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, nongovernmental 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 Management (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 (actually, 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 moto, the institution had existed since 1968 as a public-private think-tank and memorial to President 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:
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Brian Cuddy, Macquarie University
S.R. Joey Long, National University of Singapore