassador Joe E. Rogers presided over the awarding of eleven Distinguished Civilian Service Medals to village heroes and heroines. Six of the recipients were women, including Odette and Marthe. Madame Germaine Boursier, age 90, the “Mess Sergeant” of Graignes, walked with a cane and was supported by her two daughters. Her co-conspirator, Madame Renée Meunier, also received a medal. The two elderly housekeepers who served Father Le Blastier and were murdered by the *Waffen-SS* were honored posthumously.⁷

The fact that six women received Distinguished Civilian Service Medals and that Marthe won France’s highest honor are tacit recognitions that women have been unfairly left out of histories

of World War II. At the conclusion of the war, over 1,000 French citizens received the *Ordre de la Libération* for an outstanding contribution to the liberation of occupied France. Only six of the medal winners were women. Scholars have been rectifying such absurdities. Women constituted 75 percent of the workforce at Bletchley Park, the central site for British cryptanalysts during the war. Jane (Hughes) Fawcett, for example, decoded a message that led to the sinking of the German battleship, *Bismarck*. Virginia Hall, a U.S. citizen, was “a woman of no importance” and a British spy in France who organized resistance groups and helped downed Allied



Marthe (Rigault) His, 92, at home in Carentan. Her magnificent Legion of Honor medal joins her Distinguished Civilian Service medal from the U.S. Army, a letter of commendation to her father from General Eisenhower, and a letter of appreciation from President Ronald Reagan. Her mantel also includes photographs of paratroopers and their wives, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. (Photograph courtesy of Patricia Naughton)

airmen escape. Marie-Madeleine Fourcade directed a network of 3,000 spies and resistance agents in France known as the “The Alliance.” She twice escaped her captors. Despite her heroics, she did not receive the *Ordre de la Libération*, although her husband did.⁸

Watching Marthe receive the Legion of Honor constituted the most meaningful experience of my professional life. My joy was heightened by the sense that I played a small role in this great drama. My wife and I have known Marthe now for six years. It is an overwhelming experience to meet someone who saved your father’s life and ultimately made the lives of your little grandchildren possible. The emotions cannot be described, only felt. My hope is that Marthe has many more years and that the annual ritual that starts in early June will continue. Correspondents from the Associated Press, BBC, Reuters, Radio France, *et al* will line up outside her little home in Carentan. Marthe will invite them in and invariably serve them an apple tart. The correspondents will depart, raving about her strength, clarity, and good cheer. They will also leave with a good story to tell.

Notes:

1. Translated “Speech of Jean-Pierre Lhonneur, Mayor of Caren-

tan les Marais,” October 21, 2024. In author’s possession.

2. Stephen G. Rabe, *The Lost Paratroopers of Normandy: A Story of Resistance, Courage, and Solidarity in a French Village* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 65-112.

3. Steven P. Remy, *The Malmedy Massacre: The War Crimes Trial Controversy* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2017), 3-11, 24-25.

4. Rabe, *Lost Paratroopers*, 137-62; Stephen G. Rabe, “Catching and Releasing a War Criminal,” *The Journal of America’s Military Past* 49 (Winter 2024): 22-32.

5. “Speech of Mayor Lhonneur;” translated “Speech by Admiral Pierre Le Roux,” October 21, 2024. In author’s possession.

6. Ibid.

7. Rabe, *Lost Paratroopers*, 188-210.

8. Christopher Grant Smith, *The Hidden History of Bletchley Park: A Social and Organisational History, 1939-1945* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015); Sonia Purnell, *A Women of No Importance: The Untold Story of the American Spy Who Helped Win World War II* (New York, Viking, 2019); Lynne Olson, *Madame Fourcade’s Secret War: The Daring Young Woman Who Led France’s Largest Spy Network against Hitler* (New York: Random House, 2019); Mary Louise Roberts, *D-Day through French Eyes: D-Day, 1944* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Ronald C. Rosbottom, *Sudden Courage: Youth in France Confront the Germans* (New York: Custom House, 2019).

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History and Presidential Decision-Making: Where's the Economics

Aroop Mukharji

How could you possibly improve upon Ernest May?" an academic mentor once asked me, when I first told him I was studying the 1898 era.

In his 2025 *Passport* article focused on my 2023 *International Security* article on William McKinley's decision to annex the Philippines, William Burr adds a twist to my mentor's reaction.¹ Burr believes a different subset of mid-century scholars, namely the Wisconsin School historians, had settled the debate. As Burr admits, his comments "largely reinforce the 'revisionist/Wisconsin School' interpretations," arguing that McKinley decided to annex the Philippines because of the "glut thesis," or a search for foreign markets to vent U.S. overproduction.²

The Wisconsin School showed that no question of history was truly settled. For the revisionists studying 1898, this had less to do with discovering new data, and more to do with interpreting data through a different lens. As Lloyd Gardner fondly remembers, when Fred Harrington saw Gardner's master's thesis, Harrington asked: "where's the economics?"³

Economics is the defining lens of Wisconsin School scholars. As any serious McKinley historian knows, they contributed far more than that.⁴ Nevertheless, they popularized purposeful economic expansionism as the dominant explanation of U.S. foreign policy in the 1898 era. The "glut thesis" is at the center of it all.

Over the decades, many pushed back. Witness Kristin Hoganson's four-page, 2500-word historiographical essay disguised as an endnote in her 1998 book. Her critique centers on explanations of the initiation of the War of 1898, but her larger attack is on the causal influence of economic, annexationist, and strategic worldviews, broadly speaking, in that era. "If markets drove U.S. policy," she questions the Wisconsin School, "why did the United States not act during the depths of the 1893-97 depression?"⁵

For McKinley's Philippines annexation decision, the glut thesis suffers from one primary weakness: a deep link to McKinley's mind at the time of the decision. Any explanation of any presidential policy decision must naturally link to the president. For the secretive McKinley, as Hoganson, May, and others – Burr included – lament, this imperative has been famously difficult to achieve.⁶

To solve that problem, advocates of the glut thesis rely on circumstantial evidence. As Burr tips his hand on page one of his critique, his evidence merely explains "McKinley's general approach."⁷ Given the absence of specific evidence, the argument follows a version of this logic: McKinley made some gluttonous statements in his presidency, some individuals in McKinley's administration argued their cases on gluttonous grounds, therefore, McKinley annexed the Philippines primarily to achieve glutton-

ous goals.

This is a weak way to show causation. First, McKinley offered his reasons, in public and in private, for annexation. Not once did he say or write it was primarily because of economic expansionism into the fabled China market. Nor did anyone around him say he made the choice primarily because of that – even when they themselves argued on those grounds. If other decision-makers felt comfortable arguing for the glut thesis, what would stop McKinley from doing so? What would stop his advisors from recording that he did so?

The second reason the glut thesis lacks causal weight as a primary explanation is because it disregards McKinley's long-established worldviews. For years, McKinley argued *against* chasing foreign trade. "Let us seek first to increase trade at home," he said in 1896, before focusing on "the high seas."⁸ "Why need we vex ourselves about foreign commerce?" he asked on the House floor in 1890, warning "depression" would come if the United States were to "invade the world's markets."⁹

Unlike many of his peers, McKinley generally did not trust the dependability of foreign markets, believing they were fickle. Speaking to a group of farmers in 1896, he said, "The only market [a farmer] can rely upon every day of the year is the American market."¹⁰ Twelve years earlier, he declared on the House floor: "Home demand is safer, more reliable, and more profitable than any foreign market can possibly be."¹¹

His skepticism, however, was not adamant. McKinley occasionally praised foreign consumption of American products. But anachronistically cherry-picking those statements is misleading. It ignores decades of data showing how he always cared far more about the home market than opportunities abroad. It is one thing to explore how McKinley's worldviews developed over his presidency, suggesting commercial opportunity played some role in his calculation. It is another thing to insist, with zero direct evidence, that the number one reason he decided to annex a country 7,000 miles away was a worldview orthogonal to his entire political career to that point.

It is possible that glut thesis advocates were unaware of some of these data. The Perry Heath Papers, for instance, contain a trove of McKinley's 1896 campaign speeches. According to Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Google Books, only two published works have ever cited the Heath Papers at all.¹² McKinley's earlier congressional tenure, furthermore, is one of the most overlooked parts of his life in the literature.¹³

The final causal weakness of the glut thesis centers on mistaken use of advisor evidence. Merely because an advisor argued something does not imply the president agreed, or even cared. Not only is the evidence lacking to make that argument, advocates of the glut thesis, as Burr illustrates, tend to select evidence involving advisors who did not actually support full annexation or were not in McKinley's inner circle.

For instance, Burr leads readers' attention to a State Department report, a retiring U.S. minister's letter, and the Naval War Board's August 1898 report. But at the time, the State Department was led by William Day, perhaps McKinley's closest foreign policy advisor, who actually argued *against* full annexation. With respect to U.S. Minister to China Charles Denby, Burr quotes Denby via a secondary source, H. Wayne Morgan's slim 1965 volume. Yet Morgan reads the context for Denby's quote very differently. In the following paragraph, Morgan writes that Denby's views did *not* reflect the total opinion of the business community or the diplomatic service, implying that Burr commits the methodological mistake of "forgetting the denominator."¹⁴

Burr places the most weight, in terms of real estate, on the Navy War Board's report. But after 600 words on the report's arguments, he admits at the very end, "Evidence has not surfaced on whether McKinley was aware of the War Board report."¹⁵ The report's author, Alfred Thayer Mahan, furthermore, was not in McKinley's inner circle.¹⁶ What is even more confusing about Burr's argument is that the War Board did not argue for full annexation. It defies basic causal logic to declare that a sub-cabinet advisor's arguments for option 1 serve as evidence of the president's choice of option 2.

And what of McKinley's closest foreign policy advisors? Day did not agree with full annexation, repeatedly making that case to McKinley. John Hay and John Long also did not think full annexation was the answer.¹⁷ Moreover, McKinley's team, including Day, offered him cheaper alternatives for commercial advantage, such as a base in the Carolines. If McKinley were really prioritizing commercial advantage, he would not have chosen full annexation. This was the argument Andrew Carnegie made directly to the president. "I meet no business man who does favor it," he wrote.¹⁸

As I argued in my 2023 article, McKinley's choice was a product of his views: his cultural worldview, his security assessment, and a decision-making bias. In particular, I focused on his Lamarckist civilizational worldview and his strategic forecasting of great power war. His belief that Filipinos were unfit for self-governance impacted his forecasting of great power war if the United States were to leave the Philippines after the War of 1898. Scholars have long explored these cultural and strategic views, but few have connected them. In McKinley's mind, culture and security were intertwined.

Culture and security, however, insufficiently explain McKinley's new interest in a region he had previously given little thought to. The war transformed the Far East's strategic relevance to McKinley. But why?

The answer, I argue, was a feeling of ownership. Language indicates how individuals conceptualize issues. As I read through McKinley's letters and speeches, I was struck by how McKinley began using the language of ownership in reference to a country he did not yet control. A common decision-making bias called the "endowment effect" holds that individuals tend to overvalue things they *feel* they own. Because of the presence and victory of U.S. troops in Manila, I argue, McKinley felt ownership over the Philippines. This inflated his strategic interest in the island chain in the postwar negotiations. I evidence the endowment effect not just from McKinley's public and private statements (including previously uncited speech drafts), but also in advisor recollections of McKinley's decision-making.

The insight here is that military interventions abroad can drive perceptions of national interest, not just the other way around. The endowment effect helps explain why.

Economic interpretations of the 1898 era have certainly moved far beyond the glut thesis.¹⁹ But that is not true for McKinley's annexation decision, where economic explanations are still stuck in the 1960s. By repeating those arguments without modification, Burr unwittingly proves that it has been impossible to take them any further, not because, as he believes, they are flawless, but because no amount of new archival material or new arguments has solved their many problems.

A rich irony of Burr's critique is that by clinging so closely to mid-century economic arguments, he misses decades of research in economics itself, especially on how individuals judge costs and benefits. Economists theorized the endowment effect. Richard Thaler won the 2017 Nobel Prize for it, at least partly. The Nobel Prize committee explicitly recognized the endowment effect in their press release of the award, praising Thaler's shaping of the

field of behavioral economics.²⁰

Burr is not alone in this outdated approach to economics and concepts of risk, uncertainty, and rationality. Search *Diplomatic History*, the *American Historical Review*, and the *Journal of American History*, and you will find only two articles – out of thousands – that even mention any of the fields, "behavioral economics," "decision science," or "judgment and decision-making."

One wonders what Thaler would say if he were presented with an article attempting to explain McKinley's annexation decision with the glut thesis. He might react the same way Harrington did with Gardner: "Where's the economics?"

Thanks to Fredrik Logevall, Harvard University; and Daniel Immerwahr, Northwestern University, for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

Notes:

1. Aroop Mukharji, "The Meddler's Trap: McKinley, the Philippines, and the Difficulty of Letting Go," *International Security* 48:2 (2023): 49-90; William Burr, "William McKinley's Strategic-Economic Policy Toward the Philippines, 1898: A Research Note on Aroop Mukharji's 'The Meddler's Trap'" [hereafter: "A Research Note"] *Passport* 55:3 (January 2025): 39-45.
2. *Ibid.*, 39-41. It is hard to pin down Burr's terms. For instance, he never defines "strategic-economic" policy. But he does imply he views commercial motivations as primary by citing the purpose of "projecting military power to support U.S. commercial interests."
3. Lloyd Gardner, "H-Diplo Essay 193: Learning the Scholar's Craft" (14 February 2020), Available: <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/5838048/h-diplo-essay-193-lloyd-gardner-learning-scholar%E2%80%99s-craft>.
4. E.g. by recovering McKinley's centrality. See, Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion 1860-1898* (1963; Cornell University Press, 1998).
5. Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine American Wars* (Yale University Press, 1998), 210-11.
6. Ernest R. May, *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power* (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), 112; Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 105; Burr, "A Research Note," 39.
7. *Ibid.*
8. William McKinley, "Department Employees [*sic*] and Officers of the Pennsylvania Lines West of Pittsburgh," September 12, 1896, in the Perry Heath Papers, Box 1, Library of Congress (LOC), Washington, D.C.
9. William McKinley in U.S. Congress, Congressional Record, 51st Cong., 1st sess., May 7, 1890, vol. 21, pt. 5, H 4253, 4255, available: <https://www.congress.gov/bound-congressional-record/1890/05/07/21/house-section>.
10. William McKinley, [untitled], September 29, 1896, Heath Papers, Box 1.
11. William McKinley in U.S. Congress, Appendix to the Congressional Record, 48th Cong., 1st sess., April 30, 1884, vol. 15, pt. 6, 137, available: <https://www.congress.gov/48/crecb/1884/06/21/GPO-CRECB-1884-pt6-v15-15.pdf>.
12. Mukharji, "The Meddler's Trap"; Aroop Mukharji, "William McKinley Jr.," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, Oxford University Press, 2014—. Article published March 20, 2024; last modified, March 20, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.1091>.
13. *Ibid.*
14. H. Wayne Morgan, *America's Road to Empire: The War with Spain and Overseas Expansion* (John Wiley and Sons, 1965), 100-101; Aroop Mukharji, "The Blind Spots of Diplomatic History," *War on the Rocks*, April 1, 2022, Available: <https://warontherocks.com/2022/04/the-blind-spots-of-diplomatic-history/>.
15. Burr, "A Research Note," 41.
16. Mahan contemporaneously characterized his wartime interactions with McKinley as "occasional." His published letters betray distance from the president. See Robert Seager II and Doris D.

Maguire, *Letters and Papers of Alfred Thayer Mahan, Volume II, 1890-1901* (Naval Institute Press, 1975), esp. 506, 579, 591-593, 635-636, 692, 693.

17. See Mukharji, "The Meddler's Trap," *passim*.

18. Carnegie was not a close government advisor like Day, Long, and Hay. I cite Carnegie's letter to illustrate the pro-business argument against annexation. Andrew Carnegie to William McKinley, November 28, 1898, George B. Cortelyou Papers, Box 57, LOC.

19. See for example Marc-William Palen, "The Imperialism of

Economic Nationalism, 1890-1913," *Diplomatic History* 39:1 (2015): 157-85. For a list of other works in the medium-recent past, see Paul Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *American Historical Review* 116 (December 2011): 1374-78.

20. "Press Release," *The Noble Prize*, October 9, 2017, online, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/2017/press-release/>.

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2025

For the twenty-first consecutive year, the John A. Adams '71 Center for Military History & Strategic Analysis at the Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia, will award prizes for the best unpublished papers on Cold War military history. The contest promotes innovative scholarship from rising (early to mid-career) scholars on Cold War subjects.

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Questions to:

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Seven Questions on... The United Nations

Steven L.B. Jensen, Sandrine Kott, Eva-Maria Muschik, Alanna O'Malley, and Margot Tudor

Editor's note: *"Seven Questions On..." is a regular feature in Passport that asks scholars in a particular field to respond to seven questions about their field's historiography, key publications, influences, etc. It is designed to introduce the broader SHAFR community to a variety of perspectives for a given field, as well as serving as a literature and pedagogical primer for graduate students and non-specialists. BCE and SZ*

1. What drew you to this field and inspired you to focus on your specific area of the history of the United Nations?

Steven Jensen (SJ): I started doing my PhD on human rights history in 2010 after spending almost a decade working outside academia first for the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, followed by 4 years for the United Nations (UNAIDS) and then leading a collaborative project on HIV/AIDS and human rights between UNAIDS, OHCHR, UNDP, the Ugandan Human Rights Commission and the Danish Institute for Human Rights. I was therefore well-versed in the inner workings of U.N. institutions and had always brought a historical perspective to the work that takes place inside an international organization and as part of multilateral diplomacy. I knew there was a richness in these spaces that were often undervalued when analyzing international processes and historical change.

It was therefore a rather natural step when I moved into the world of research to continue with a focus on multilateral diplomacy and international organization. I was able to create very strong synergies between the world of research and practice. Methodologically, my professional experience gave me a huge advantage in tracking and accessing primary sources and connections because I had a keen understanding of how agenda items moved within the ecosystem of the United Nations and beyond. Practically, I was during my PhD work invited to speak at U.N. Board meetings (on programming non-discrimination in HIV work) and appointed to be part of Danish delegations to U.N. meetings in Geneva and New York so I could repeatedly visit U.N. archives and collect more sources on an ongoing basis (this was before digitalization was widespread) while having a constant dialogue between the past and present in U.N. diplomacy.

In this process, it became clear that the existing human rights historiography had completely missed out on some of the most vital and significant parts of its own story because of not paying sufficient attention to U.N. processes and how it interacted with processes of global change during the decolonization era. The scholarship needed a process of being immersed in U.N. diplomacy in a different temporal

space and then carry findings from here to archives around the world. The U.N. archives carried the seeds of a very different and much more relevant and representative interpretation of the post-1945 evolution of human rights.

Sandrine Kott (SK): My interest in international organizations (and not just the U.N. system) stems primarily from methodological concerns. Historians' growing interest in international organizations is the result of the discipline's global turn, in terms of both its themes and its practices. While the nation, region, or village remain relevant units for global historians, they are understood in relation to other spaces based on a renewed focus on connections and flows, which have traditionally been neglected in a strictly monographic framework. From this dual perspective, international organizations are particularly fertile grounds for study. I view them as open social spaces through which we can study what can be described as the "dynamics of internationalization" or how local and/or national realities become internationalized. I am also interested in the role that these organizations play in exchanging information, elaborating international expertise and producing normativity in the economic and social fields.

In my own work, I examined some aspects and issues of the Cold War period from the perspective of the United Nations, including all the technical agencies. This U.N. perspective confirmed what other historians had already said. Contrary to the polarized view inherited from the Cold War itself, there was significant intellectual, economic, and political exchange between the "two worlds" of the Cold War: the Eastern and Western blocs (Ilya Gaiduk, *Divided Together: The United States and the Soviet Union in the United Nations, 1945–1965*, Stanford University Press, 2012). In lesser-known U.N. agencies, such as the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, development strategies common to both blocs were developed and disseminated. More broadly, studying the period through the lens of the U.N. system rather than U.S. archives revealed that the dominant issue of the period was not the ideological and political opposition and between the capitalist and communist worlds, but rather the unequal economic development in the world, first within Europe itself (between Eastern and Western Europe) and between the Global North and South.

Eva-Maria Muschik (EM): Since my undergraduate studies at Humboldt University, – inspired by Frederick Cooper's and Randall Packard's work – I have been interested in the history of development, its roots in colonial history, and continuities across the colonial-postcolonial divide. As a PhD student at New York University, I was struck by scholarship suggesting that there "there was a certain logic" to the continued employment of colonial civil servants and experts in U.N. development work in the 1950s and 1960s, because of their presumed adaptability to "local conditions," and "sympathetic understanding of the cultural backgrounds and specific needs of the countries concerned" (Murphy, *UNDP*). At the same time, there was critical scholarship by Susan Pedersen and Mark Mazower coming out on the imperial origins of the League of the Nations and its successor organization – the United Nations.

Following the assumption that institutions develop a life of their own, I wanted to explore the tension between the imperial origins of the United Nations, the universalist, emancipatory promises in the Charter, and the push by anti-colonial member states to (re)make the institution to serve their specific needs. I was also inspired by Daniel Speich's suggestion to build on Dipesh Chakrabarty's work and "provincialize" or "localize" global actors and aspirations as rooted in a specific time and place. Finally, for personal and practical reasons, I was interested in pursuing a research project that would be mainly anchored in the use of "local", that is NYC-based archival materials. That's how I came to focus on the U.N. Secretariat and its attempts to shape processes of decolonization via development work in my first book. Elsewhere, I've also written about the postcolonial career of a colonial forester within the broader U.N. system ("Chameleon Politics"); about limitations of "rule of experts"-arguments when it comes to U.N. development assistance ("Pretty Kettle of Fish"), and about the various roles that international organizations more broadly have played in processes of decolonization ("Special Issue Introduction").

Alanna O'Malley (AO): The United Nations has a broad cultural resonance in Ireland because during the Congo crisis Irish peacekeepers, on their first mission, were killed during the siege of Niamba in 1960 and the siege of Jadotville in 1961. This tragedy impacted Irish society as many of the soldiers were young and drawn from a wide variety of backgrounds. It was especially tragic because Ireland, as an anti-colonial nation which fought for independence from the British empire from 1919-1921 was (and is) a proud U.N. member-state. So, my enchantment with both the United Nations and the Congo was very much informed by the ways in which they were narrated as part of Ireland's international history.

Initially I wanted to focus more on African, especially Congolese history using the United Nations as a lens. But when I went to the U.N. archives, I was struck by the fact that although almost all the scholarship on the United Nations is written about Western actors, and their activities and objectives within the organization, the archives themselves are dominated by actors from Africa, Asia and Latin America. This put the United Nations in a different light, and I decided to focus my research agenda on this problem, trying to understand how and why the contributions of Global South actors have been excluded or rendered invisible in our traditional histories of the United Nations, and indeed the wider international system.

That has led to my current research project on the 'invisible' history of the United Nations and the Global South. I use that word invisible, not because these histories don't exist but because they have been rendered invisible by the aforementioned over-whelming emphasis on Western interests. Rather, it has become clear that the United Nations was changed by Global South actors over time, and they proved a much more dynamic group than Western powers who sought to maintain the status quo ante. From this perspective, the United Nations emerges as a kaleidoscopic landscape of possibilities and limitations, with which actors of the Global South sought to change global order from within.

Margot Tudor (MT): My approach to the United Nations comes from my training as a historian of humanitarianism.

As a teenager, I was interested in human rights, the death penalty, and freedom of speech issues in the United Kingdom and around the world. When I was 18, I began writing about these issues for my student newspaper and I became a Youth Advisory Board member for *Index on Censorship*, an anti-censorship magazine. These activities led me to participate in a visit to the United Nations offices in Geneva, meeting representatives from the WHO, UNAIDS, UNCHR, and UNHCR, as well as the peacocks that roamed between the columns and manicured gardens. The visit was organized with the hopes of inspiring a cohort of young British students to join the organization once we had finished our degrees. However, rather than confirming my career plans, the trip instead opened my eyes to the bureaucratic machinery and extraordinary wealth concealed behind the guise of humanitarianism and international development. Many of the staff we met complained of rapid turnover across the United Nations, their feelings of ineffectiveness in the face of nation-state aggressors, and the need for more money to make a difference. Yet, while watching peacocks roam across manicured lawns and in between columns on the shore of Lac Geneva, I struggled to reconcile the privileged reality of the United Nations – and its high-level staff – with the organization's marketed purpose. I felt uncomfortable with the idea of working within the gilded halls, many of which exhibited photographs of anonymous malnourished or suffering aid recipients (often children). I was still drawn to the humanitarian sector, but I wanted to explore more behind the curtain — to investigate its ethical tensions, its own inequalities and, despite protests of impotence, its political influence and direct agency across the world.

On returning to university, I was lucky enough to take a module with Dr. Emily Baughan on the history of humanitarianism and the British people, which transformed my understanding of the sector still more. We traced the history of humanitarianism in tandem—and often co-constitutively—with the violent operations of the British Empire, examining the political agency of international organizations such as Save the Children and Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF). In Emily's class, I found myself fascinated by the tensions of humanitarian intervention; the balance of interventionist fervor with fears of protecting sovereignty, the racialized rhetoric and instrumentalization of women and girls in justifying the use of force, and the ways in which 'good intentions' often produced harmful outcomes. In short: I was attracted to the range of ways in which organizations and staff shaped conflict on the ground. It was with this tension in mind that I wrote an essay on the ethical dilemmas of MSF during the Rwandan Genocide in 1994 and learned of Operation Turquoise, a French military operation deployed to Rwanda under U.N. mandate. We had read Michael Barnett's *Empire of Humanity* (2011) as part of Emily's reading list, but it was *Eyewitness to a Genocide* (2003) that made me consider U.N. peacekeeping missions as part of this longer narrative of humanitarianism and colonialism. As I drafted my MRes, I kept discovering scholarship that identified the coloniality of U.N. peacekeeping in 1990s and 2000s missions, but I struggled to find any empirical work on the original missions in the 1950s and 1960s. Some had published on one mission, others on how one power – such as Britain or Canada – had participated in multiple missions. Building on these, and with the support of my supervisors Dr. Eleanor Davey and Dr. Laure Humbert, I wrote my

Ph.D. on how early U.N. missions were a bridge between liberal colonialism to the contemporary peacekeeping and military interventions of the 1990s, thus reinventing colonialism with a humanitarian guise for the post-colonial international order.

2. Which scholars do you see as having laid the groundwork for the study of the history of the United Nations?

SJ: I would like to give special mention to a group of unknown – and often unacknowledged – scholars who did work on the United Nations already back in the 1950s. I have on several occasions benefited greatly from journal articles or unpublished PhD dissertations that during this period made in-depth studies of the early years of the United Nations. They sometimes had a focus on issues that we have lost sight of but that remain historically significant. I have recently completed a book chapter on how the so-called colonial clause – a territorial application clause that limited application of international treaties when it came to colonial territories and was a tradition inherited from the League of Nations – after a few years of being applied in U.N. instruments was abandoned in 1950. The best piece of scholarly writing about the colonial clause was an article in the *American Journal of International Law* from 1951 that captured the 1940s developments at the U.N. with great insight. That piece guided me towards a broader range of historical sources that allowed me to tell this story with much greater nuance.

In this context, I also want to mention the book series published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace during the 1950s. The book series addressed individual states and their relations with the United Nations during the first 10 years of its existence. When I wrote a few years ago about Denmark's attempt in 1950 and 1951 to have "forced sterilization of people with mental deficiencies" (i.e. eugenics) written into the U.N. Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as a protected practice intended to "qualify" the anti-torture article, the volume Denmark and the United Nations from the Carnegie series was very useful to compare, contrast and read between the lines regarding what was seen then, including subtle criticisms that still resonate today. A piece of secondary literature from 1956 became a historical source. I think it is always worthwhile to keep an eye on the early scholarship because it can in surprising ways inspire our own approaches today. Hence, my acknowledgement here.

SK: In my opinion, two main research trends have led to the development of recent studies on international organizations. Though their objectives differ, the two trends complement each other rather than being mutually exclusive.

The first, represented by Mark Mazower, focuses on international organizations as places and instruments for asserting Western hegemony, particularly that of colonial powers (*No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, Princeton University Press, 2009).

A second and currently more fruitful body of work examines international organizations from an "international history" perspective highlighting how they have embodied and promoted a genuine internationalist ideal. Akira Iriye (*Global Community: The Role of International*

Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World. University of California Press, 2002) was a pioneer in this regard, but many historical studies have followed. Notable works include those of Madeleine Herren (*Geschichte der Internationalen Organisation*. Darmstadt: WBG, 2009), or Glenda Sluga (*Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

Through this perspective, other historians have carefully reconstructed the development and dissemination of international knowledge made possible by international organizations. To cite just a couple of examples: Thomas Zimmer, *Welt ohne Krankheit: Geschichte der internationalen Gesundheitspolitik 1940-1970*, (Wallstein Verlag, 2017); and Elisabeth Roehrich, *Inspectors for Peace: A History of the International Atomic Energy Agency*, (John Hopkins, 2022).

EM: To my mind, there are different layers of U.N. (history) scholarship that sometimes appear like closed-off sediments, with more recent studies failing to engage earlier scholarship. "First generation research" was unsurprisingly written by social scientists and "practitioners" (e.g. diplomats, international civil servants, and technical experts). Quite often, the two categories overlapped. Evan Luard's two volume history comes to mind, but also e.g. Ruth Russel's history of the UN Charter, Yassin El-Ayouty's work on the United Nations, decolonization, and the role of Afro-Asia, or scholarship focused the Soviet Union at the United Nations (e.g. by A. Dallin, A. Rubinstein and R. Mansbach). Even if these early studies are not based on archival research, I think they still offer important insights and starting points that may guard against some reinventions of the wheel.

Since the early 2000s—Akira Iriye's *Global Community* was very influential here—there was a broader interest in the history of international organizations more generally. During that period, a group of social scientists led by Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss embarked on a collective research effort to recover past "intellectual contributions" by the United Nations, mostly without recourse to archival materials. John and Richard Toye's notable *The UN and Global Political Economy*, which was part of this broader *UN Intellectual History Project*, was an exception to this rule. A few years later, in 2006, a first introductory overview of the U.N. system and history appeared with Paul Kennedy's *The Parliament of Man*, providing a template that other scholars (J. Hanhimäki, A. Sayward) have since updated.

Alongside Toye and Toye, it was really Sunil Amrith and Glenda Sluga whose seminal 2008 article paved the way for "new" primary source-based, "third generation" histories of the United Nations. Mark Mazower, as mentioned above, called attention to the imperial roots of the organization in *No Enchanted Palace* (2009), but also, in *Governing the World* (2012), to the fact that the organization was remade by decolonization. Daniel Maul's, 2012 study of a U.N. "specialized agency", the International Labor Organization, was among the first archives-based, book-length studies to demonstrate in a sophisticated way what that meant in practice. Also in 2012, Heidi Tworek launched the collaborative *United Nations History Project*: an online resource for scholars, who wish to teach about and research the United Nations and its specialized agencies with useful bibliographies, guides to archival and online sources, and syllabi.

AO: Undoubtedly the work of Glenda Sluga, Sunil Amrith, Madeleine Herren, and Sandrine Kott has been formative in opening the possible histories of the United Nations that challenge the great power narrative favored by Mark Mazower and Paul Kennedy. In particular, Sluga and Amrith's essay 'New Histories of the UN' which was published in 2008 was very influential in presenting the United Nations as an integrated, if problematic system and a site of continuity, influence and contestation for a wide range of issues from racism to development.

There is, of course, a deeper and wider history of the United Nations from authors who were closer to events, especially Inis Claude and Evan Luard, who wrote a two-volume history of the United Nations. I have also been inspired by Patrica Clavin and Susan Pedersen's fundamental work on the League of Nations which was the bedrock for so many of the U.N.'s institutions, politics and processes.

The works of the U.N. Intellectual History project, led by Thomas Weiss have also been very helpful in providing dedicated histories of many of the U.N.'s agencies. This body of work has drawn on the experiences of the people who worked for the United Nations, so it's not necessarily an analytical approach, but these publications provide insights into the operation, functioning and politics of different U.N. bodies. It also places an emphasis on the work of individual agency within the U.N. system, among the Secretariat officials and experts who carried out much of the organization's work.

The basis of U.N. history as an inter-disciplinary field, or a history that benefits from inter-disciplinary approaches can also be viewed in, for example, the work of Maria Ivanova. She has written about the United Nations Environment Programme and how it came into being through a series of political agreements. Her work highlights a process-driven approach to the U.N.. In this vein, I have also found institutional sociology very helpful in understanding how the United Nations works, as part of analyses why the organization achieved some ends over others. These IR scholars include Peter Katzenstein, Kathryn Sikkink, Thomas Risse and Stephanie Hoffman and their theorization of institutional dynamics and change has been incredibly useful as a basis to develop a process-driven approach to U.N. history.

Overall, while there are excellent histories of the United Nations as an organization, it also appears across a wide range of issue areas from the Cold War to decolonization and development, so it's an incredibly vibrant field of study that is not limited to historical approaches but in fact benefits from adopting other views and methods from law, history, and IR.

MT: It is unusual that a field in history has a canon so dominated by memoirs and amateur historians. Until the 21st century, scholarship on the United Nations – especially on its daily operations – was largely limited to the (auto) biographies of leading officials such as Dag Hammarskjöld, Ralph Bunche, as well as a cast of military officials who served as Force Commanders. Some of these were written by other U.N. officials, such as Brian Urquhart's 1990 biography of Ralph Bunche, creating a pseudo-ersatz tradition of hagiography in the field. Much like any other memoir, these sources provide useful insights into how an official *sought* to be remembered, rather than an interrogation into how they acted; it is – and can only ever be approached

as—a constructed display of reputational control. These biographies of U.N. officials built upon a corpus of political and military biographies in the West, including tropes such as their dedication to duty, their frustration at impotence, and their hopes for the future. But – as one would expect – they keep the U.N. leader or official as the main character, centering their emotional journey or investment, rather than the wider context of their decision-making. It should not be controversial to say that officials' memoirs are not empirical contributions to U.N. history, yet this hagiographic approach has stretched a long shadow into contemporary scholarship on the United Nations, shaping how many officials are perceived today.

By the millennium, although there was a pool of memoirs to dive into, there was little canon to speak of (excepting Robert Hilderbrandt's 1990 work on Dumbarton Oaks). However, historiographical attention – and the creation of a meaningful groundwork of scholarship – emerged fully at the turn of the century as diplomatic and political historians began to use the U.N. archives to explore how the creation of the organization shaped Western politics. In the 2000s, this first 'generation' of scholars, including Paul Kennedy (2006), Jay Winter (2006), Carol Anderson (2003), Mark Mazower (2009), Stephen C. Schlesinger (2003), Mary Ann Glendon (2001), and Elizabeth Borgwardt (2005), brought a wave of fresh interest to the organization as a space of political activity. Glenda Sluga and Sunil Amrith highlighted this trend of 'new histories of the UN' in their 2008 *Journal of World History* article. This group nuanced the approaches of social scientists who typically relied upon the United Nations' public documents and resolutions for insight into its interests and practices. However, this approach still understood the United Nations as its diplomatic forums; it was perceived as a normative environment that hosted member-states and provided the legal structure of committees and councils. It would take the next generation of scholars to build upon this groundwork and to push beyond the origins of the organization, outside the geography of its headquarters, and into its individual agencies' activities during the Cold War and decolonization.

3. Discuss how the field has evolved to include different approaches to analyzing the history of the United Nations.

SJ: We have certainly moved from the broad stroke studies – under which category I would also include the 11-volume U.N. Intellectual History Project (2001-2007) – to the much more detailed and granular studies covering a range of U.N. agency histories, thematic issues and critical events and developments.

I think the most interesting development has been the turn toward a greater focus on the global south and a more systematic engagement with the decolonization process. Mid-20th century decolonization has been described as the largest transfer of sovereign power in world history and it has in recent times been getting the extensive scholarly attention it deserves after some earlier pioneer studies had laid important groundwork.

A very exciting step in this process has been moving beyond viewing the global south as interesting actors towards a much more systematic engagement with archives in the global south that adds extra layers of richness to historical accounts. We should be foregrounding the question of

archives much more in our discussions about historical method. The question of archives can also help address another key question about the United Nations in history, namely that about its global reach and interactions with domestic political, economic and social processes.

SK: Over the past twenty years, historians studying the United Nations have explored many new areas of research. Below, I will mention a few of these avenues.

Historians have questioned the United Nation's self-definition as radically novel and have demonstrated that the newness of the organization must be studied in the continuity of the League of Nations. This older but very interesting volume already addressed this issue: Victor-Yves Ghebali, *Organisation Internationale Et guerre mondiale: Le cas de la Société des Nations et de l'Organisation Internationale du Travail pendant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale*, (Grenoble: Institut d'études politiques, 1975); and more recently Simon Jackson and Alanna O'Malley, (eds.), *The Institution of International Order: From the League of Nations to the United Nations*, (Routledge, 2018). In this regard, historians such as Jessica Reinisch have highlighted the role played by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (1943-1947) as a hub and a bridge between the League of Nations and the United Nations.

To substantiate this continuity thesis, historians have shown a particular interest in biographical continuities between the two organizations. They have studied carefully the staff working in international organizations' secretariats. These secretariats have thus become objects of research in their own right like in this work: Karen Gram-Skjoldager Haakon A. Ikonomou, and Torsten Kahlert, *Organizing the 20th-Century World: International Organizations and the Emergence of International Public Administration, 1920-1960s*, *Histories of Internationalism*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. In this trend of research, the often-invisible role of women has been particularly highlighted. The excellent biography of Marguerite Thibert (Françoise Thébaud, *Une traversée du siècle: Marguerite Thibert, femme engagée et fonctionnaire internationale*, (Belin, 2017)) documents convincingly the role that this woman played at the International Labor Office in putting the issue of women's work on the agenda.

Although the United Nations has been studied as a tool for colonial powers to maintain imperial domination, recent studies have shown that the organization has also been a forum where newly decolonized countries have been able to make an alternative voice heard, particularly within the General Assembly. The United Nations became a place where colonization was attacked and delegitimized, hastening its end. See in this regard Steven L.B. Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights the 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values*, (Cambridge UP, 2016). This trend of research also shows how this voice from what was then known as the Third World led to questions about the economic domination of the major powers. Over the past decade, the project of a New International Economic Order has attracted renewed interest. Discussed and voted on in 1974 at the UN General Assembly, the declaration called for the better redistribution of global wealth and the regulation of trade in raw materials. It also emphasized the protection of the economic sovereignty of Third World countries, particularly their ability to control access to their natural resources. (See *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 6:1 (Spring

2015)) or Alex Veit and Daniel Fuchs, eds., *Eine gerechte Weltwirtschaftsordnung?: Die »New International Economic Order« und die Zukunft der Süd-Nord-Beziehungen* (Verlag, 2023).

In line with these issues of decolonization and the quest for greater economic equality, historians have focused their attention on how the United Nations has been a key player in economic development policies. Examples include: Daniel Maul, *Human Rights, Development, and Decolonization: the International Labour Organization, 1940-70*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Corinna R. Unger, *International Development: A Postwar History*, (Bloomsbury, 2018); Marc Frey, Sönke Kunkel, and Corinna R. Unger (eds.) *International Organizations and Development, 1945-1990*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; Eva-Maria Muschik, *Building States: The United Nations, Development, and Decolonization, 1945-1965*, (Columbia University Press, 2022).

Recent studies have examined how the United Nations has addressed environmental issues since the 1970s. (See Wolfram Kaiser, Meyer, Jan-Henrik, eds., *International Organizations and Environmental Protection: Conservation and Globalization in the Twentieth Century*, (Berghahn, 2017).

EM: As mentioned above, there are now quite a few studies focused on the origins of the United Nations, including its ties to the League of Nations and British imperial thought (in addition to *No Enchanted Palace*, Simon Jackson and Alanna O'Malley's edited volume comes to mind). Most studies focus on the key role played by the U.S. in bringing the United Nations into being, which has been interpreted as an effort to extend the New Deal to the World (Elizabeth Borgwardt), but also as an attempt to legitimize the projection of global U.S. power at home and abroad (Stephen Wertheim). Few studies have explored U.N. origin stories beyond the Anglo-American world, as Eric Helleiner did for the Bretton Woods institutions. In addition to origin stories and the above-mentioned introductory overviews, there is now a growing body of work concerned with how the U.N. system – the U.N. Organization and affiliated bodies – has changed over time, especially in the wake of decolonization. Much of this new research moves beyond success and failure-narratives – which were often measured against idealist aspirations – to examine the multiple, multifaceted roles played by various U.N. bodies and actors and the impact that they had.

There has been research on no longer existing U.N. organizations (e.g. UNRRA, IRO), as well as myriad affiliated organizations within the "U.N. System", including funds, programs, and commissions that report to the General Assembly or the Economic and Social Council (e.g. the U.N. Development Program, the regional economic commissions, or the UN High Commissioner for Refugees), independent "specialized agencies" (e.g. FAO, ILO, WHO, UNICEF, and the Bretton Woods institutions), and "related organizations," such as the International Atomic Energy Agency. There have also been studies focused on certain countries' engagement with the United Nations and its mandates (aside from the U.S., Canada and India seem to feature prominently in this genre), as well as studies of outsized personalities, especially the Secretaries-General (Dag Hammarskjöld looms large), but also, increasingly, on the "less flashy" people (especially of North-Atlantic origin), who carried out the day to day work of the organization in the secretariats and beyond. More and more scholars have also zoomed in on how specific issues (e.g. the environment,

decolonization, public health, terrorism, international law, especially human rights – including those of women and indigenous peoples), various territorial conflicts (e.g. Palestine, Algeria, Congo, Namibia) and practices (such as peacekeeping, development assistance, knowledge production, including data standardization and collection) were negotiated at the United Nations. A big overarching question for many of these studies is how U.N. negotiations and practices were shaped by the dominant conflicts of era, namely the Cold War and the North-South conflict and how they in turn shaped these two contestations.

In order to sort research in this proliferating field, I find it helpful to broadly differentiate between studies that approach the United Nations and its various bodies (1) as a public forum *and* networking space (especially for Global South representatives, but also others), where certain topics (e.g. Apartheid or Jim Crow) were discussed and negotiated by government representatives and those “on the margins” who were lobbying and/or challenging them, e.g. through formal petitions, and (2) as institutions with agency composed of, led and shaped by staff (international civil servants, experts etc.) with their very own agendas and interests. As I have argued elsewhere, some of the most interesting work combines these approaches, bringing a variety of historical actors into view, who were located in very specific times and places, and collectively shaped the history of the United Nations and its affiliated bodies. Though there is much to be said for continued work in this vein on topics and actors that have not yet been covered, perhaps historians may also find inspiration from other disciplines and “ways of studying international organizations” – Negar Mansouri and Daniel R. Quiroga-Villamarín’s recent edited volume provides a terrific starting point for this.

AO: Traditional histories of the United Nations narrate the evolution of the organization in a straight line because if we only chart the interests of the great powers (and even therein most approaches focus on Britain and the United States) it is a story of largely waning interest in the United Nations as decolonization crowds out their majority. During the Cold War, the organization has often been viewed as passive, or as an arm of America abroad. After the demise of the Soviet Union, in this view the United Nations becomes a renewed epicenter of activity with the rise of humanitarian intervention, before that fails humanity in Rwanda and Bosnia and renders the United Nations as lacking the ability to act when political will ebbs. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 in violation of international law has led to a period of deep decline in trust and the capacity of the United Nations to act effectively. This reductive approach has dominated historiography and in fact serves to falsely inform current debates about the organization’s purpose and effectiveness.

However, the field has evolved in different directions in the last fifteen years. Alongside the works mentioned above, there has been a shift to issue-driven approaches, which analyze the United Nations and its programs and activities in a range of areas from decolonization, to development to human rights and environmental issues, among others. This sheds light on the range of questions which came before the United Nations and how the system adapted to these challenges. The work of historians such as Eva Maria Muschik, Steven Jensen, Francine McKenzie and Mary-Ann Heiss has been important in advancing through the

breaches of older historiographies.

Even more recently, there have been more critical approaches from historians such as Emma Kluge, Elisabeth Leake and Margot Tudor which highlight a valid criticism of the teleology of the United Nations. They point to the ways in which the organization has replicated imperialism through some of its programs and highlight the issues that the United Nations did not address and the nations who were stranded outside the international system.

MT: As I mentioned above, more recently the field has evolved toward histories of different specialized U.N. agencies, organizations, or committees (such as the WHO, UNESCO, etc), rather than just on the main diplomatic forums of the U.N. Security Council or the General Assembly. In my experience, writing about the United Nations is to become a pedant. It involves a lot of “well actually” statements, the most common being: “actually, the United Nations is a huge organization with a range of activities” and “actually, I only study *this* agency.” This siloing is sometimes necessary for an empirical discipline like history. We seek to make discrete claims about a specific, contingent individual or group, and forego generalizations about the world’s largest international organization. This has meant, however, that – absent of a large grant project – U.N. historians often find it difficult to compare and contrast across these global operations, even if the staff we examine are moving in positions across multiple agencies. However, this focus on specific agencies has also enabled a more granular analysis on staff activities, as well as relationships with area politicians and activists, thus uncovering to what extent organization officials shaped field-based politics and society – with (or without) approval from U.N. headquarters.

This divorce between headquarters and field-based offices is an approach adopted from colonial historians’ metropole/colony framework as scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the overlaps between the late colonial period and the formative years of the United Nations. While historiography of the United Nations remained focused on its diplomatic fora, there was little scholarly attention to the development projects, military activities, and political interference of the organization. The emergency powers afforded to U.N. agencies or missions during conflict, or in the aftermath, empowered U.N. officials to materially and culturally impose a European model of ‘civilization’ upon weakened populations under the guise of development aid or ‘modernization.’ Thus, the evolution into the specific powers and privileges of specialized agencies has enabled scholars to trace colonial continuities in staff, rhetoric, geography, and method (amongst others), beyond the headquarters offices. Through this recent work, scholars are beginning to demonstrate the global impact of the organization as a historical agent in its own right, rather than just a space for member-state deliberation.

4. What are some of the challenges faced by scholars working in the field?

SJ: I think the U.N. Archive and Library services have done a wonderful job of increasing access to U.N. source materials through e.g. the U.N. Digital Library. There may, however, still be challenges for researchers in terms of accessing vital materials. This is exacerbated by funding restrictions and logistical issues. I am thinking particular of researchers from places or institutions where there are

severe limitations accessing any research funding. The digital access is great but still has limitations. I am also concerned whether the United Nations given its current crisis – which is existential and financial – will be able to maintain an adequate curation of its wonderful library and archive resources. There are reasons to be concerned for future research.

In addition, in my research I am very interested in tracing the normative across time and space. This is why the U.N. history is of such relevance. However, this is also a challenging approach because this degree of openness to tracking influence and impact also demands moving where the story takes you. This requires adaption to the archives that need to be consulted across a large geographical space and adapting research design and process along the way. I believe such challenges are well worth the investment, but it places significant demands on time and resources and these things are clearly not equally distributed in the world we live in.

SK: Historians who want to study international organizations face many challenges, and the “entry ticket” is expensive. First, they must understand the organizations’ structure, how they function, and the specific roles of the various actors involved. It is important to distinguish between government delegates, international civil servants, the experts they employ, and representatives of INGOs. For each group, it is essential to define their roles precisely and situate them accurately.

Furthermore, one must pay close attention to the biases of the sources used and what can be expected from them. International organizations have developed an elaborate and effective official discourse to legitimize their activities in the eyes of their sponsors. To do so, it is necessary to work on the different circles (in my opinion, there are three) that make up international organizations.

The first circle, or first space, consists of delegates or representatives of national governments surrounded by numerous national experts. Examples include the United Nations General Assembly, the International Labor Conference, and the assemblies of the WHO and UNESCO. However, we must also include smaller decision-making bodies, such as the U.N. Security Council and the ILO Governing Body. Discussions in these arenas are recorded in minutes, which are often available online. Understanding these discussions requires a precise grasp of the interlocking political contexts in which the delegates operate. Reduced to this first space, international organizations can be seen as purely diplomatic forums where national governments, particularly the most powerful ones, meet and oppose each other. These organizations serve as platforms for staging and projecting the major ideological or strategic differences between governments. In this respect, international organizations offer a good vantage point for observing conflicts and convergences between governments of countries or groups of countries. However, other fault lines are also apparent, particularly between groups with divergent interests, such as workers and employers at the ILO or doctors and pharmaceutical companies at the WHO. However, it is important to look beyond these public arenas.

In recent years, historians attentive to the dynamics of internationalization have focused on the sources produced by the permanent secretariats of these organizations. I consider these secretariats to be the “beating heart” of the

organizations. The international civil servants employed there, as well as the many experts recruited for specific projects, are the main actors. These individuals develop international knowledge and expertise, and epistemic communities form around the sharing of knowledge and experience. International knowledge and expertise are built by pooling national and local experiences. Working with the secretariats’ documents (correspondence, reports, mission reports, etc.) is the only way to grasp this dynamic and the diversity of actors contributing to it. These documents bear witness not only to the joint effort but also to the conflicts and tensions that accompanied it. It is important to note that these conflicts do not necessarily reflect the national or ideological divisions expressed in larger assemblies.

The various actors encountered within the secretariats must be carefully placed in their national, ideological, social, and epistemic contexts to understand their positions. This work is meticulous but essential. International organizations are not closed institutions. They exist in constant exchange with the outside world. The most visible example of this porosity and these exchanges are the pressure groups and non-governmental organizations that collaborate with these organizations (sometimes referred to as the “third UN”).

EM: One big challenge for scholars in the field is access to archival materials of the UN and affiliated bodies, which partially has to do with funding: With lean and dwindling budgets, resources available for archival preservation, processing, and – crucially – staff to help researchers navigate archival collections are often limited. But it’s partially also a question of lack of interest in or support for independent research from the leadership of select organizations. As the U.N. History Project website, which provides a list of accessible U.N. archives, explains: “It should be noted that some organizations do not keep archives or have simply proven incommunicado. In such cases, it is still worth contacting the ... organizations in question, just in case the situation has changed.” It might also be worthwhile to learn from other scholars’ experiences, who were the first to work in certain institutional archives, how they were able to secure access for themselves and others who followed. The section on international organizations of the *International Council on Archives* (ICA) is also doing important work in this regard.

Another issue—a somewhat related, but distinct challenge—are mounting attacks on multilateralism and the extent to which critical scholarship may feed into certain narratives about a general ineptitude and dysfunction of the U.N. system. Until recently, I found Mark Mazower’s reasoning reassuring that critical “third generation” scholarship – which portrays the U.N. in all its moral and political complexity – was very much necessary and, indeed, better suited than earlier idealizing scholarship to help put outsized expectations (to which the U.N. system is certain to fall short) into realistic perspective. The comforting effect of this argument, however, is wearing off, as a robust response to these attacks from U.N. scholars fails to materialize. Perhaps this muted response has to do with the fact – another challenge – that “the field” or the “scholarly U.N. community” is quite scattered and not organized in a way as other national/regional or topical studies associations are. Finally, there are, of course, very few jobs for historians in general, and specializing in U.N. history in particular may not be advisable career-wise,

given how most history departments are organized around geographic logics.

AO: The U.N. archives, from Geneva to New York to Santiago and beyond are a terrific resource and are gradually being digitized. But at times it can feel like an embarrassment of riches, because there are so many reports, resolutions and telegrams available. In addition, many of the U.N. documents are the product of tense, and often fractious negotiations and do not reflect what has taken place behind the scenes so cannot be taken as representative of the position or point of view of a particular state. This presents a challenge to researchers who must trace a question across many layers of bureaucracy and piece together how that issue was framed and negotiated over time.

Another challenge is understanding what happens in the interstitial spaces of the U.N., to use Lydia Walker's term. How can we know what may have changed as an issue was discussed in the delegates lounge? What deals were made behind the scenes, and what pressures were applied to secure votes to pass a resolution? This is an issue that faces historians of all international organizations and forces scholars to think creatively about how to draw lines of connection, but also to understand what is lost in negotiation and to trace processes backwards.

A final issue I have found is that some U.N. files remain resolutely closed, and the declassification process is quite long, so this can be frustrating. However, what I have also discovered is that select files can be found in other places, especially in the archives of Global South countries who often filed the relevant U.N. reports alongside their national records, so this has been very helpful. Moreover, it gives a clear picture of the issues that they were variously concerned with, and most often, this is about decolonization and development, so not at all the security-driven thesis that we have of the U.N.'s historic functions.

MT: A common problem for many international historians is archive accessibility. For scholars of the United Nations, the organization has sought to remedy this problem by funding an impressive digitization program (in line with the success of the League of Nations digitization project). This is a wonderful way of making official documents more accessible, especially as the price of staying in New York or Geneva (the two main archive depositories) is prohibitive. However, there is still an ongoing problem with declassification. Many files related to 'ongoing conflicts' remain inaccessible, and scholars are reminded of the resourcing demand that declassification requests entail (the United Nations is currently undergoing several financial crises due to U.S. budget cuts). Recently, I sought to declassify some documents relating to the first U.N. peacekeeping mission, UNEF, from 1956 and was told this could take years to process. This is a serious impediment to early career scholars. Many conflicts that the United Nations intervened in remain ongoing in some way or form, thus preventing their accessibility. Beyond there being a resourcing and staffing issue, there remains a question of organizational transparency when documents from almost seventy years ago remain classified.

The issue of archival accessibility, however, can often be too good to be true. The volume of official U.N. bureaucracy held within the archives is comparable to that produced by British colonial administrators. As a global organization, offices and missions had to communicate information

across vast distances, often more than once, resulting in a hunt through duplicates, receipts, and illegible carbon copies, as well as the original memos, code cables, reports, letters, and newspaper cuttings. This volume of bureaucracy was, of course, part of a performance of legitimacy and technocracy, but this can obstruct a clear view of the organizational goings-on. Often, this awareness of volume can lead scholars towards the 'exhaustive approach,' or the false belief that you will be rewarded with clarity if you read every single document. Instead, my approach has always been to perceive the U.N. archives as fragmentary from the very beginning and 'take the temperature' of the situation through the documents I can access. This helps to quiet the voice that insists that you cannot start writing until you have finished reviewing every folder.

Although, as an Early Modernist friend once commented, "At least they used typewriters!" The grass is always greener, I suppose.

5. What are some of the significant questions in the field that you feel need to be addressed in greater detail or, alternatively, which questions need to be reconsidered by contemporary scholars?

SJ: I think more historical scholarship on histories of international ordering after 1945 across the different spheres of U.N. work is where more detail and precision are urgently needed. There are already some works out there that address this, but the research agenda remains a work in progress. I think this is also a great opportunity to think more about the relationship between the disciplines of History and International Relations in this field of study. The latter discipline while having engaged more naturally with questions of international order has too often left us with works that leaves much to be desired - to put it mildly - due to a detachment from or blindness toward the actual historical record. This has weakened our understandings of some highly significant drivers of historical change.

In my own field of human rights history, I think the time has come for a broader study on the historical relationship between human rights and war over a longer time span i.e. not limited to a focus on one specific conflict or one specific decade which we have seen work on. It is the substantive connection over a larger timespan that needs attention. There is a richness now in the human rights historiography that can enable a larger reflection on this theme while grounding it with the nuance required to do this well.

SK: Of the many new avenues for research, I would highlight the following:

To better understand the nature and evolution of knowledge and expertise within the United Nations, it is useful to have a clearer picture of the training of international civil servants and experts. In this regard, it is important to understand the roles of economists, lawyers, and political scientists in the various secretariats and how these roles have evolved.

The role of economic actors, particularly multinational company representatives, in international organizations should be further explored, especially since the 1970s. This would provide insight into the organization's evolution since the 1980s and the choices made in favor of greater cooperation with large corporations and fewer binding regulations.

Some networks, particularly religious actors like churches, have played hidden roles in the U.N. system and constitute powerful international forces. Studies that examine the role and influence of these religious actors in the U.N. system more systematically would be very useful.

EM: I think there's much interesting research to pursue (and I'm probably not aware of existing interesting research that's already out there), but something that I'm personally very much interested in are the following questions: 1) What was the socialist world's engagement with the U.N. system in both rhetoric and practice? How did different socialist countries and citizens – including e.g. of the People's Republic of China – approach the United Nations and affiliates bodies? There has been some terrific research on “global socialism” in recent years, but few scholars have explored the implications of socialist global aspirations and projects for the U.N. system. 2) How did people beyond politicians, diplomats, experts, and civil servants – i.e. “ordinary people” – think about and engage the United Nations – both, in countries that were major financial sponsors of the United Nations and in countries on “the recipient end” of various U.N. missions and mandates? How were they shaped by and how did they in turn shape U.N. practices? How did public opinions about the U.N. change over time? There is an important growing literature on petitions to the United Nations, but it would be interesting if future studies went beyond this source base and looked also e.g. at media coverage of the United Nations. 3) Relatedly: What is the organization's relationship with democracy? What did past initiatives to “democratize global governance” or the U.N. system look like? (There is ongoing research on this as part of the “Global Governance, Trust and Democratic Engagement in Past and Present,” led by Daniel Laqua at Northumbria University.) But also: What did U.N. “democracy promotion” work entail? What effects did these efforts have? 4) I'd also be interested in seeing more research on U.N. “preventive diplomacy”: that is research that focuses not on official Security Council deliberations and actions, but on the various behind-the-scenes roles of U.N. personnel, who worked in “conflict zones”, not necessarily as official mediators, but e.g. as country-level technical assistance coordinators.

AO: A lot of ink has been spilled about the United Nations' role in decolonization and the end of empire but less has been focused on the agency of Global South actors in that process. In order not to repeat older genealogies of the United Nations, more histories of how these actors constructed and changed the United Nations are required, to construct truly global histories of the organization.

However, related to this, more critical histories of the United Nations need to be written. A lot of scholarship upholds a normative approach which does not distinguish between the principles and the practices of the United Nations. These more nuanced interpretations should however be contextualized in the possibilities and limitations of the relevant moments in history, rather than taking a post-historical approach.

Finally, we still need more in depth, granular histories of the United Nations which will highlight patterns of repetition of issues across the system and identify processes of inclusion and exclusion. My current work addresses some of these ‘lost causes’ of issues which were discussed at the United Nations but never achieved

fruition. It's important to abandon the binary framework of success versus failure with which we have reviewed the United Nations' performance over the last 80 years. Only by doing so and rejecting the idea that the organization is a bastion of liberal internationalism, will it be possible to capture these alternative histories. This will produce a new reflection of the United Nations as a center of global order.

MT: Although there is still much to be written on specific officials, agencies, and organizations in the United Nations' history, there is more to be uncovered about how fundamental area or ‘local’ employees have been in shaping the history of the organization. The top-down focus in histories of the United Nations is a product of archival availability and the Great Powers-centered research questions that this field has focused on in the past couple of decades. Over the next years, I would love to see more attention placed on investigating how different area employees – for example, translators, teachers, security, drivers, laundry services, medical staff, etc. – joined the organization, influenced the U.N. culture, and shaped agency conduct in the field. By investigating the ideas, activities, and diversity of area staff, we can also build upon existing scholarship on non-Western U.N. officials that has explored how post-colonial hierarchies have influenced their decision-making about self-determination and sovereignty. For international officials, even those who were themselves from post-colonial states, employment within the United Nations created an elite class division and a belief in civilizational supremacy over the host population. Yet, for area staff, many were employed by the United Nations and continued to live and work in their hometowns and cities. So, how might this proximity to their home shape their political and cultural engagement as a U.N. employee? How were area staff treated by international U.N. staff and vice versa?

6. For someone wanting to begin study of the United Nations, what 5-8 books do you consider to be essential, either as the “best” or most influential?

SJ: I would recommend an approach focused on diversifying one's reading from the outset to understand the scope of what historical research on the United Nations can entail. One should also be aware that some of the best work on the United Nations may appear in books that are not solely focused on the United Nations, but rather is broader in scope while paying due attention to the role of the United Nations in the context of what is being studied.

Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin, eds. *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Marcos Cueto, Theodore M. Brown and Elizabeth Fee, *The World Health Organization: A History* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Giusi Russo, *Women, Empires, and Body Politics at the United Nations, 1946–1975* (University of Nebraska Press, 2023).

Sandrine Kott, *A World More Equal: An Internationalist Perspective on the Cold War*. (Columbia University Press, 2024).

SK: There are numerous manuals that help readers understand the U.N. system and reconstruct its history. Evan Luard's book, although a little old and ending in the

1960s, has the advantage of providing a true chronological history of the United Nations. Evan Luard, *A History of the United Nations*, (Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 1982), 2 vols.

The U.N. Intellectual History Project (https://www.ralphbuncheinstitute.org/un-intellectual-history-project/publication_list.html), whose website is unfortunately not updated, published 17 volumes between 2001 and 2009 that reflect on the importance of the United Nations and provide an overview of most of its activities. The volumes are uneven, but they generally provide a good starting point for an overview of the organization's actions in areas as diverse as human rights, statistics, global economics, multinational corporations, etc.

This handbook by Louis Marieke, Bob Reinalda, ed., *Routledge Handbook of International Organizations*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2025), is not limited to the study of the United Nations, but it is very useful for understanding the fields covered by research and current issues.

EM: I think Amy Sayward's 2017 introductory overview *The United Nations in International History* provides a good starting point. On the origins of the UN, I would recommend looking at Mark Mazower's *No Enchanted Palace* (2009) for the ties to British imperialism, and Stephen Wertheim's *Tomorrow the World* (2020), read in conjunction with Elizabeth Borgwardt's, *A New Deal for the World* (2007) for two very different perspectives on what the United States tried to achieve with its commitment to the United Nations. Since the Bretton Woods institutions are part of the U.N. system, I would also recommend having a look at Eric Helleiner's *Forgotten Foundation's* (2014), which is concerned with "Global South" investments in and contributions to the U.N. system. For a discussion on how the United Nations has changed since its inception, especially in the wake of decolonization and the "Third World" project (Vijay Prashad 2007), Mark Mazower's *Governing the World* (2012) is a good starting point as well as Sandrine Kott's *A World More Equal* (2024), which calls attention to the fact that Cold War—counterintuitively perhaps—produced a striking degree of international cooperation.

For more focused explorations, I'd recommend having a look at: Ryan Irwin's *Gordian Knot* (2012), on how debates over Apartheid led U.S. leaders to reconsider their relationship with the U.N. system and Margarita Fajardo's *The World That Latin America Created* (2022) on the momentous impact of the U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and its staff members on intergovernmental and social science discussions about development and global inequalities. For a similar discussion of "Global South" initiatives to remake global values, I would recommend Steven Jensen's, *The Making of International Human Rights* (2016). For perspectives on socialist engagement of the United Nations, I would recommend Louis Porter's *Reds in Blue* (2023), which focuses on Soviets within UNESCO, and Raluca Grosescu and Ned Richardson-Little's edited volume on *Socialism and International Law* (2025). Finally, – although I'm already well beyond the 8 books-limit – I think Margot Tudor's 2023 book *Blue Helmet Bureaucrats* on U.N. peacekeeping as a key activity for which the organization is known, should be engaged with.

AO: The best essay on the United Nations is Sunil Amrith, Glenda Sluga, 'New Histories of the United Nations,' *Journal of World History*, Vol. 19, No. 3, (Sep., 2008), pp. 251-274.

Eva-Maria Muschik, *Building States, The United Nations, Development, and Decolonization, 1945–1965* (Columbia University Press, 2022)

Siba N'Zatiola Grovogui, *Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans: Race and Self-determination in International Law* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

Shirley Hazzard, *People in Glass Houses* (Picador, 1967).

Steven Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Maria Ivanova, *The Untold Story of the World's Leading Environmental Institution: UNEP at Fifty* (MIT Press, 2021).

Margaret Antsee, *Never Learn to Type: A Woman at the United Nations* (Wiley, 2004)

Conor Cruise O'Brien, *To Katanga and Back: A UN Case History* (Simon and Schuster, 1963)

MT: Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

Jessica Pearson *The Colonial Politics of Global Health: France and the United Nations in Postwar Africa* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

Mary Ann Heiss, *Fulfilling the Sacred Trust: The UN Campaign for International Accountability for Dependent Territories during the Era of Decolonization* (Cornell University Press, 2020).

Laure Humbert, *Reinventing French Aid: The Politics of Humanitarian Relief in French-Occupied Germany, 1945-1952* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

William Carruthers, *Flooded Pasts: UNESCO, Nubia, and the Recolonization of Archaeology* (Cornell University Press, 2022).

Sebastián Gil-Riaño, *The Remnants of Race Science: UNESCO and Economic Development in the Global South* (Columbia University Press, 2023).

Anne Irfan, *Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System* (Columbia University Press, 2023).

7. For someone wanting to teach a course about the history of the United Nations or add the history of the United Nations to an existing course on U.S. foreign relations, what core texts (written or otherwise) would you suggest assigning?

SJ: I would definitely look at books such as Michael Franczak's *Global Inequality and American Foreign Policy* (Cornell University Press, 2022) and Christopher R. W. Dietrich's *Oil Revolution: Anticolonial Elites, Sovereign Rights, and the Economic Culture of Decolonization* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). I would also consider Bradley R. Simpson's *The First Right: Self-Determination and the Transformation of International Order, 1941-2000* (Oxford University Press, 2025) and Thant Myint-U, *Peacemaker: U Thant and the Forgotten Quest for a Just World* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2025). The anthology *Women and the UN: A New History of Women's International Human Rights* (Routledge, 2022) edited by Rebecca Adami and Dan Plesch is also worth

consulting. I would also look more broadly on writings by scholars such as Alanna O'Malley and Roland Burke who are producing thoughtful research interventions that explore U.N. history with quite some breadth.

There are now plenty of audio-visual materials that have been made available by the United Nations going back to the 1940s. There are resources here to explore for discussions or exercises in the classroom – although it may take time to identify what works in this context. In general, the United Nations is a major knowledge producer with a vast number of reports available in addition to statements, resolutions, declarations and legal treaties. There are some very good examples from across the decades that could work for student essay's that analyze their content in historical context. The difficulty is finding the good and relevant materials among everything that has been produced and that has not stood the test of time.

SK: I have no answer to the question 7.

EM: I've already suggested some books that I consider "core texts" above. In terms of articles, I think people may want to assign Sunil Amrith and Glenda Sluga's pathbreaking "New Histories of the United Nations" (2008), which really established the field and/or Sandrine Kott's "International Organizations – A Field of Research for a Global History" (2011) for a primer on the study of international organizations more broadly. For an updated introduction to the field, I would recommend Alanna O'Malley and Lydia Walker's "A Revisionist History of the United Nations" (2025).

For more focused pieces, I'd assign Mark Mazower's article „The Strange Triumph of Human Rights, 1933-1950,“ (2004), which compares the U.N. framework to the League of Nations; S. Wertheim's article "Instrumental Internationalism" (2019) on the early U.S. commitment to the United Nations; Cindy Ewing's "With a Minimum of Bitterness" (2022) on how "Third World" elites tried to use the United Nations as a platform for their cause(s); Jess Pearson's "Defending Empire at the United Nations" (2017) on how colonial powers, in turn, sought to use the organization for their own purposes; Alessandro Iandolo's "Beyond the Shoe" on Soviet policy at the crucial General Assembly meeting during the crucial "Year of Africa" in 1960; Emma Kluge's "Papuan Petitions as an Archive of Decolonisation" (2025) on how non-elite actors engaged the United Nations; and David Webster's "Development Advisors in a Time of Cold War and Decolonization" (2011) on U.N. staff as autonomous actors in Indonesia. My own book chapter "Moving Beyond Advice" (2022) may also be of interest for U.S. foreign relations courses, as it explores the very close informal working relationship between U.N. staff and US government representatives in Bolivia and D.C.

I would also very much recommend using the official chart of the U.N. system (<https://www.un.org/en/delegate/page/un-system-chart>), so that students have an idea about the confusing structure of the U.N. system, and pointing them to the above mentioned "U.N. History Project" website for online resources, as well as the site that accompanies Amy Sayward's book for further references (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/cw/the-united-nations-in-international-history/the-united-nations/>) and finally, the UN Photo Library: <https://unmultimedia.org/photo/index.jsp>.

AO: Dag Hammarskjöld, 'The International Civil Servant

in Law and in Fact: A Lecture delivered to Congregation on 30 May 1961'.

Ryan Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

Amy L. Sayward, *The United Nations in International History* (Bloomsbury, 2017)

Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, 14 December 1960, UN General Assembly (15th session: 1960-1961) <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/206145?ln=en&v=pdf>

MT: Jessica Reinisch, 'Internationalism in relief: the Birth (and death) of UNRRA,' *Past & Present* 210 (S6) (2011): 258-89.

Meredith Terretta, "'We Had Been Fooled into Thinking that the UN Watches over the Entire World': Human Rights, UN Trust Territories, and Africa's Decolonization," *Human Rights Quarterly* 34:2 (2012): 329-60.

Emma MacKinnon, "Declaration as Disavowal: The Politics of Race and Empire in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *Political Theory* 47:1 (2018): 57-81.

Stephen Wertheim, "Instrumental Internationalism: The American Origins of the United Nations, 1940-3", *Journal of Contemporary History* 54:2 (2019): 265-83.

Elisabeth Leake, "States, nations, and self-determination: Afghanistan and decolonization at the United Nations," *Journal of Global History*, 17:2 (2022): 272-91.

SHAFR SPOTLIGHTS



Vivian Chang

I grew up in Seattle and Vancouver in the 1990s and 2000s. A child of Taiwanese immigrants, I developed an interest in foreign affairs long before I viewed it as a possible career path. Growing up, my favorite pastimes were basketball, hip hop, and books—including books on basketball and hip hop. At the time, the two were deeply intertwined, and it was through reading about these that I first learned about systemic racism, the prison-industrial complex, and other issues plaguing high-poverty Black communities. At the University of British Columbia, I majored in history and English literature (following a brief stint as a political science major). Following graduation, I worked on a morning show at CTV News before going to graduate school. I am now a postdoctoral fellow at Dartmouth College and working on my first book on transnational Black efforts for economic decolonization in the 1960s and 1970s.

What are your favorite movies/TV shows of all time?

My favorite movie is *The Godfather Part II*. I still remember exactly where I was and how I felt the first time I watched it, and I try to rewatch it every year. My comfort watches are *Lost in Translation* and *Inside Llewyn Davis*. A movie I (finally) watched recently that really stayed with me is *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*.

My favorite TV shows are *Mad Men* (especially the first four seasons), *The Wire*, and *Seinfeld*. I also love *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*—growing up, my parents watched it religiously to learn English, so I have many fond memories associated with it.

What was your most embarrassing/nerve-wracking/anxiety-producing professional moment?

The first time I presented at a conference.

You are exiled to a desert island and can only take five novels. What do you take and why?

East of Eden (my favorite novel), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (one of the reasons I became interested in postcolonial Africa), *Little Women* (a comfort read), *Anna Karenina* (a doorstopper of a book I have been meaning to reread for years), *Never Let Me Go* (I recommend this to everyone I know).

If you could have dinner with any three historical figures, who would they be and why?

John F. Kennedy, Kwame Nkrumah, and James Baldwin. Imagine the conversation we would have.

What would you do if you won the \$750 million Powerball?

I would start a small liberal arts college and hire all the brilliant junior scholars who are currently on the job market.

You have been given an unlimited budget and a time machine to organize a music festival. What bands or solo acts do you invite?

Tupac, Nirvana, Nina Simone, Otis Redding, NWA, Soundgarden, and Whitney Houston.

What are five things on your bucket list?

Get another sheltie (or two) to keep my current sheltie happy, publish a novel, travel to the Yukon, learn Italian, go to the NBA All-Star Game.

What would you be doing if you were not an academic?

I would be a journalist or a novelist.

Currently I'm the John D. Winters Endowed Professor of History in the School of History and Social Sciences at Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, Louisiana, where I've taught many different undergraduate and graduate courses since 2012. I have published two books, both with the University of North Carolina Press—*Gun Country: Gun Capitalism, Culture, and Control in Cold War America* (2023), and *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America* (2017). I have also written about gun politics and culture recently for publications like *Slate*, *Time*, the *Washington Post*, and *MSNBC*. I was first drawn into history by my grandfather, a classic “history buff,” though we often argued about, well, everything—I dedicated my last book to him and noted that he “would have hated every word of it.” I live in Shreveport, Louisiana, with my spouse, Jennie, my son, Ian, and my dog, Louie, who does not like that I sit in front of the computer all day.

What are your favorite movies/TV shows of all time)?

In no particular order:

1. *The Sopranos*: I grew up in New Jersey, and my family is from North Jersey, so watching this show always felt like going home.
2. *Dr. Strangelove*: How can you write about the Cold War and not love this film?
3. *Dog Day Afternoon*: The perfect film about the United States in the 1970s, from Hollywood's best era.
4. *Cowboy Bebop*: Anime's best era was the 1990s, and this was the best series to come out of it.
5. *Lost in Translation*: This film taught me, as I was working on my dissertation, that it's okay to feel alienated and confused by a different culture, because you don't own that culture and you're not entitled to it.

What was your most embarrassing/nerve-wracking/anxiety-producing professional moment?

In late 2006, near the end of my first semester teaching college history as an adjunct and Ph.D. candidate, I woke up one morning to discover that half my face wouldn't move. It was frozen! I couldn't keep mouthwash in my mouth without it squirting out the side. I couldn't pronounce Bs and Ps. At the time I was diagnosed with Bell's Palsy, facial paralysis, though years later we discovered it was likely Ramsay Hunt Syndrome, which is related to the chickenpox virus. (This is the only thing I will ever have in common with Justin Bieber.) Your first semester teaching college is already a nerve-wracking experience: now imagine having to walk into the classroom every day and half your face doesn't work. It took months to get used to it, and it has never fully recovered, but I did learn that if I could deal with that, there wasn't much else that could ever really rattle me when it came to public speaking.

You are exiled to a desert island and can only take five novels. What do you take and why?

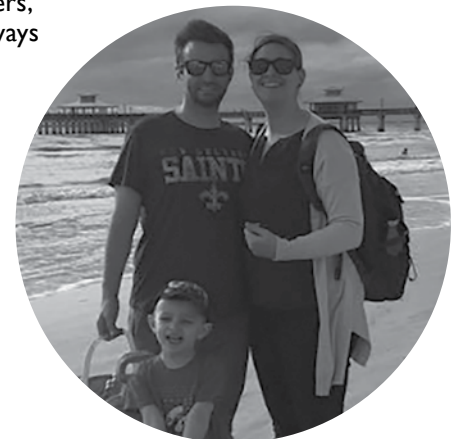
1. Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*: Just about any Murakami novel would do if you're dealing with isolation and loneliness, but this is my favorite.
2. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: I've reread this book more than any other, and each reading is rewarding in new ways.
3. N.K. Jemisin, *The Broken Earth Trilogy*: I read lots of fantasy and science fiction and nobody writes it better than Jemisin.
4. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*: As with Murakami, almost any book will do, but this one is where Vonnegut's writing went from brilliant to transcendent. Somehow it's absurd and hilarious and devastating all at once.
5. Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall*: As with Jemisin, I'll cheat and take the whole trilogy. Has anyone ever written historical fiction better than Mantel?

If you could have dinner with any three historical figures, who would they be and why?

This is easy: Joan Didion, Kurt Vonnegut, and James Baldwin. They are my three favorite writers, and depending on what I'm writing, I can hear their particular voices in my head as I write, always failing to live up to my aspirations. They're also the three best stylists, I think, of the postwar era, which is what I write about. They were all contemporaries too so is it possible the three did have dinner once, together, without me?

What would you do if you won the \$750 million Powerball?

Who needs that much money? I would give most of it away. Then I'd put the rest in one of those “financial instruments” that allow rich people to make money without doing any work. That is the key to becoming wealthy: to start out with a lot of money. Otherwise I already like what I do day to day, and would probably just keep doing that, but at least I wouldn't have to worry about paying the bills. Maybe I would move somewhere with less homicidal weather. This is a very boring answer. You should have asked a more interesting person to do this.



(cont'd on the next page)

Drew McKevitt

You have been given an unlimited budget and a time machine to organize a music festival. What bands or solo acts do you invite?

The Who, but we'd have to bring Keith Moon back. David Bowie, Prince, the Pretenders. Having grown up NJ and cut my own musical teeth on the Jersey Shore rock scene, I'm probably supposed to say Springsteen, but not stadium-tour Springsteen—pre-*Born in the USA* Springsteen, before he started lifting weights. We'd do the show at the Stone Pony in Asbury Park, NJ. Opening acts include Deftones (who I actually saw at the Pony!), Saves the Day, and Stars.

What are five things on your bucket list?

1. Live outside the United States. Japan and New Zealand seem nice.
2. Own a big boat. I grew up near the water but I was never a boat person. Boat people always seem like they're living their best lives.
3. Live in the mountains. The more isolated the better, but it has to have plenty of amenities—not survivalist mountain living, but rich person mountain living, a place where I could stand thoughtfully in front of large picture windows, contemplating the mountain landscape and the human condition.
4. Travel throughout China. A billion people, diverse cultures and landscapes—it feels like I'd be missing some essential human experience without experiencing China.
5. Write a novel. Seriously! I'll get around to it.

What would you be doing if you were not an academic?

I'd be a house painter. I did it for a while before I went to grad school. It's good, honest, fulfilling work, even creative work sometimes. If you paint rich people's houses, you make good money. And you do little things that make people feel better about their lives. You go home tired and sore at the end of the day, which is okay when you're in your twenties. Now in my forties, I'd be running the business, a vast house-painting empire, perhaps, spending my days looking out my picture windows, contemplating the human condition.



SHAFR ANNUAL MEETING 2028

THE SHAFR COUNCIL WOULD
LIKE TO HEAR FROM MEMBERS
INTERESTED IN HOSTING THE
CONFERENCE IN JUNE 2028.

SHAFR IS ESPECIALLY
INTERESTED IN PROPOSALS
FROM MEMBERS WHO WOULD
LIKE TO HOST THE
CONFERENCE ON THEIR
CAMPUS OR AT THEIR
INSTITUTION.

PROPOSAL DEADLINE: 9/1/2025

CONTACT KAETE O'CONNELL WITH QUESTIONS
CONFERENCE@SHAFR.ORG

SHAFR 2025 Award Winners

Betty M. Unterberger Dissertation Prize

The Betty M. Unterberger Dissertation Prize Committee—Nicole Anslover (chair), Samantha Payne, and Nicole Phelps—has awarded the 2025 prize to **Daniel Chardell** for his dissertation “The Gulf War: An International History, 1989-1991.” It was completed at Harvard University under the direction of Erez Manela. In this examination of the 1991 Gulf War, Chardell argues for new interpretations of the end of the Cold War. He analyzes Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait through the lens of new understandings of the global balance of power amidst the collapse of a Communist superpower. Through multinational archival work, Chardell explains how differing U.S. and Arab visions of sovereignty helped shape foreign relations in the post-Cold War world. This dissertation will spark new conversations about the Gulf War and greater international relations at the end of the 20th century.



The committee also awarded Honorable Mention to **David Helps** for his dissertation, “Securing the World City: Policing, Migration, and the Struggle for Global Los Angeles, 1973-1994,” which was completed at the University of Michigan with advisor Matthew D. Lassiter. In it, Helps crafts a transnational urban history that examines the transformation of Los Angeles during the twenty years Tom Bradley served as mayor, a period of dramatic growth in the city’s population and its economic role as a port city. In examining contests over downtown redevelopment, security at the 1984 Olympics, and the Rodney King verdict, Helps brings together an impressive range of scholarship and archival research to illustrate how action at multiple scales came together in a specific place.

Congratulations also go to **Kaitlin Simpson** for receiving Honorable Mention for her dissertation, “The Flow-ers of El Dorado: Gender, Production, and the Cut Flower Industry in the United States and Colombia, 1908-Present.” Completed at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, under the supervision of Tore Olsson, it is a creative and beautifully written history of the cut flower industry in the United States and Colombia during the twentieth century. Simpson draws the reader in through a gendered analysis of the ascent of the cut flower industry, moving seamlessly between the U.S. and Latin America and drawing on a wide range of methodologies to explain how and why cut flowers were produced and consumed. The committee especially appreciated the way she captures the experiences and perspectives of women workers in Colombian flower fields by reading corporate archives against the grain.



Marilyn Blatt Young Dissertation Completion Fellowship

The winner of the 2025 Marilyn Blatt Young Dissertation Completion Fellowship is **Margie Tang-Whitworth**, a Doctoral Candidate in History at the University of Minnesota. Her dissertation—“‘The Oriental Julia Child’: Chinese American Cuisine, Gendered Orientalism, and the Cold War”—is an exciting and thought-provoking study that examines how four Chinese American female celebrity chefs influenced popular U.S. perceptions of foreign relations, Chinese migration, and the Cold War both at home and in the world. Tang-Whitmore’s project argues that “authentic” Chinese food on U.S. plates, hand in hand with the crafted performances, delivered an intersectional formation of the “model minority myth” in the United States. Utilizing an approach that skillfully combines interdisciplinarity with both public and private primary sources, it unearths a key means by which Chinese American anticommunism increased during a key period in U.S., international, and global history. The award committee (Kate Burlingham—chair, Aaron Coy Moulton, and Marc Selverstone) was greatly impressed with Tang-Whitmore’s original approach and conceptual framework. Her dissertation, once completed, will make an outstanding addition to the breadth of work at SHAFR.



Dante LaRiccia of Yale University received Honorable Mention for the Young Dissertation Completion Fellowship. His dissertation—“Carbon Colonization: U.S. Empire in the Age of Oil”—explores the origins and evolution of the global oil economy and charts its role in advancing America’s interests and mission abroad. It reveals how the processing, shipment, and consumption of oil—in addition to its extraction—facilitated the imperial ambitions of the United States. He then traces the impact of those ambitions and their ensuing frictions—between and among American oil companies, U.S. policymakers, and local peoples, at both the elite and grassroots levels—framing those contestations against the backdrop of the Cold War. Incorporating documents from over two dozen archives, LaRiccia’s work sits at the intersection of environmental, international, and energy history and offers a wide-ranging and creative account of the climate crisis and its imperial roots. Its insights into both colonization and decolonization, realized through the lens of the global petroleum economy, provides a deeper understanding of both our geo-climatic era and the projection of U.S. power abroad.



Taylor Prescott of the University of Pennsylvania also received Honorable Mention for the Young Dissertation Completion Fellowship. His dissertation—“Sovereigns and Exiles, Recaptives and Revolutionaries: A History of Black Interethnic Exchange in Sierra Leone, 1775-1848”—is a political, intellectual, and global history that links the American Revolution with the movement for independence in Sierra Leone. By connecting the history of the United States with the global history of Sierra Leone, he argues that the importance of the American Revolution extends beyond its influence in the Euro-American world and reaches to those colonized in Africa. His project is part of a growing literature that seeks to shed light on the important links between U.S. and African history during this early period. Further, by calling for a “global history of Sierra Leone,” his project addresses the need to see Africans as global actors long before the anti-colonial movements of the late twentieth century. The committee was impressed by Prescott’s project and excited about the much needed geographic and temporal diversity it brings to SHAFR.



The Stuart L. Bernath Scholarly Article Prize

The Stuart L. Bernath Scholarly Article Prize Committee—Mattias Fibiger (chair), Oli Charbonneau, and Kaete O’Connell—is pleased to announce that **Ben Zdenecanovic** is this year’s winner. “A Strange Paradox: U.S. Global Economic Power and the British Welfare State, 1944–1951” in *Diplomatic History* is a pathbreaking contribution to U.S. foreign relations history. With exceptional archival depth and analytic precision, Zdenecanovic reinterprets the trans-Atlantic ecumene in the immediate postwar years. He skillfully nuances the dominant “embedded liberalism” thesis, revealing profound tensions between American marketism and British statism in the elaboration of the postwar economic order. Yet he also exposes, through a detailed study of tobacco duties, the deep interdependencies between the two projects. For example, U.S. dollar aid financed British imports of American tobacco, and taxes on the consumption of this tobacco financed much of the incremental increase in government spending necessary to realize the Beveridge Plan. Elegantly written, empirically rich, and theoretically incisive, this is scholarship of the highest caliber.



The committee also recognized **Garrett McKinnon**’s article “The 1960 U-2 Crisis Reconsidered: Technology, Masculinity, and U.S. Airpower’s ‘Unmanning’” in *Diplomatic History*. It offers a bold and original reinterpretation of a pivotal Cold War episode. With intellectual verve and archival rigor, McKinnon frames the U-2 incident not merely as a diplomatic failure or intelligence blunder, but as a transformative moment in the cultural politics of American national security. By situating pilot Francis Gary Powers’s capture within broader discourses of technology and masculinity in the Cold War, the article uncovers how perceptions of gender inflected the move from man to machine in U.S. military policy. Methodologically innovative and brilliantly argued, this is scholarship deserving of recognition.



Stuart L. Bernath Book Prize

This year’s Stuart L. Bernath Book Prize, for the best first book in the field, was awarded by Colleen Woods (chair), Tessa Winkelmann, and Benjamin Coates to **Christina Cecelia Davidson**. Centered on the life of H. C. C. Astwood—the first Black U.S. consul to the Dominican Republic—*Dominican Crossroads: H. C. C. Astwood and the Moral Politics of Race Making in the Age of Emancipation* is a wide-ranging history of late 19th-century Black internationalism, transimperial Caribbean politics, and American race-making. Astwood’s critics condemned him as a self-interested huckster (he once participated in a scheme to take Columbus’s skeleton on tour in the United States), but Davidson offers a nuanced portrait of a man who sought to exploit loopholes in the otherwise suffocating racial and international hierarchies that characterized the period. Rooted in an impressively deep excavation of documents from U.S. and Dominican archives, *Dominican Crossroads* is a penetrating study that makes a persuasive case for the significance of a nation often overlooked by scholars of U.S. foreign relations.



The committee also recognized **Allison Powers** with Honorable Mention for her book, *Arbitrating Empire: United States Expansion and the Transformation of International Law*. In this brilliant social and multinational history of international law, Powers illustrates how ordinary people used arbitration to challenge U.S. power. Between 1870 and 1930, the United States used claims commissions to legitimize, facilitate, and secure U.S. “territory, wealth, and political power across the globe.” Charting how claimants from sites across the Americas, Caribbean, and Pacific appealed to international law through claims commissions to challenge and expose U.S. imperial violence, Powers reveals how ordinary people shaped the emergence of modern international law. Through deep research and an engaging narrative, *Arbitrating Empire* makes a major contribution to our understanding of how the law of state responsibility has been constructed and deployed across the 20th century.



The Myrna F. Bernath Fellowship

The Myrna F. Bernath Fellowship recognizes excellence by women, non-binary, and/or trans scholars in U.S. foreign relations history. This year's committee—Carol Chin (chair), Megan Black, and Ryan Irwin—selected **Sonya Schoenberger** as the winner. The committee was very impressed with the scope and design of her dissertation—"Oceanic Sovereignities: Decolonization and the Rise of Large Ocean States." It is poised to chart key legal, political, and environmental currents of the postwar era, as Pacific Islands in the Francophone and Anglophone sphere moved from territories to free associations and trade partners in decolonization. Through the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea, emerging Pacific Island States sought to affirm sovereignty in part by negotiating terms of marine governance: Who could control the valuable skipjack tuna fishing grounds? How did the interests of Pacific Island States conflict with U.S. strategic interests in seabed minerals? Sonya has already spent several months in New Caledonia, Fiji, and French Polynesia, and she will use the award to consult archives and conduct interviews in the Solomon Islands and Hawai'i.



The Michael H. Hunt Prize for International History



The Michael H. Hunt Prize for International History goes to the best first book that on international or global history since the mid-nineteenth century that makes substantial use of historical records in more than one language. This year's prize committee of Jeremy Rich, Nathan Citino, and Pierre Asselin found **Mateo Jarquín's** *The Sandinista Revolution: A Global Latin American History* to be a fascinating exploration of the Nicaraguan government's diplomatic engagement with other countries in Central and South America as it struggled against U.S. state efforts to undermine it. Drawing on the multinational approach to diplomatic history that has been a hallmark of SHAFR, Jarquín highlights the role of varied Latin American governments in their bid to assert their autonomy vis-a-vis the U.S. government and to prevent a recurrence of heavy-handed U.S. interventions such as in the Dominican Republic. Jarquín deftly navigates interplay between internal Nicaraguan conflicts, U.S. Cold War relations, and especially the role of other Central and South American governments. Well-written and convincingly argued, *The Sandinista Revolution* deserves attention from a wide range of diplomatic historians inside and outside of Latin American history.

Robert H. Ferrell Book Prize

The Robert H. Ferrell Prize rewards distinguished scholarship in the history of American foreign relations, broadly defined, for a book beyond the author's first monograph. This year's prize committee—Marc Gallicchio (chair), Amanda McVety, and Kristin Ahlberg—is pleased to announce that this year's winner is **Kate Epstein**. In *Analog Superpowers: How Twentieth Century Technology Theft Built the National Security State*, she has shown how an inquiry into a technical and seemingly narrow topic—naval fire control—can produce a new understanding of the relationship between the law, technological development, political economy, and Anglo-American relations in the first half of the twentieth century. This compelling trans-Atlantic drama of great power competition and intellectual piracy is a story about ingenuity and invention as well as the conflict between private property and national security. Working with a wide range of legal, naval, and business sources, Epstein reveals how the U.S. and Royal navies pirated a privately developed system and then wrote the history of that technology in a way that made the theft disappear. It took Epstein's admirable skills as a historian to discover what had been hidden. In the process of doing so, she explains how the transnational efforts to override intellectual property rights laid the legal foundation for the current national security state well before the creation of Manhattan Project's all-encompassing secrecy regime.



Peter L. Hahn Distinguished Service Award

The Peter L. Hahn SHAFR Distinguished Service Award recognizes a senior historian who, over a career, has shown a deep commitment to the growth and development of our organization. This year's selection committee—Kristin Hoganson (chair), Andrew Preston, and Thomas Schwartz—are delighted to confer this honor on **Andrew Johns**.

SHAFR has been the fortunate beneficiary of Andy's considerable talents and energy over the course of decades. Andy has made new members feel welcome at SHAFR conferences since he was a new member, back in his grad student years in the 1990s. His commitment to mentoring prompted Andy to co-direct the 2015 Summer Institute, and to this day, he continues to offer guidance to that cohort of Institute participants.

Andy brought this commitment to community building to his position as editor of *Passport*, which he expertly stewarded for fourteen years. The selection committee received testimonials on his creativity, exacting editorial standards, talent for layout and design, and ability to lighten serious content with humor. His nominators

also commended his ability to identify emerging historiographical trends, envision fora of contemporary relevance, conceive of features such “Seven Questions,” and tirelessly solicit articles, oversee budgets, shepherd contributors, meet deadlines, and secure resources from his own institution (Brigham Young University). In addition to advancing scholarship, teaching, and public advocacy, Andy has fostered awareness of developments at the National Archives and Presidential Libraries, the work of the Historical Advisory Committee on diplomatic documentation, SHAFR business, and member news.

Though substantial in themselves, Andy’s roles as a mentor and editor are only part of a larger record of conscientious service to SHAFR that also includes ample committee work. Andy has served on the Gelfand-Rappaport Dissertation Fellowship committee, the Bernath Dissertation Grant committee, the local arrangements committee for the 2016 conference, the oversight and editorial board committees for the SHAFR website, and the search committee for the first Electronic Communications Editor. He has also served SHAFR faithfully as a Council member.

Additionally, Andy played a role in establishing the Hahn Service Award, along with SHAFR’s LaFeber-Wood Teaching Prize and a book prize in our field offered by the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association. His role in these endeavors is a testament to his commitment to lifting up and recognizing others. It is a great pleasure to, in turn, recognize Andy, for his record of service to SHAFR is matched by few in the history of our Society.



Anna K. Nelson Prize for Archival Excellence

The Anna K. Nelson Prize for Archival Excellence is awarded by SHAFR’s Historical Documentation Committee, consisting of Robert J. McMahon (chair), Katherine Sibley, and Thomas Zeiler, who unanimously recommended **William Burr** with great enthusiasm. During his 35 years at the National Security Archive, Bill has displayed exemplary expertise with government documents pertaining to U.S. foreign relations and international affairs, along with outstanding and dedicated service to the scholarly community. As one of the several distinguished scholars who nominated him notes, Bill Burr “has expanded the role of archivist to include not only the preservation and care of archival material but also to making archival material more accessible to scholars in innovative ways.” He has excelled in using the Freedom of Information Act to locate, declassify, and preserve thousands of documents on U.S. foreign policy and international history. Bill has helped collate, edit, and publish many of those in over 231 Electronic Briefing Books and nine Digital National Security documentary sets, totaling close to 200,000 pages of material that has been extraordinarily helpful to scholars.



His “tireless commitment to the release and dissemination of archival material,” writes another of his distinguished nominators, “particularly records related to the U.S. nuclear history, has made it possible for scholars to delve into a variety of topics and supported a generation of researchers working in the field.” “Burr is the quiet, helpful, unassuming, invaluable archivist that Anna Nelson would have enormously admired,” adds another of his nominators. How fitting, then, that he be awarded this prize established in her honor.

LaFeber-Wood Prize for Distinguished Teaching

The inaugural Walter LaFeber-Molly Wood Prize for Distinguished Teaching was awarded by a subcommittee of the Teaching Committee comprised of Justin Hart (chair), Addison Jensen, Zachary Tayler, and Laila Ballout. Their unanimous choice was **Kyle Longley**.

For three decades, first at Arizona State and now at Chapman, Longley has mentored countless undergraduate and graduate students, from first-year college students to PhD candidates, with equal enthusiasm. Dr. Longley begins his teaching statement with the aphorism “love what you teach, but also love who you teach,” and this has clearly been a guiding principle for him, according to the seven former students who took the time to write on his behalf for this award. As one of his most distinguished PhD graduates writes of him, “At every point throughout my graduate career, I doubted myself. Yet, Dr. Longley always believed in me. . . . Throughout each step, I knew that I had an advocate and a mentor who always considered what was in my best interest, and who believed in me.” One of his undergraduates, who met Dr. Longley in a freshman seminar, was equally effusive, noting the way that Longley “engaged with students each day before the start of class and in smaller break-out sessions. This allowed me to interact with him in ways that many freshmen don’t have the opportunity to.” Dr. Longley is that rare instructor who excels in teaching students at all levels, and we believe that he is a most deserving recipient of the inaugural LaFeber-Wood Prize.





Diplomatic Pouch

Personal Notes:

Peter L. Hahn was named a 2025 Distinguished University Professor at the Ohio State University. This is the highest faculty honor awarded by the institution. After over three decades at OSU, during which he mentored almost 40 PhD students and 34 master's students, Professor Hahn retired on May 31, 2025.

Books of Interest

- Breitman, Richard. *A Calculated Restraint: What Allied Leaders Said about the Holocaust*. (Harvard, 2025).
- Buchanan, Andrew and Ruth Lawlor, eds. *The Greater Second World War: Global Perspectives*. (Cornell, 2025).
- Buono, Stephen. *The Province of All Mankind: How Outer Space Became American Foreign Policy*. (Cornell, 2025).
- Carroll, Jonathan. *Beyond Black Hawk Down: Intervention, Nation-Building, and Insurgency in Somalia, 1992-1995*. (Kansas, 2025).
- Cohen, Benjamin. *Dream States: A Lurking Nightmare for World Order*. (Oxford, 2025).
- Daddis, Gregory. *Faith and Fear: America's Relationship with War since 1945*. (Oxford, 2025).
- Ferling, John. *Shots Heard Round the World: America, Britain, and Europe in the Revolutionary War*. (Bloomsbury, 2025).
- Gerges, Fawaz. *The Great Betrayal: The Struggle for Freedom and Democracy in the Middle East*. (Princeton, 2025).
- Golub, Grant. *Warriors in Washington: Henry Stimson, the US Army, and the Politics of American Power in World War II*. (Cambridge, 2025).
- Grinberg, Mariya. *Economic Cooperation across Enemy Lines*. (Cornell, 2025).
- Hahn, Peter L. *Crisis and Crossfire: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945*, 2nd. ed. (Potomac Books, 2025).
- Hahn, Peter L. *Libya and the West: What Everyone Needs to Know*. (Oxford, 2025).
- Heefner, Gretchen. *Sand, Snow, and Stardust: How US Military Engineers Conquered Extreme Environments*. (Chicago, 2025).
- Jeffreys-Jones, Rhodri. *FBI Tarihi, 1908-2023: Kuruluşundan Günümüze*. (Kronik, 2025).
- Jeffreys-Jones, Rhodri. *Allan Pinkerton: America's Legendary Detective and the Birth of Private Security*. (Georgetown University Press, 2025).
- Johnstone, Andrew. *Spinning the World: The Public Relations Industry and American Foreign Relations*. (Cambridge, 2025).
- Kaplan, Robert D. *Waste Land: A World in Permanent Crises*. (Random House, 2025).
- Kuzmarov, Jeremy and Dan Kovalik. *Syria: Anatomy of Regime Change*. (Baraka Books, 2025).
- Lowe, David. *The Colombo Plan: Development Internationalism in Cold War Asia*. (Cambridge, 2025).
- Mayers, David. *Seekers and Partisans: Americans Abroad in the Crisis Years. 1935-1941* (Cambridge, 2025).
- Nasir, Vasil. *Iran's Grand Strategy: A Political History*. (Princeton, 2025).
- Preston, Andrew. *Total Defense: The New Deal and the Invention of National Security*. (Harvard, 2025).
- Rogg, Jeffrey P. *The Spy and the State: The History of American Intelligence*, (Oxford, 2025).
- Stout, Mark and Sarah-Jane Corke. Eds. *Secrets on Display: Stories and Spycraft from the International Spy Museum*. (University of Kansas Press, 2025).

In Memoriam: Warren I. Cohen

By Meredith Oyen

Professor Warren I. Cohen will be remembered as a man with a profound scholarly legacy. He wrote more than a dozen books, served as President of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR), chaired the State Department's Historical Advisory Committee, and played an instrumental role in the conceptualization and development of American-East Asian Relations as a field, and as a scholarly journal. This legacy is evident upon reading the obituaries published in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* upon his passing in April 2025, at the age of 90.

I knew him primarily as my Ph.D. advisor Nancy Bernkopf Tucker's greatest fan (and, it turned out, husband, though I was comically delayed in making that connection when I first met them). I'm not convinced he wouldn't prefer that memory be the paramount one.

The path of Warren's career would astound and mystify a newly minted Ph.D. studying U.S.-China relations in 2025. The hardscrabble beginnings as a first-generation college student, funded in part by a fellowship from the taxi company that employed his father, led him through degrees at Columbia University and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts. After a stint in the U.S. Navy, he began a Ph.D. program at the University of Washington and ended up studying U.S. Diplomatic History and China by virtue of who was available to advise him. And then, as his self-deprecating description in his H-Diplo "Historian's Craft" essay put it, he graduated "in 1962, when there were jobs aplenty — and when publishers often begged one to take advances and write a book for them."¹ (Recent graduates may be permitted a short, bitter laugh here.)

Warren developed as a historian of U.S. relations with China at a critical time in the 1960s. The United States did not have a diplomatic relationship with the People's Republic, continuing instead to support the Republic of China on Taiwan. Access to Chinese archives and even language training was not easy. He spent time in Taiwan in the mid-1960s doing both (and attracting at least some attention from local authorities, I think, since I found his name on a list of American visiting scholars being monitored on one of my own visits to ROC archives in Taiwan decades later). By the end of the decade, in the context of American backlash against the Vietnam War, Cohen would become part of an effort to develop the study of U.S. involvement in East Asia into its own field. In 1967, the American Historical Association (AHA) sponsored the Committee on American-East Asian Relations (AEAR).

The names of the scholars involved in the new effort loom large to anyone who has read for comprehensive exams in this or related fields: John K. Fairbank, Dorothy Borg, Akira Iriye, James C. Thomson, Jr., Michael Hunt, and of course, Warren Cohen. Along with many others, they re-conceived the study of American relations with East Asia, thinking beyond the bounds of the dead white guy stereotype of diplomatic history but also with a different agenda from Asian Studies. The Committee soon transferred affiliation from AHA to SHAFR, and when the funding dried up there, the members developed and seeded the early issues of the *Journal for American East Asian Relations*.

Warren served as president of SHAFR in 1984, and his presidential address published in *Diplomatic History* in 1985 includes this definition of the field:

My view of diplomatic history has always been that it is the most comprehensive of fields, the most inclusive. There is room for those who would focus on political questions, and for those who are more interested in ideas, culture, sociality, even economic matters. It is the most demanding of fields because to excel in it one should be fluent in at least one foreign language and equally well informed about at least two political entities.... In general a department will find its diplomatic historian has a range of knowledge and teaching skills that cannot be matched with less than two other appointments, a matter of no small importance in these days of shrinking budgets.²

Though the budgets continue to shrink, the field of diplomatic history has continued to expand in the ways the AEAR committee members advocated for their own work: pulling in ever greater complexities, incorporating methods and sources from across disciplines, and demanding linguistic and cultural fluency in two if not more societies.

Reading through the bibliography of Warren's publications you can see manifested the American-East Asian Relations Project. What might appear to an overworked graduate student to be a series of mundane "conference volumes" easily dismissed or skimmed chronicle the collaborative efforts of international scholars to examine key issues from every possible lens. Some of these volumes include *Pearl Harbor as History*; *The Great Powers in East Asia, 1953-60*; *The United States and Japan in the Postwar World*; and *American, Chinese, and Japanese Perspectives on Wartime Asia, 1931-49*.³

Many of these conferences were both historical and held contemporary resonance. Historian Marc Gallicchio recalled attending one such event about American-East Asian Relations in the Eisenhower Era in Bellagio. He remembered that it intended to bring international scholars together around newly declassified documents from countries all over the world, though it did not live entirely up to this promise. Gallicchio explained,

Unfortunately, the Russian representative at the conference and his Japanese counterpart spent their entire session repeating their governments' public positions on the Northern territories dispute. Their papers cited no new sources and held to their government's positions like grim death.

Warren was not pleased. In fact, he chided, scolded really, the two scholars for failing to live up to the standards of independent scholarship at international conferences. He said that unless their governments began to grant their historians access to official sources, there would be no point in inviting them to future conferences. A few participants at the conference

thought Warren had been too hard on our two colleagues. But I'll just note here that the Berlin Wall fell two years later. As the Russians like to say "Coincidence? I don't think so."⁴

Warren's insistence on integrity in historical writing famously was not restricted to international conferences. He did not hesitate to call for the same transparency at home. As chair of the Historical Advisory Committee for the State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* series in 1990, he called the department and the CIA to task for their gross omission of U.S. involvement in the 1953 coup that overthrew the Shah of Iran in the relevant volume. He resigned in protest, and he took his disgust public with a *New York Times* editorial.⁵ By drawing attention to the egregious whitewashing of history, he helped facilitate the following year's passage of a new Congressional charter for the FRUS series that included demands for "comprehensive documentation" that is "thorough, accurate, and reliable," among other rules for timely declassification.⁶

Warren's most famous works are likely his three general histories that serve as useful textbooks: *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations*; *East Asia at the Center: Four Thousand Years of Engagement with the World*; and *A Nation Like All Others: A History of U.S. Foreign Relations*.⁷ He also wrote more unexpected volumes, like *East Asian Art and American Culture* and *Profiles in Humanity: The Battle for Peace, Freedom, Equality, and Human Rights*.⁸

Warren was known not just for rigorous scholarship and integrity, but also good humor. It was not something he hid away from his scholarly career. One of the greatest footnotes in the history of *Diplomatic History* (the journal) must be Warren's. In a 1997 symposium on the idea of a "lost chance" for accommodation between Truman's White House and the newly established Communist government of China, Cohen explained how his access to records in Taiwan along with reading Acheson's papers led him to suspect that Acheson and with him, Truman, might have been open to recognition. A few years later, he noted, Nancy came along with her deeply researched first book, *Patterns in the Dust*, which laid out more robust evidence for the idea, "giving rise to the notion of a 'Tucker-Cohen thesis.'" In the footnote attached to the sentence, Warren wrote, "The notion was reinforced when Tucker and Cohen were married in 1988. Their critics were disappointed to learn that they had neither children nor pets named after Acheson."⁹

The narrative of Warren's publishing career does not half capture the contributions he made to SHAFR and the field of American-East Asian Relations, though. At Michigan State he trained graduate students whose legacy remains in the field. After marrying Nancy, he found his way to the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), a position on the East Coast near to her berth at Georgetown University. UMBC does not have a Ph.D. program in history, but after Nancy died in 2012, he adopted and mentored her recent graduates who were still finding their way on the tenure track and missing her presence the most.

I was a beneficiary of this generosity. Warren read every chapter of my book manuscript and offered detailed and thoughtful commentary. My favorite: "You need to find yourself a support group for people who abuse semi-colons." I still think twice every time my pinky finger hovers over the key. My friend and colleague from graduate school Wang Tao, who also had the distinction of being Nancy's last Ph.D. student, called Warren "a true 良师益友" (i.e. a good teacher and helpful friend).¹⁰ Wang Tao has his own memories of talking research, politics, parenting, and really good pho with Warren in recent years, demonstrating the accessibility and kindness that so many of us were surprised to find was standard from someone whose name adorned the spine of so many of the books we read in grad school.

Warren was not a regular at SHAFR in recent years, but his legacy lives on in the work we do, especially those of us who still grapple with the idea of American-East Asian Relations. It is still on the cutting edge.

Notes:

1. Warren I. Cohen, "Learning the Scholar's Craft: Twists and Turns in the Life of a Very Lucky Man," H-Diplo Essay 383, Nov. 2, 2021, <https://issforum.org/essays/PDF/E383.pdf>.

2. Warren I. Cohen, "The History of American-East Asian Relations: Cutting Edge of the Historical Profession," *Diplomatic History* 9:2 (1985): 102.

3. Dorothy Borg et al., "New Frontiers in American-East Asian Relations: Essays Presented to Dorothy Borg," Studies of the East Asian Institute, Columbia University (Columbia University Press, 1983); Warren I. Cohen and Akira Iriye, *The Great Powers in East Asia, 1953-1960* (Columbia University Press, 1990); Nihon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai et al., *The United States and Japan in the Postwar World* (The University Press of Kentucky, 1989); Dorothy Borg, *Pearl Harbor as History: Japanese-American Relations, 1931-1941*, Studies of the East Asian Institute, Columbia University (Columbia University Press, 1973); Akira Iriye, *American, Chinese and Japanese Perspectives on Wartime Asia, 1931-1949: America in the Modern World* (Scholarly Resources Incorporated Imprint, 1990).

4. Email, Marc Gallacchio to author, June 20, 2025.

5. Warren I. Cohen, "At the State Department, Historygate," *New York Times* (May 8, 1990), <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/08/opinion/at-the-state-dept-historygate.html?smid=url-share>

6. Bruce R. Kuniholm, "Foreign Relations, Public Relations, Accountability and Understanding," *Perspectives* 28 (May/June 1990): pp. 1-12, <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/foreign-relations-public-relations-accountability-and-understanding/>

7. Warren I. Cohen, *East Asia at the Center: Four Thousand Years of Engagement with the World* (Columbia University Press, 2000); Warren I. Cohen, *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations*, Sixth edition. (Columbia University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.7312/cohe19198>; Warren Cohen, *A Nation Like All Others: A Brief History of American Foreign Relations* (Columbia University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.7312/cohe17566>. Not along ago, I mentioned to Warren that I was working on my own history of U.S.-China relations, for which the most direct competition in the market is his *America's Response to China*, now in its sixth edition. "Good," he replied. "I'm done updating mine."

8. Warren I. Cohen, *East Asian Art and American Culture: A Study in International Relations* (Columbia University Press, 1992); Warren I. Cohen, *Profiles in Humanity: The Battle for Peace, Freedom, Equality, and Human Rights* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

9. Warren I. Cohen, "Introduction: Was There a 'Lost Chance' in China?" *Diplomatic History* 21:1 (1997): 73, note 5, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7709.00051>

10. Wang Tao email to author, June 13, 2025.

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