

Applied History and Diplomacy

Historical scholarship should neither condemn nor kiss up to power. Historians can help citizens and policy-makers to understand their moment and to begin to imagine a future that has its roots in the past, even if it remains unknowable.

By Jeremi Suri, University of Texas at Austin

Near the end of his long masterpiece, *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy admits: “The totality of causes of phenomena is inaccessible to the human mind. But the need to seek causes has been put into the soul of man.”¹ Like many ambitious thinkers, Tolstoy wanted to explain human behavior and advise rulers on how to make better policies. To his deep frustration, he realized this was impossible. The causes for any major event were too numerous and the forces moving people to action only became more mysterious as one studied behavior closely. Tolstoy concluded that there are no real “historical heroes.”²

This is the appropriate point of departure for discussing the uses of historical analysis in policy, what some call “applied history.” With the overwhelming evidence in recent years that “old” phenomena are resurgent – warfare, pandemics, racism, and authoritarianism, among others – many observers have grown dissatisfied with the social sciences (particularly economics) that promised to explain the world in purely rational terms.

History is not an alternative oracle

Historical scholarship offers explanations for the repeated tendencies of human beings to act in ways that defy science – the widespread rejection of masks and vaccines during COVID is only the most recent example. Historical wisdom takes us beyond the logic of numbers to probe the deeper fears and loves that drive social change. That is why Machia-

velli’s *Prince* remains widely read and outlasts every trendy wave of “leadership science” books.

But history is not an alternative oracle. It does not offer “laws” or other “single causes” for human behavior, as Tolstoy reminds us. Serious historical scholarship shows us that big events have many causes which often contradict one another. And many of the causes have long periods of gestation, emerging from small, unnoticed changes in society that over time grow to exert powerful influence.

This is, of course, how demographic change works. Unpredictable shifts in birth and migration rates slowly push cultures and economies in new directions which are initially ignored until they shock, offend, and ultimately shatter long-held assumptions. We are living through one such moment in the United States and much of Europe today.

The rare gift of “historical sensibility”

Historians elucidate the many long-term causes acting upon our current world; we do not predict precisely how they will play out, but we explain the pressures, opportunities, and dangers that they create. We help citizens and policy-makers to understand their moment and to begin to imagine a future that has its roots in the past, even as it remains unknowable. Historical scholarship, therefore, neither condemns nor kisses up to power; it widens one’s vision of what power means in its current moment and context.

There is something called a “historical sensibility”, which few people have. It is not about being a

¹ Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans., Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 987.

² For more on this point, see Isaiah Berlin’s brilliant essay, “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” available at: https://www.blogs.hss.ed.ac.uk/crag/files/2016/06/the_hedgehog_and_the_fox-berlin.pdf

historian and visiting the archives. A historical sensibility is what Tolstoy describes: an intuitive understanding that the roots of current events are deep in the soil, and excavating those roots is necessary to shape the future of the garden. Policy-makers with a historical sensibility ask probing questions about long-term causes, they resist the urge to focus predominantly on the immediate, and they are profoundly skeptical of easy explanations and overbearing responses.

Their knowledge of history encourages humility. They look for compelling stories that explain complexity and reject facile “solutions” that try, foolishly, to overpower the past. Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine are just the latest reminders that even the most formidable militaries cannot reverse what has come before.³

The goals of diplomacy

This is the framework for understanding how diplomacy works. It is the oldest profession because it is the essential work of adjusting politics to history. Diplomats study the history of the regions they visit, and they search for ways to translate their society's interests into effective influence abroad. The goal of diplomacy is neither peace nor war, but a furtherance of the aims charged to the diplomat by her masters (which in a democracy are the citizens.)

Diplomats cultivate relationships with foreign groups that allow them to understand, identify, and ultimately persuade. They find causes to champion for results that they want, and that they hope other societies want too. This work involves many skills, but it ultimately rests on penetrating the historical memory of another society and finding the openings within it. Skilled diplomats learn to think and see like their counterparts, yet they never forget that they serve the interests of their country or organization.

History and diplomacy

Ambassador Robert Hutchings and I have devoted a decade to studying the history and practice of diplomacy. Our research shows that diplomatic institutions which cultivate a historical sensibility are most effective in promoting the interests of their countries. This is learned behavior that comes from intensive training and a culture that emphasizes historical investigation before action and decision.

Diplomats develop communities of practice that bring different historical trends together for a shared set of causes. Echoing Tolstoy and Machiavelli, they are not heroes or even clever manipulators; diplomats are opportunists who anticipate the openings created by a history they do not control. That is applied history at its best.⁴

³ This discussion of “historical sensibility” draws on Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri, eds., *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

⁴ See Robert Hutchings and Jeremi Suri, eds., *Foreign Policy Breakthroughs: Cases in Successful Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); idem., eds., *Modern Diplomacy in Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁵ <https://lbj.utexas.edu/suri-jeremi>



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Jeremi Suri⁵

holds the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Leadership in Global Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. He is a professor in the University's Department of History and the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. Suri teaches courses on strategy and decision-making, leadership, globalization, international relations and modern history. He is the author and editor of several books on contemporary politics and foreign policy, including “The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America's Highest Office” (2017) and “Foreign Policy Breakthroughs: Cases in Successful Diplomacy” (2015). His newest book “Civil War By Other Means: America's Long and Unfinished Fight for Democracy” will be published in October 2022.