

Chapter 3
WHEN DOES THE PRESENT BECOME THE PAST?
Jeremi Suri

We rarely understand a moment until it has passed. That is especially true for traumatic events, like the beginnings of a conflict, when emotions and instantaneous reactions overwhelm situational analysis. The enthusiastic crowds across Europe that greeted the start of war in the summer of 1914 had little sense that they were marching into four years of stalemated trench fighting, mass death, and social and economic dislocation – a disaster that would usher in the end of a century of European global predominance. Stefan Zweig, a highly regarded Jewish writer and one of the era’s most astute observers, described

the frenzy that for a moment gave wild and almost irresistible momentum to the worst crime of our time... . Every little post office worker who usually worked from morning to night, Monday to Saturday, sorting letters without a break, every clerk, every cobbler suddenly saw another possibility lying ahead – he could be a hero.¹

Here was the intoxicating allure of war, experienced at the conflict’s start and replicated at many other times in many other societies. Historical perspective has exposed what Zweig characterized as the childishly naïve and gullible shortsightedness of citizens moved by instinct and by lies. The misjudgments of the moment are revealed not only by the passage of time, but by the willingness to interrogate initial prejudices and predictions. What historian James Joll called the “unspoken assumptions” of 1914 distorted how people on the cusp of disaster understood their predicament. Present decisions are built on distortions, intensified under stress, and then subject to interrogation by the historically minded analyst.²

A different dynamic occurs during less abrupt periods of social change, like a gradual shift in modes of economic production and consumption. In the decades after the Second World War, the United States made intensive investments in industrial infrastructure – including factories, highways, and fossil fuel extraction – at home and abroad. These investments contributed to immediate prosperity, particularly in the most industrialized regions, but they locked these areas into work patterns and technologies that became outdated in a few short decades. The postwar economic miracle was also the seed of the rust belt.

The transition from industrial to digital production, largely unacknowledged in the postwar decades, brought unemployment and dysfunction to what had felt like the most industrially advanced and economically secure places, such as Detroit, the English West Midlands, and the German Ruhrgebiet. The changes were slow, unseen by most leaders in times of prosperity, and largely ignored until it was too late. Historical perspective elucidates the ignored patterns of change that evade the headlines, even as they reorder society.³

Amid sudden conflict and gradual change alike, contemporary actors neglect the deeper causes and miss the enduring effects of events around them. Presentism is the frequent tendency to overestimate the importance of the obvious, immediate, and sensational while simultaneously discounting the longer-term influences and effects. It is the narrow focus on the moment that neglects wider context. It is the legitimate but distorting instinct to manage a crisis without understanding why the crisis occurred and what might come next.

This chapter will address the perils of presentism, especially for policy-makers, and describe how historical thinking offers a necessary antidote. Historical thinking for government leaders does not require a return to the archives or even a deep familiarity with historiography. It calls for a focus on historical questions, even in moments of intense crisis. Historically thinking policy-makers should raise a number of queries: what were the long-term causes of this moment? How should those causes affect our understanding of the moment and our possible responses? How will the developments of the past shape the effects of our responses to the current crisis? What are the likely unintended but historical implications of our current behavior?

These questions push present-obsessed policymakers to look back before the current moment and examine the dynamics that linger below the surface. Historical thinkers see the flash in front of them, but they remain attentive to the ever-shifting ground on which we stand – moved both by slow continental drift and catastrophic earthquake. To command effectively in the contemporary terrain, we need present awareness of what is going on and historical perspective on why and how things are changing. Historian John Lewis Gaddis articulates this point eloquently when he writes about a landscape of history. This chapter describes a historical mapping of the policy landscape broader than the decision-maker's normal, narrow confines.⁴

Journalistic writing about the present is more and less than the first draft of history. The most astute reporters capture the feelings of the moment, the confusion, the uncertainty. They take us into the experiences of those living through the start of a war or a shift in modes of production. Contemporary description elucidates how people acted in the moment, often in ways that are not well documented. Zweig's account of the First World War is a classic example. His awestruck description of the great wave of militarism that broke over humanity so suddenly is essential to any retelling of a conflict that ultimately produced millions of maimed and despondent citizens.⁵

But Zweig's vivid descriptions do not tell us much about why this phenomenon took shape. In his memoir he relies on a simple Freudian analysis of human aggression, which explains little and probably distorts analysis of the war. For this author and other shaken observers of murderous events, the causes are necessarily mysterious. Although Zweig's memoir is not an academic analysis of the war's origins, it is a frustrated effort to understand how his comfortable fin-de-siècle European milieu destroyed itself. The struggle to understand the unthinkable would ultimately drive Zweig to suicide.⁶

When contemporary observers, even those as astute as Zweig, try to explain the causes of events around them, their perspective frequently mistakes immediate triggers for deeper motivations and pressures. Although they reveal what people think they are doing in a given moment – and here Zweig is a master storyteller – real-time assessments rarely probe deeply into the hidden, unspoken, and often unrecognized reasons for behavior. Context is foreshortened in contemporary analysis, and causes are narrowed. Although we closely follow the trajectory of the bullet striking the exposed body, we do not gain a full understanding of why the gunman aimed in that direction, and why he pulled the trigger.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky tells us we might never get a good explanation for the deepest motivations of the human mind, but the historian must try to uncover reasons for why things in the past transpired. When we analyze why something happens, and query our original, contemporary, explanations – that is when the present becomes the past. In the original moment, reaction takes precedence. What shall we do? That is not a historical question. Once we step back and ask why this happened, we have made a move that is fundamentally historical.

Time and distance are generally sufficient to escape the dominant reactive impulses, but that is not always the case. The contested political and social disruption of some events lingers for so long that even decades later it is difficult to inquire seriously about their causes. More than twenty years after the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, most Americans have resisted asking why terrorists targeted the country and its citizens. Killing the evil men who carried out the atrocities because they hate what we stand for is more satisfying than examining how the United States might have provoked their violence. The links between American actions and those of the terrorists are essential to any causal analysis, even if the responsibility for the murder of innocent civilians on September 11, 2001, rests squarely on the shoulders of the airplane hijackers. They killed, but what caused them to kill remains under-analyzed.⁷

To historicize an event or episode requires the discipline to suspend reactive explication for critical, narrative inquiry. When did this moment really begin? How is our current experience part of a longer story that originates far back in the past and extends into the future? Time and distance are not the sole, nor the most important, touchstones for historical inquiry about the present; a determination to evaluate uncomfortable causes is what matters most.

Few can summon that discipline in the moment, and still fewer can do it later when memories remain politicized. Although collected evidence in an archive can help to ground analysis, those materials are also assembled amid the reactions of the moment, and not as a function of a deeper consideration of causes. The archive does not reveal why events occurred; it offers clues that are subject to interpretation by the analyst.

To historicize, then, is about what one does with evidence – the questions one asks of it – more than about which evidence and how much of it one acquires. More footnotes do not make for better history. A compelling narrative, focused on human motivations in a changing context, tells us so much more.

Proximity to an event makes alternative pathways difficult to see. Once the weapons are fired and the war commences, it is hard to imagine a different experience unfolding. Once Zweig's European cosmopolitans marched off to war, proposing peaceful possibilities among adversaries became almost impossible to envision, at least in the short term. How could Wilhelmine Germany and czarist Russia coexist any longer?

Despite the obvious and immediate reasons for war, the two countries had, of course, lived side by side, more or less peacefully, for decades. The popular momentum towards armed conflict ahead of the First World War over time closed off different outcomes and disguised the many contingencies that might make war avoidable. Christopher Clark has shown that at many junctures German, French, Russian, and Austrian leaders could have pulled back to stop the outbreak of the conflict had they thought more deeply about the trajectory of events and the tragedy that awaited. They did not pursue these alternatives because they were obsessed with the immediate crisis after the assassination of the Austrian Archduke and felt compelled to react to escalating threats as national armies mobilized. They gave exclusive attention to present slights and dangers, and ignored deeper historical causes, consequences, and precedents. They were resigned to a conflict they wished they could avoid. In Clark's account, European leaders were sleepwalkers following a path that became more and more obvious to them and, ultimately, inescapable. They lacked the awareness, flexibility, and creativity of thought necessary to see that war was not inevitable, as indeed nothing is in history.⁸

To those living through the 1914 crisis, what was previously unthinkable became increasingly inevitable. Even faced with the unimaginable horrors of world war, that sense of inevitability was hard to escape. Fatalism became a default in mainstream thought. By 1916 the daily killing of thousands of men stuck in trenches seemed normal. It was easier to keep fighting, and counting the dead, than to stop and change direction. To end the war meant accepting personal responsibility for the rash, rushed decisions that had caused so much suffering. Every decision-maker had strong incentives to continue ignoring the historically obvious, sending more boys to their death in the name of combating the enemy. War had been inevitable, so patriots had to accept their duty and keep fighting. Suffering ennobled the present while it denied the past.⁹

Despite the perceived necessity of conflict, war did not have to come and it nearly did not. Acting with historical perspective, and not simply responding to the emotional pressures of the moment, would have opened up an array of alternative outcomes, many of which did not involve war. The traditions of European great power diplomacy, exemplified by Metternich and Bismarck, had encouraged negotiation and compromise, rather than war, in resolving tensions. Those traditions were ignored and then forgotten in July 1914. Present inclinations toward aggression occluded historical peacemaking successes. Seen in the context of the historical *longue durée*, the turn to war that seemed obvious and inevitable actually becomes a historical puzzle – a departure from what was most likely and made more sense. Presentist policy perspectives induced a war of necessity that historical perspectives rejected as absurd.¹⁰

The limits of presentism are also evident during moments of strategic surprise, like the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 or the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001.

Each of these bolts from the blue achieved surprise less from mastermind planning than from a conjunction of circumstantial factors – including domestic political pressures, which distracted the American leadership, and which the attackers did nothing to generate. Both Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and George W. Bush confronted strong anti-interventionist sentiments in Congress and among the public. Both leaders neglected signs of coming conflict – including the stated aims of their adversaries – that were lost in more immediate attention to other pressing political matters, including congressional debates about budgets.

The tragic results at Pearl Harbor and on September 11, 2001, were not inevitable. Many contingencies had to fall into place, including weather, timing, and the performance of individuals in the circumstances. The role of chance in these attacks is lost in the enormity and apparent irreversibility of the outcome. The failure to predict a unique and unlikely event looks like an intelligence failure to those dealing with the immediate consequences. How did well-informed people neglect the coming tragedy? victims exclaim. Someone must have known this would happen, the reporter on the scene surmises.

Often no one could have expected what in retrospect appears obvious. A recognition of both indeterminacy and multicausality in the complex mix of forces contributing to recent experience is what separates historical from presentist analysis. The present becomes the past when we move beyond a mere description of what happened to explore the many previous decisions and occurrences that led to the episode. Those decisions and occurrences were not inevitable and they were not designed to produce the outcomes that they precipitated. Analyzing the many pasts that contributed to the present – that is the essence of historicizing our contemporary world.

In the lovely *The Landscape of History*, alluded to earlier, John Lewis Gaddis uses a visual metaphor to describe what it means to analyze the present as part of the past. Gaddis writes of seeing like a historian, which involves making legible the connections between what came before our current moment and how those connections continue to influence our experiences, even when we do not initially recognize them. He calls for a rejection of reductionist claims, often politically driven, and a search for balance between the frequently contradictory forces that create present conditions.

Gaddis wants us to see the unexpected conjunction of human patterns of behavior that shape the world we live in, and that will continue to transform the world in unpredictable ways. We prepare for the future, he argues, by studying evolving patterns of behavior, from past to present, while humbly acknowledging that we cannot be sure where they will lead. Echoing Hegel, Gaddis calls for close scrutiny of the long-term tension between opposites.¹¹

This formulation is especially useful in a politically polarized time such as our own. Confronted by provocative rhetoric and extreme behavior, we are all inclined to choose sides – to condemn, promote, or defend. When we feel threatened in our values and our bodies, we flee to familiar positions and respond forcefully. These conditions turn present interpretation into confirmation of bias, rather than thoughtful interpretation. Partisanship is the obvious

manifestation of this phenomenon – everything we witness is filtered through the prism of what we already believe. Faith and prejudice, not a reasoned analysis of available evidence, drives how we think. This is true at some of our most elite educational institutions, and it is commonplace in policy-making circles.

Gaddis gives us a way out of this cul-de-sac by articulating how seeing like a historian is different from acting like a partisan. He emphasizes the mystery of human behavior and how every decision is dependent on others, but he nonetheless insists that actors still have choices. He also places great store in the role of circumstance, the ways that conditions at a particular moment can have lasting consequences for later choices. Decisions are layered one on another, meaning that the old choices do not disappear but continue to influence later activities, even if unseen or unacknowledged by later actors.

This is an ecological way of viewing the present, very different from a unitary focus on action and reaction. The phenomena we experience today, Gaddis explains, are conditioned by various movements of peoples and resources over time, deep below the surface of what we initially see. To survive we are habituated to focus on what is happening right now – to ascertain how the current of the river flows at this moment. To do more than just survive – to lead and to prosper – societies must understand the geological and climactic changes that are slowly remaking everything around us. That is literally and figuratively true. The boats we build must not only sail on today's river current; they must also function on evolving waterways shaped by deposits laid down long ago, by seasonal changes in rainfall, and by water siphoned off for other uses far upstream.

We are in motion, but so too is everything around us. We cannot understand where we are and where we are going unless we consider the movements of our surroundings. A presentist outlook is static: what just happened? A historical one is dynamic: what has been happening that affected our experience today? Presentism is about surviving, keeping the boat afloat on rough waters. Historical thinking is about sustainability, helping the boat to perform in every type of river and all variety of conditions.

To think in the present is to find oneself bombarded with tactical pressures and opportunities. They are tactical because they are about immediate demands. Our overloaded daily email inboxes, which we struggle to manage, manifest this phenomenon. We spend much of our days reacting to questions, requests, complaints, and, of course, spam. Even successful professionals struggle to sift through this enormous volume of stimuli, to identify the small number of worthwhile messages, and to respond expeditiously. They endeavor to manage crises, please powerful people, and put out fires before they spread.

My research shows that these pressures have made vital leadership positions (including the U.S. presidency) impossible, even for the most talented, hard-working figures. They are stuck in a reaction doom loop (my own phrase) that diminishes the executive's time and energy to accomplish anything big and consequential. The pressures of partisanship make this worse. Each day is a struggle to keep up and please a wide coalition of people, rather than solve real

problems. Leaders survive by minimizing risks and serving as many stakeholders as possible on their side. Reaching out to the other side and taking risks makes no sense when every pressure is short term and every goal is subjected to public reassessment.

Modern presidents possess incredible power, which they use for narrow presentist purposes. They cannot get beyond their daily inboxes. Every moment of their time is cut into small increments and occupied with an immediate challenge. You can see this in their daily calendars, which I have studied closely. Most presidents barely have time to nourish themselves or exercise – there is just too much to do in every minute. This was even true for Donald Trump, who spent his presidency obsessing about his enemies, his reputation, and losing the popular vote twice.

Presentist pressures leave leaders with little time for reflection, little space for deep thinking. They are always running to catch up, rather than charting a future course based on a thoughtful understanding of the past. Their repeated failures are symptomatic of our overworked, short-term society. Most business, school, and community leaders face similar circumstances. Our leaders are often hurting themselves and our society by responding to problems as a series of crises.¹²

The problem is not only too little time for the insatiable demands placed on leaders, but also that they are deluged with too much information. At every level in modern societies, we are bombarded with more images, sounds, and words than any human brain can handle. Our current society places a premium on who can show command of more information than others. If you have hundreds of thousands of Twitter followers you are now an influencer, even if you have little to add, and influence little of importance. If you can dig up embarrassing information about someone, you are now perceived as a mortal threat, even if your information is derivative and unconfirmed. And if you can mobilize more information to defend a position – even dubious ones, such as bogus claims about stolen elections or the dangers of vaccines – you are now politically powerful, even if all your sources are intentionally distorting the truth. The aggregator of words and images has trumped the deep, creative thinker.

This is the height of present obsessions – what can you tell me now? Whoever can tell me the most, regardless of quality, wins. Saying more in different ways is always better in this media moment. Derivative outrage is familiar and comfortable for many; real innovation, building on past wisdom, is undesirable and widely resisted. Our presentism breathlessly repackages the same experience; it obsesses over one immediate point of view. Just as important as what happened is the reaction to it, how it is spun.

Immediacy is coupled with insularity. Presentist thinking emphasizes networks of connection between people, but these networks are regularly overwhelmed by current needs and shared points of view. They respond to current demands, not broader concerns that might transcend the moment. They echo opinions, rather than encouraging a diversity of perspectives. Current connections tend to create silos and homogeneity, rather than openness and heterogeneity.

This is an old story, but one multiplied ad infinitum by the ease and reach of digital communications. The internet ghettoizes citizens and leaders alike.

Historical thinking about the present ventures outside these ghettos. It begins by asking not about content but about origins: where did the current information come from? Source analysis, or heuristics, matters to historians in ways that are alien to journalists and polemicists. Tracing the origins of information and its various modifications over time, before its current deployments, allows us to see biases, limitations, and distortions. Source analysis also asks how the same evidence could be interpreted differently and deployed in different contexts for different purposes.

By asking where the information comes from, even before arguing over what it means, a historical perspective counteracts the tendency toward confirmation bias. It encourages skepticism about conventional opinions. It also calls for a comparison with information from other sources: what other information can shed light on the matter in question? This is a crucial question that policy-makers often fail to ask, and its absence prevents historical learning. Leaders repeat the mistakes of the past when they recycle old assumptions using new information.

Policy-makers under pressure often react quickly, seeing confirmation of their preexisting assumptions in the information presented to them. This was true for Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson in the first days of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam War, respectively. Kennedy saw evidence that his Soviet counterpart was seeking to provoke war; Johnson was reassured that the North Vietnamese would surrender under overwhelming American military pressure. The information in both cases was colored by the biases of the advisers who circulated it. They assumed, incorrectly, that their adversaries thought as they did.

Kennedy realized this, and during the second week of the Cuban Missile Crisis he tasked his brother, Robert, to find evidence that might provide an alternate explanation for Soviet General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev's behavior. Different information, coming from the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, and Khrushchev himself, convinced the American president that his counterpart was, in fact, equally averse to war and open to a reasonable compromise. Since succeeding Joseph Stalin, Khrushchev had defined his goals for the Soviet Union around economic growth, not victory in battle.

Kennedy used this information to pursue peace successfully. The secret removal of American missiles from Turkey and a public non-invasion pledge toward Cuba were the diplomatic carrot that the president proffered to get Soviet missiles out of the Western Hemisphere. Washington and Moscow then also committed to the first serious nuclear arms control negotiations. A historical perspective on the information coming in, rather than a singular focus on the alarming news of Moscow's deployments to Cuba, allowed for this shift in Cold War policies from nuclear escalation to arms control.

Lyndon Johnson never shifted his thinking on Vietnam. Until the end of his presidency, he remained beholden to the extensive reporting from various government agencies about North Vietnamese aggression and weakness. He also received repeated confirmation that the American people would rally to his support if he looked strong in fighting global communism. The information came to the president from the best and brightest men in America, who were his closest advisers, but he rarely questioned if they were good sources for a nuanced understanding of Vietnam. Johnson neglected better information, often available from area experts, pointing to different policy choices, particularly military de-escalation.¹³

Johnson was so obsessed with defeating communism in Vietnam that he doubled down on the biased information he had received. He intensified the acquisition of information that justified his policies, and he repressed information that argued otherwise. The president increased his commitment to a losing cause, distorting U.S. policy in other regions to generate support for his failing efforts. This meant increased American backing for brutal dictators in countries like Brazil and Indonesia, who promised to help Johnson in Vietnam, even as they ignored all of Washington's demands for basic democratization in their societies. Assisting the president's current war commitments was more important than historical American interests around the globe. Justifying U.S. intervention in Vietnam became more important than interrogating why current actions were not working and what could replace them. This was the height of willful historical ignorance.¹⁴

Lyndon Johnson left the White House in January 1969 still unable to see beyond his present predicament. Vietnam dominated his presidency, and he therefore missed numerous other opportunities abroad and at home. His presentism was ultimately self-defeating.

Johnson's tragic failures in Vietnam point to the crucial distinction between information and knowledge. The president received an overwhelming amount of data and reporting on the war, and he overextended himself trying to read it all. No president worked harder, but Johnson still knew precious little about the war or Vietnamese politics, history, and culture. That was because he pushed to make all the information fit his pre-existing understanding of American superiority and righteousness, rather than probing deeper to conceptualize Vietnam as a sophisticated country with a rich and complex culture and history. The president was responding to the immediate and overwhelming challenge of a distant Southeast Asian Cold War proxy for Soviet interests, not the historical reality of a culture and society with deep reservoirs of pride and independence.

Johnson should have known the Vietnamese had long resisted Chinese and French domination before the American intervention. He also should have known that foreign sponsorship of nation-building rarely works. Johnson missed these insights because he was in perpetual crisis mode, desperately reacting to the war in real time, rather than seeking to understand the conflict in its fullest historical dimensions.

Knowledge requires history. We know things, like the safety of vaccines, because there is an established history of their trials and their effective public use. We understand different

cultures because we study their development over time. We empathize with different experiences – personal and collective – because we situate them in their past and present. Ernest May and Richard Neustadt famously showed that effective leadership requires this placing of stakeholders to succeed. It is what we do as citizens of a nation and members of a community – we locate ourselves in a longer arc of history that connects us with those around us and those who came before. How else can we explain our identities?¹⁵

Context is crucial, and it is almost always underappreciated in presentist analyses – as in the statistics informing President Johnson that the United States was winning in Vietnam because it was killing more of the enemy’s combatants. The recourse to such kill rates offers a pristine (and perverse) example of presentist thinking. American leaders received the same misleading data in Iraq and Afghanistan forty years later. Killing more people when fighting insurgents in their home territory often creates more insurgents, not fewer. It also alienates those who remain bystanders.

Context is what matters, not the kill rate. To see that point, however, one must have a sense of how the occupied society has developed and how citizens think about insiders and outsiders. The kill data given to presidents measures discrete actions in the present only and denies them a culturally and historically constructed meaning, based on an understanding of the past. In many settings, the use of more violence makes the powerful actor weaker and more vulnerable.

Leaders must insist that their military advisers slow down and look back to make sense of the alluring data adorning their pretty, but deceptive, PowerPoint presentations. Victory in the present can hide deeper defeat in the historical evolution of a society. If the point of American intervention in Vietnam (as well as in Iraq and Afghanistan) was to rebuild those societies with functioning governments, then actions which defeated adversaries militarily but undermined social and political order were, ultimately, defeating for the United States as well. To assess this longer dynamic as decisions about the use of force are being made is to historicize one’s present – to understand the current moment as part of a longer past that will affect the future, even when today’s gangs of insurgents are dead.

After expending billions of dollars and killing thousands of people, the United States military left Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. These societies, however, continued to resemble what they were prior to American interventions. American power could not wrangle historical processes that proved much more enduring than the gadgets and tactics of the moment. This does not mean that the past is destiny – it surely is not, and these societies did end up changed – but it does mean that powerful actors must understand the limits of their present capabilities, no matter how plentiful and advanced. Historical perspective encourages humility among the most powerful.

The present becomes the past when we recognize that our current problems, and our preoccupation with solving them, are only small parts of a larger, ongoing story. The hubris of an ambitious, self-confident government that tells itself it is the last great hope on earth makes

the narcissism of presentism hard to resist. This is an ailment that has infected American foreign policy making, resulting in enormous damage at least three times in the past half century.

Strategic thinking is the only antidote to the multiplying demands on a powerful nation's resources. What Paul Kennedy famously described as the tendency toward overstretch and decline in the history of empires is a consequence of hyper-responsiveness – the urge to overreact in crises. Presentism causes competencies to be spread too widely, with short-term emergency spending replacing necessary long-term investment. The demands of the present starve the future when leaders respond quickly and instinctively to current pressures, allowing the immediate to drive their actions.¹⁶

Strategic thinking is the antidote to short-term, tactical thinking. Strategy is, among other things, the art of connecting one's immediate conditions to a longer narrative, in which the past helps to explain present conditions and to anticipate what they may genuinely portend for the future. Strategy focuses on a study of what matters most across time, and which actions are most likely to serve desirable ends in an enduring manner. In this sense, past values and experiences should drive reactions to present challenges, rather than having policy defined solely by immediate outcomes and threats. The question should not be: how does this country threaten us today? We can always imagine terrifying dangers from the other. The appropriate strategic question is: what are the most meaningful values and interests of my society, and where and how are they most imperiled today?

One can only answer this last, crucial question by historicizing the present. Values and interests evolve over time, they reflect past decisions, and they draw on remembered experiences that remain alive in the public consciousness. At the end of the Second World War, for example, President Harry Truman and many other Americans recognized that destroying fascist adversaries, their current priority, was essential but did not represent the sum of their interests. Postwar planning in Washington motivated influential figures, especially George Marshall and Dean Acheson (both future secretaries of state), to examine what role the defeated countries of Germany, Italy, and Japan had played in the evolution of American power in prior decades. That history helped to set priorities for the economic and political reforms Washington wanted to encourage in the former fascist countries as the war ended. To win the peace, leaders in Washington had to understand what peace had looked like before the war, and prioritize the conditions that could sustain it again.

Despite the traumas of the recent fighting, the historical experiences of Americans in the Great Depression had taught them that they needed prosperous allies and reliable security partners in the very countries that caused the current conflict. The isolationism and beggar-thy-neighbor economic policies of American leaders early in the Depression had contributed to the suffering of millions of Americans and foreign citizens. For better or worse, the U.S. economy depended on reliable open markets in Europe and Asia. American democracy also benefited from partners who worked together through institutions like the League of Nations and its successor, the

United Nations, to sanction aggressive regimes. The history of the early twentieth century emphasized the importance of international cooperation for American prosperity and security.

U.S. strategy at the end of the Second World War prioritized these insights. It focused on rebuilding and democratizing Germany and Japan as part of a global liberal capitalist system, with the United States at the center. This meant representative governments, private property protections, and open markets for trade. It also required large investments in the industrial facilities that had been destroyed during the war, as well as support for the labor unions and other institutions that helped sustain working families.

American leaders shifted their priorities to pursue these foreign reconstruction goals because they conceived their own postwar moment as part of a longer historical trajectory. Keeping these countries down, as some suggested the United States should do, would respond to current emotional demands for revenge, but would undermine the sources of prosperity and security that mattered most to Americans. Seeing current challenges as part of a longer narrative allowed for more effective policy-making.

The European Recovery Program in 1947 (the Marshall Plan) reflected the courageous and strategic American decision to put aside present animosities and invest millions of precious dollars in rebuilding traditional partners who would solidify a resurgent American-led West. Leaders in Washington could not have pursued this policy or sold it to a war-weary public without the historical perspective that they brought to the present crisis. Their earlier efforts in 1946 to focus only on the immediate issues of military occupation had, predictably, failed to create order or progress after the fascist surrender in Europe and Asia. President Truman and his advisers reconceptualized their difficult moment as an opportunity to invest in a Western European and Japanese future that built on a thoughtful reading of the past. The presence of an aggressive regime in Moscow, which sought to build an alternative communist system, helped to focus American attention on the historical opportunity of the early postwar years.¹⁷

Secretary of State Marshall's speech announcing the program, delivered on June 5, 1947, offers a model for strategic thinking. It is logical, Marshall explained, that the United States should do whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of normal economic health in the world, without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace. Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine but against hunger, poverty, desperation and chaos. Its purpose should be the revival of a working economy in the world so as to permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist.¹⁸

These words helped connect the present and the past for listeners anxious about the future. Marshall made similar points when testifying to Congress and speaking to audiences around the country. He not only advocated for a policy; he sought to change the public understanding of the postwar moment.

There has never been another Marshall Plan, although the United States has repeatedly invested in nation-building efforts around the world since then. These projects have failed

because of difficult local conditions, regional resistance, and, especially, American historical ignorance. Leaders in Washington have approached foreign problems as immediate crises, and they have conceptualized international development efforts as opportunities to build new societies on a rapid timetable. They have treated the present as prologue for an imagined, unrooted future that denies the powerful history that matters most to people on the ground.¹⁹

The diversity of present human experiences holds up a mirror to the diversity of human history. The present becomes the past when we see our current moment as one part of a longer story that both precedes us and extends into the future. The changes of this moment in time are less monumental and transformative than we think.

Our footprints will remain in the soil so we must be careful where we step. But our steps do not remake the terrain or determine its composition. We must recognize that we stand on the ground occupied by many predecessors, and they are with us still. The past indeed haunts us, and it is when we see the ghosts, and contemplate their memories, that we are at our best.

Historical thinkers are the Hamlets of their world, conversing with the ghosts of their forerunners. They might make poor politicians, but they educate better policy-makers.

Notes

1. Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*. Trans. Anthea Bell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 246–247.
2. Ibid.; James Joll, 1914: *The Unspoken Assumptions* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968).
3. See Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Gert-Jan Hospers, Restructuring Europe’s Rustbelt: The Case of the German Ruhrgebiet. *Intereconomics* 39 (May–June 2004), 147–156, www.intereconomics.eu/contents/year/2004/number/3/article/restructuring-europe-s-rustbelt-the-case-of-the-german-ruhrgebiet.html.
4. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
5. Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, 246.
6. Ibid.
7. On this point, see Peter Bergen, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and Al-Qaeda* (New York: Free Press, 2011).
8. Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper, 2013).
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12. Jeremi Suri, *The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America’s Highest Office* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).
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14. See Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).
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19. This is a central argument in Suri, *Liberty’s Surest Guardian*.

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Edited by **PAUL M. DOVER**



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**The Relationship between Past
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