

8, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/what-it-means-to-be-a-public-intellectual/282907/>. There has been a good deal of debate and criticism regarding the historical and contemporary gendered, racialized, and elitist elements that make up the “recognized” public intellectual. Many argue, as some SHAFR conference participants and one of my colleagues at Oregon State University did, that much of the “smartest” criticism and analysis of recent U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, or Israel and Palestine, or on topics of race, sexuality, or gender, appears online on Twitter and on personal and group blogs rather than in mainstream print or other media. An influential view is represented by Russell Jacoby, “Big Brains, Small Impact,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54, vol. 18 (January 11, 2008): B5–B6, <http://chronicle.com/article/Big-Brains-Small-Impact/11624>.

3. One of the best intellectual history blogs that has grappled with some of the definitions, challenges, and development of public intellectuals in an historical context is the group blog of the Society for U.S. Intellectual History, www.s-usih.org.

4. C. Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three* (New York, 1958), 29, 30.

5. Stanley Aronowitz, *Taking It Big: C. Wright Mills and the Making of Political Intellectuals* (New York, 2012).

6. Russell Jacoby, *Last Intellectuals* (New York, 1987), 5, 7.

7. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York, 1962), 25.

8. Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 29.

9. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1994), 32, 11.

10. Russell Jacoby, “Intellectuals and their Discontents,” *The Hedgehog Review*, Fall 2000: 39.

11. Randolph Bourne, “The War and the Intellectuals” in *The World of Randolph Bourne*, ed. Lillian Schlissel (New York, 1965), 156–58. This essay originally appeared in *Seven Arts*, June 1917, 133–46. For more, see: Christopher McKnight Nichols, *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), chs. 3–4; Steven Biel, *Independent Intellectuals in the United States, 1910–1945* (New York, 1992); Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York, 2009); Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, 1993).

12. See Alan Lightman, “The Role of the Public Intellectual” at: <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/lightman.html>.

13. William Appleman Williams, William Appleman Williams Papers, Oregon State University Special Collections and Archives (hereafter OSU SCARC), Box 2, 6.1, Draft and final version (quoted): “The Crown on Clio’s Head,” Review of *The Death of the Past*, by J. H. Plumb, *The Nation* 210 (March 9 1970): 279–80.

14. Williams, OSU SCARC, “The Intellectual in American Public Life,” a lecture delivered on April 30, 1984. Available online at <http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/coll/williams/manuscripts/page5.html>.

15. Williams, OSU SCARC, Box 7, 7.89, “One Historian’s Challenge to Journalists,” *The Pennsylvania Journal & Weekly Advertiser* 16, 1:1 (October 1983): 15.

16. Williams, OSU SCARC, “Crown on Clio’s Head,” 280.

17. Williams, OSU SCARC, “Confessions of an Intransigent Revisionist,” delivered at the AHA in 1973; slightly revised final version quoted from Henry Berger, ed. *A William Appleman Williams Reader* (Chicago, 1992), 336–44.

18. Williams, OSU SCARC, “Intellectual in American Public Life.”

19. Henry Giroux, “Intellectuals as Subjects and Objects of Violence,” <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/18704-intellectuals-as-subjects-and-objects-of-violence#VIII>.

20. Giroux, “Intellectuals as Subjects and Objects of Violence.”

21. Giroux, “Intellectuals as Subjects and Objects of Violence.”

22. This is a paraphrase of a line by Williams. See Williams, OSU SCARC, “Crown on Clio’s Head,” 280.

Public Intellectuals and Democracy

Jeremi Suri

I am devoting this present week to the effort—primarily through an article in *Foreign Affairs* (drafted by Mac Bundy but signed by four of us) to force our government to abandon the option of “first use” of nuclear weapons which it has insisted on retaining for the past 30 years, and to which I have always been opposed. . . . Should the effort

succeed, I would regard it as the most important thing I had ever had a part in accomplishing.

--George Kennan diary entry, 7 April 1982¹

Although George Kennan began his career as a Foreign Service officer, attained fame for his 1947 “X” article on the “Sources of Soviet Conduct,” and served brief stints as chairman of the State Department Policy Planning Staff and ambassador to Russia and Yugoslavia, he had been out of government for almost twenty years when he recorded this diary entry. He had spent those two decades—as his diaries attest—reading, writing, lecturing, and brooding... brooding a lot! He was firmly ensconced at Princeton University’s Institute for Advanced Studies, and when that bucolic isolation was not enough, he retreated to a rural Pennsylvania farm or to family dwellings in Norway. Kennan remained a major figure in print, but he was self-consciously isolated from the daily work of government. He had become the quintessential public intellectual: a literary figure who drew on his unique knowledge, gained from research and experience, to comment on public affairs.²

Public intellectuals are defined by neither their ideology nor their efficacy in influencing policy or public opinion. Their effect is felt in their contributions to civil society. They are not shadow politicians nor are they commanding elites. They are public educators who shake their readers and listeners into thinking more deeply and creatively about matters that are often ignored or subjected to banal conventional wisdom. They are essential—as Kennan was—for raising awareness about important issues and pushing debate in new directions.

Public intellectuals take strong positions on public issues, drawing on deep and rigorous thinking that ordinary citizens have neither the time nor the resources to pursue. And just as ordinary citizens need public intellectuals to help them understand and evaluate what their elected leaders are doing, established policy leaders need access to the learned opinions of public intellectuals as they seek to make sense of difficult real-world problems. Public intellectuals are thus bridge-builders between the frequently separate worlds of policy, academia, and professional life in modern society. Thinkers like Kennan publish information and opinions that bring people together in argument, if not in consensus.

Although public intellectuals know enough to be well informed about a range of issues, they are distant enough from inside expertise that they can bring fresh eyes to complex problems. They interrogate unstated assumptions, test evidence, and evaluate the implications of common decisions. And, perhaps most important of all, they propose alternatives. Criticism from writers like George Kennan helps those who make policy think more rigorously and broadly about what they are doing. The best work of public intellectuals pulls readers outside the daily rules that govern their behavior to see themselves and their positions from a different perspective. More often than not, policymakers will not fundamentally change their programs because of what they have read or heard, but they will refine their thinking when tested by a vibrant public sphere of learned opinion.

The best scholars of the subject agree that few things are as important to democracy as a learned public sphere.³ American history reinforces this argument. From the founding of the United States to the present, the most important decisions on war and peace have involved vibrant and diverse debate, with major contributions from public intellectuals. Decisions on war with Great Britain in 1812, Spain in 1898, Germany in 1917, Germany and Japan in 1941, Vietnam in 1965, and Iraq in 2003 all involved intense public discussion and dissent. While some question how

much influence these debates had on the actual course of decision-making, almost no one would argue that public discussion weakened American policy. If anything, public debates frequently re-calibrated policy (especially in the aftermath of a decision for war), and more debate would probably have been beneficial.⁴

This is the appropriate historical context for considering the role of public intellectuals. More than experts, advisors, or iconoclasts (like Charles Beard and William Appleman Williams), public intellectuals are contributors to democracy. The positions they take are less important than the questions they ask, and the ultimate correctness of their judgments matters less than the pressure they place on readers to think clearly and creatively in the national interest.

Christopher Nichols captures the questioning role of public intellectuals in his excellent essay, and he discusses some of their contributions to public debate. His essay, however, posits a false choice. Individual historians can, of course, choose to refrain from contributing directly to the public sphere for many legitimate reasons. The discipline of history, and the sub-discipline of American foreign relations scholarship, cannot make that choice. History is simply too important to debates about war and peace, and most related issues, for policymakers and citizens to ignore it. They never have.

Policymakers and citizens might invoke poor history to justify their actions, and they are always very limited in their understanding of historical scholarship. Nonetheless, they repeatedly turn to history for help in explaining the problems they confront (“Where did this threat come from?”) and how to move forward (“What can we learn from past efforts?”). For very practical reasons, history is foundational to public discussions of policy, and historians—professional and non-professional—will always be part of the public debate.⁵

Those who choose to engage the public energetically are doing work that is as fundamental to historical scholarship as reading sources in the archives, writing monographs, or teaching undergraduates. One set of activities should not be privileged over another. Historical scholarship is a dialogue with the past for people living in the present. The past is always unreachable, and we are always tainted by the bias of presentism in our efforts to understand it. Resisting the urge to fetishize the false “purity” of particular sources and suppressing the narcissistic impulse to attack less learned policymakers, historians do their work best when they respect various points of view and think rigorously about their relationship to evidence, circumstance, and human capabilities—all of which should be broadly defined.

William Appleman Williams was insightful, as Nichols shows, when he emphasized the importance of interrogating a “worldview,” but he was too limited when he assumed that worldviews translate consistently into policy outcomes. Quite the contrary. Worldviews shift considerably—although not completely—when they confront new problems and circumstances. One can see the roots of current American thinking about the Middle East in past assumptions about anti-communism, oil, and Orientalism, but those past assumptions cannot by themselves explain the 2003 war in Iraq, American withdrawal, support for the Arab Spring, and renewed war against both Bashir Assad and the Islamic State in the Levant.

Historians need archival sources, research monographs, and engagement with current public concerns to understand these and other policy shifts. That is our bread and butter: the study of policy change over time. But excavating a historical worldview, however valuable, is not sufficient. Analyzing the evolving push and pull on worldviews from the past into the present is an equally essential historical enterprise. It involves meditating deeply on the sources and lifting one’s head to look at their resonances. The interplay

between past sources and contemporary resonances is the space for the public intellectual work of historians.

This analysis brings us back to Kennan. His anti-nuclear writings and speeches in the early 1980s are a powerful example of what public intellectuals can do and what they cannot. The purported author of the containment doctrine had spent more than thirty years thinking deeply about nuclear weapons. He had corresponded with many of the scientists who designed the first atomic and hydrogen bombs, he read deeply in the emerging scholarship about these weapons, and he contextualized them in relation to the foreign policy pressures of the Cold War. In his years out of government, Kennan also studied the history of diplomacy in prior eras, particularly the decades after 1870, and he drew on the knowledge of that history to assess assumptions about and expectations of military power in his own time. By the early 1980s, Kennan was as serious a historian of nuclear weapons and foreign policy as anyone else in the United States.⁶

He used his studies and his experiences to spark public debate. Kennan’s opposition to the continued growth of the U.S. nuclear arsenal reflected both his deep understanding of the dangers inherent in the superpower nuclear postures and his observation that an escalating nuclear arms race undermined diplomatic efforts at reducing international tensions. The latter was a particular concern for Kennan because of the crises during the late 1970s surrounding the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the deployment of new intermediate range nuclear missiles by Moscow and then Washington in the early 1980s.

Kennan’s writings in *Foreign Affairs* and other publications contributed to what historian Lawrence Wittner has identified as a period of heightened anti-nuclear activism within the United States and various countries around the world. Critics protested in major cities; they put nuclear freeze resolutions to a vote in numerous American states, with favorable results; and they even found sympathetic listeners in government—most surprisingly, President Ronald Reagan and future Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. A public climate favorable toward nuclear abolition, Wittner shows, encouraged Reagan and Gorbachev to push unprecedented arms reductions, even as their close advisers expressed skepticism. Public opposition to nuclear arms control, or public apathy, would have made the Reagan-Gorbachev breakthroughs of 1986 and 1987 more difficult. The rapid warming of relations between the superpowers emerged from a growing desire to escape fears of nuclear war, and related crises, in both societies.⁷

Public intellectuals like Kennan did not necessarily drive this process, and one can imagine similar outcomes without them. One can also, however, imagine the skeptics of deep nuclear arms control in each society dominating policy if public pressures and respected opinions had been different, as they were a decade earlier. As late as November 1987, then-Deputy Director of the CIA Robert Gates warned President Reagan against trusting the Soviet leadership with serious nuclear reductions.⁸ Reagan and his more cautious successor, George H.W. Bush, could discount Gates’ warnings and push forward with disarmament negotiations, knowing they benefited from a favorable climate of public opinion within the country.

The point here is not to attribute the end of the Cold War to George Kennan, or public intellectuals, or anyone else for that matter. Public intellectuals do not make policy, nor do they dominate shifts in popular opinion. In fact, they are often frustrated by the limits on their power and influence. What Kennan’s non-government role during the late Cold War shows is that public intellectuals matter because they can push issues to public attention and contribute to broader shifts in perception. They question assumptions, they challenge inherited policies, and they provide leaders

with alternatives, if they wish to pursue them.

Christopher Nichols' insights, inspired by William Appleman Williams, give pride of place to public intellectuals who are radical, or at least dissident from mainstream politics. As historians, we are inclined to embrace the criticism and deconstruction of power. That is, of course, a legitimate and often valuable position, but it is not the exclusive role for the public intellectual. Thinkers who bring historical knowledge to the public make enduring contributions to a democratic civil society when they help to broaden the discussion of policy, even without radicalizing the dominant paradigms. Kennan contributed to a wide public discussion of nuclear arms control that helped change how the United States conducted itself in the Cold War without challenging communist containment or American postwar primacy—two goals Kennan had helped to promote.

Public intellectuals add value because they bring serious thinking to big problems. Historians of foreign relations have a lot to offer, and the politics of their advice should not matter. Historical perspectives on contemporary foreign policy—derived from close attention to specific evidence, a deep study of contextual developments, or a rigorous questioning of historical assumptions—are essential for democratic discussion. No historian should feel obligated to write for a particular public group in a particular way, but all of us as historians should care about getting our ideas into the public sphere. The historian-as-public-intellectual is close kin of the historian-as-teacher and the historian-as-writer. Our thinking matters for those outside our discipline, our profession, and our nation. Our thinking, in all its forms and biases, is part of our democracy.

Notes:

1. George Kennan diary entry, Washington, 7 April 1982, in Frank Costigliola, ed., *The Kennan Diaries* (New York, 2014), 541–42.
2. Many historians have, of course, written about Kennan's long career. The fullest and most revealing biography is John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York, 2011). Gaddis covers Kennan's period as public intellectual in detail. See pages 577–675.
3. See, among many others, Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA, 1989); Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, 2002).
4. Public debate is crucial to how I understand the evolution of American policies toward areas of occupation in war. See *Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama* (New York, 2011).
5. These are central points in the classic book by Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York, 1986). See also Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri, eds., *History and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA, forthcoming).
6. See Gaddis, *George F. Kennan*, esp. 613–46.
7. Lawrence S. Wittner, *Toward Nuclear Abolition: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971–Present* (Stanford, 2003). See also Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia, MO, 1997); Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford, UK, 1996); Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (New York, 2006); Ken Adelman, *Reagan at Reykjavik: Forty-Eight Hours that Ended the Cold War* (New York, 2014).
8. See Memorandum from Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates, 24 November 1987, at http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/17/19871124.pdf.

CONGRATULATIONS!

THE FOLLOWING COLLEAGUES WERE ELECTED IN THE
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THOMAS "TIM" BORSTELMANN

VICE PRESIDENT:
DAVID ENGERMAN

COUNCIL:
PETRA GOEDDE
PAUL KRAMER

GRADUATE STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE:
AMANDA BOCZAR

NOMINATING COMMITTEE:
ANDREW JOHNS

*The membership ratified the referenda on revisions of
Article II, Section 5(a) and Article II, Section 5(d) of the SHAFR By-Laws.*