

The Triumph and Tragedy of Diplomatic History



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Academics, and academic disciplines, engage in bouts of self-doubt and even self-flagellation from time to time. They question their intellectual worth and standing within the ivory tower; they fret about their relationship to the broader world. Yet for the field of diplomatic history — simply defined, the historical study of foreign policy and international relations, and American foreign policy and international relations in particular — recent years have been a time of remarkable self-congratulation.

In the 1970s and 1980s, diplomatic history was derided by academic critics — and some of its practitioners — as a field of limited intellectual value, characterized by unimaginative scholarship that served primarily to chronicle what one bureaucrat said to another. Now, however, a sense of near-triumphalism pervades many self-assessments of the field.

Diplomatic history has become more international and less U.S.-centric, these analyses hold; it has incorporated approaches and perspectives from social, cultural, and gender history; it has regained its good name in the broader historical profession. Diplomatic history was once “on the edge of extinction,” Columbia University’s Matthew Connelly recently observed. “It has not only survived, but thrived by reinventing itself as part of a vastly expanded field of research on the history of world politics.”¹ Another respected scholar has even written of a “diplomatic history bandwagon,” the idea being that a reformed and revitalized diplomatic history is at the vanguard of historical inquiry.²

There is a thin line between self-congratulation and self-delusion, however, and diplomatic history stands perilously close to that line today. In some respects, the triumphalists have it right: Diplomatic historians are producing remarkable works of scholarship, often based on research in multiple archives and languages, on an array of important

issues. Yet it is hard to shake the feeling that something has gone very wrong with the endeavor. Although diplomatic history may have halted its long decline within the academy in recent decades, it has simultaneously — and not coincidentally — become afflicted by three fundamental problems. Diplomatic history has become less intellectually cohesive; less concerned with traditional issues of war and peace, diplomacy, and statecraft; and less engaged with policymakers on the questions they care about most. The “triumph” of diplomatic history has also been its tragedy.³ The field has reinvented itself, but in doing so it has lost a great deal.

The consequences of this situation are not merely academic. History, if it ever left us, has surely returned with a vengeance as geopolitical competition intensifies, authoritarian and democratic models of governance compete for primacy, security threats proliferate, and the international system enters a new era of volatility. This ought to be a golden moment for diplomatic history: An understanding of international strategy and statecraft, of how American foreign policy and state power have historically been wielded in global affairs, could scarcely be more relevant. That diplomatic history is ill-suited to answering this call is bad news for the discipline — and even worse news for a country that needs all the intellectual help it can get to navigate a dangerous world.

1 Matthew Connelly, “The Next Thirty Years of International Relations Research: New Topics, New Methods, and the Challenge of Big Data,” *Les Cahiers Irice* 14 (February 2015): 85-86.

2 Thomas Zeiler, “The Diplomatic History Bandwagon: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 95, no. 4 (March 2009): 1053-1073.

3 Although space constraints preclude a fuller discussion of this point, other “traditional” forms of history — particularly military and political history — have experienced many of the same phenomena considered in this essay. See Fredrik Logevall and Kenneth Osgood, “Why Did We Stop Teaching Political History?” *The New York Times*, August 29, 2016.

Both the triumph and the tragedy of diplomatic history are rooted in the field's response to the crisis it confronted 30 to 40 years ago. During the early postwar era, diplomatic history had been at the forefront of the historical profession. "Diplomatic historians held leadership positions in the major organizations" of the field, the eminent scholar George Herring later recalled. "Diplomatic history topics were essential components of survey courses." Major scholarly debates — on the origins of the Cold War, dropping of the atomic bomb, and other subjects — played out in leading journals and attracted widespread attention both within and beyond the historical profession. "There was a sense of real importance in what we were doing," Herring reflected.⁴ By the 1970s and 1980s, however, the worm had turned and diplomatic history seemed increasingly out of step with the broader historical community.

Diplomatic history stood accused of being largely devoted to studying the actions of dead white men at a time when the historical profession was — with good reason, and in response to broader societal changes — looking to excavate the experiences of the marginalized and oppressed. It represented a traditional, even conservative, approach to history at a time when newer subfields that emphasized issues of race, class, and gender had become ascendant.⁵ It focused largely on U.S. foreign policy and the view from Washington, in contrast to more cosmopolitan, international approaches. Not least, diplomatic history was closely identified with the study of American power, and after Vietnam American power seemed decidedly disreputable to many academics.

The upshot was that diplomatic history — like other "conservative" subfields such as military

history and political history — went from being at the center of the historical profession to its periphery. "What I encountered," one scholar later recalled, "was a sub-discipline under siege."⁶ Many leading history departments stopped hiring new diplomatic historians and declined to replace retiring ones; from the 1970s onward, the proportion of college history departments employing one or more diplomatic historian began a precipitous, decades-long decline.⁷ A study by three Stanford scholars later demonstrated, moreover, that articles on diplomatic history were increasingly excluded from generalist journals and pushed into more specialized publications; the number of dissertations on diplomatic history topics dropped significantly.⁸ Perhaps most tellingly, diplomatic history was subjected to withering critiques from within the profession. The most famous broadside was fired by the Harvard scholar Charles Maier, who argued in 1980 that diplomatic historians were simply "marking time" — busying themselves with dull, unimaginative approaches to the study of foreign policy — during a period of great innovation in the rest of the historical community.⁹ During the 1980s and 1990s, it often seemed that diplomatic history was dying; it was common to hear of the "long crisis" — perhaps the terminal crisis — of the field.¹⁰

Crisis can be the mother of innovation, however, and the discipline responded to these pressures by essentially reinventing itself. Diplomatic historians got culture — they incorporated insights and methods from cultural history, as well as related subfields such as social history and gender history, in their scholarship on issues as varied as containment and U.S.-Latin American relations. One prominent example: In 1997 a leading diplomatic historian published a widely read article in the *Journal of American History* arguing that George Kennan's "Long Telegram" was heavily influenced

4 George Herring, "A SHAHR Retrospective," *Diplomatic History* 31, no. 3 (June 2007): 397-400.

5 A good guide to shifts within the profession is Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

6 William Keylor, "The Problems and Prospects of Diplomatic/International History," *H-Diplo Essay No. 126*, April 10, 2015, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/66930/h-diplo-state-field-essay--problems-and-prospects>.

7 For two slightly different sets of statistics that convey the same basic trend, see Patricia Cohen, "Great Caesar's Ghost! Are Traditional History Courses Vanishing?" *The New York Times*, June 10, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/11/books/11hist.html>; Robert Townsend, "The Rise and Decline of History Specializations over the Past 40 Years," *Perspectives on History*, December 2015, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2015/the-rise-and-decline-of-history-specializations-over-the-past-40-years>.

8 Stephen Haber, David Kennedy, and Stephen Krasner, "Brothers Under the Skin: Diplomatic History and International Relations," *International Security* 22, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 34-43.

9 Charles Maier, "Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations," in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 355-387.

10 Michael Hunt, "The Long Crisis in U.S. Diplomatic History: Coming to Closure," *Diplomatic History* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 115-140.

by gender tropes and the “homosocial” climate in the U.S. embassy in Moscow.¹¹ Scholarship proliferated on how racialized worldviews and concepts such as “Orientalism” shaped America’s interactions with foreign peoples; postmodern theory and deconstructionism moved into accounts of U.S. relations with the world. And with a critical assist from the end of the Cold War — which dramatically increased the availability of non-U.S. sources — diplomatic historians embraced international or even transnational approaches to the study of American foreign relations, often “de-centering” Washington to bring the perspectives of other actors to the fore.¹²

Most notably, diplomatic historians dramatically expanded the boundaries of their subfield to make room for subjects of greater interest to the rest of the profession. Greater attention was paid to the roles of migration, international public health, development, globalization, environmental activism, food security, human rights, tourism, architecture, religion, and even sports in shaping America’s relationship with the world; diplomatic historians began to emphasize the interaction not just of governments but also of non-state actors, peoples, and transnational communities. Diplomatic history was once mocked as the study of “what one clerk said to another”; the field now explicitly rejected that label and claimed a more encompassing self-definition.¹³ As one advocate of the “new” diplomatic history has written, diplomatic historians became “part of the global community of scholars interested not just in war and diplomacy, but also international and non-government organizations, trade and monetary policy, scientific and technological innovation, and countless other subjects that connect different

countries or transcend the boundaries between them.”¹⁴

In many ways, this transformation accomplished a great deal. There is simply no question that diplomatic history has become a broader and more intellectually diverse field in recent decades. The turn toward multiarchival and multilingual research has produced groundbreaking works of scholarship, such as Mary Sarotte’s account of the end of the Cold War, Jeremi Suri’s reinterpretation of the origins of détente, Odd Arne Westad’s volume on superpower competition and the Third World, and Fredrik Logevall’s classic study of the French war in Indochina and the origins of the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam.¹⁵ De-centering the United States has provided new insights on agency and causality on issues as varied as the Algerian war of independence and the struggle between left and right in Cold War Latin America.¹⁶ Looking beyond state-to-state relations and the view from Washington has given us a better understanding of how U.S. power is experienced by ordinary people around the world. Historians who have drawn ideas from the study of culture and memory into more traditional works of diplomatic history, as opposed to simply replacing the latter with the former, have better illuminated the complex mix of factors that has long shaped American perceptions of and policies toward the world — and that has long pushed U.S. officials toward such an expansive definition of the country’s global interests.¹⁷ Similarly, scholars have written fascinating accounts that integrate smallpox eradication, population control, economic development, religion, and other subjects into the history of U.S. foreign relations, and the field has attained greater appreciation of the role of non-state actors in

11 Frank Costigliola, “‘Unceasing Pressure for Penetration’: Gender, Pathology, and Emotion in George Kennan’s Formation of the Cold War,” *Journal of American History* 83, no. 4 (March 1997): 1309-1339; Robert Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

12 On these sources and their significance, see John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Melvyn Leffler, “The Cold War: What Do ‘We Now Know?’” *American Historical Review* 104, no. 2 (April 1999): 501-524. In some circles, in fact, the labels and approaches “diplomatic history” and “international history” have become essentially interchangeable.

13 On the origins of this dig, see Elie Kedourie, “From Clerk to Clerk: Writing Diplomatic History,” *The American Scholar* 48, no. 4 (Autumn 1979): 502.

14 Connelly, “The Next Thirty Years of International Relations Research,” 87-88.

15 Mary Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2014); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third-World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

16 See, for instance, Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Hal Brands, *Latin America’s Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

17 For a good summary, see Melvyn Leffler, “National Security,” in Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 25-41.

America's encounters with the world.¹⁸

Not coincidentally, diplomatic history has become more aligned with — and more acceptable to — the dominant trends in the broader historical profession. As one state-of-the-field essay noted several years ago, books authored by diplomatic historians have won awards from the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians. The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAHR), the leading professional organization for diplomatic historians, reported having more than 2,000 members from 34 countries, a significant increase from a decade prior.¹⁹ And much as another dying subfield — military history — kept one foot out of the grave by transitioning away from a traditional focus on operations and strategy to one rooted in the broader concept of “war in society,” the broader category of “America in the world” has gained a measure of respectability even as traditional diplomatic history has receded. Leading universities such as Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and Cornell all employ distinguished scholars concentrating in this area; so do many other research and teaching institutions.

Given all this, leading diplomatic historians no longer lament but celebrate the state of the field. As Matthew Connelly has written, “The study of U.S. diplomacy therefore has a secure place in the historical profession, *but only because it is now just part of a much larger project.*”²⁰ It would seem, then, that the transformation of diplomatic history has not simply enriched but resurrected that field. Diplomatic history has by no means recaptured the stature it possessed 60 years ago — not even close — but at the very least no one is talking about the end of diplomatic history these days.

So amid all this intellectual dynamism and renewed academic respectability, what's not to like? Three things, it turns out.



The first problem is that as diplomatic history has become broader and more eclectic, it has also become less intellectually cohesive. In any field of study, there is an inevitable trade-off

between the breadth of topics covered and the intellectual coherence of the community covering them. Opening the analytical aperture is essential to incorporating new subjects and fostering intellectual diversity, but it risks atomizing the field and making its respective subcomponents less relevant to one another. This is precisely what has happened to diplomatic history.

For all the shortcomings of the field in an earlier era, its focus was at least relatively clear, and a resulting sense of intellectual community formed around much of the work produced. Diplomatic historians focused largely on issues of high politics and strategy, on the exercise of state power and government policy — particularly American state power and government policy — in the international system. There were vibrant and often heated debates on critical issues, such as the sources of American intervention in World War I and World War II, the causes of the Cold War, and U.S. nuclear strategy in the 1940s and 1950s, and those debates involved an array of leading academics in the field. This is why even proponents of the more recent changes in diplomatic history have sometimes looked back wistfully upon this earlier era.²¹ Despite all the interpretive disputes that divided the field, diplomatic historians were part of a common intellectual inquiry organized largely around crucial issues in U.S. foreign policy and international affairs.

The same cannot be said today. In his definitive study of the American historical profession, Peter Novick titled the final chapter “There Was No King in Israel,” the idea being that the profession had become so intellectually diffuse that it had lost any common identity or purpose.²² Similarly, the fact that diplomatic historians are focusing on such a diverse array of issues, and are utilizing such a wide range of methodological and intellectual approaches, has made it far harder to discern any common intellectual purpose — or even for people who identify as diplomatic historians to be in meaningful dialogue with one another.

One wonders, for instance, whether one scholar who studies the origins of the Cold War from a quintessentially geopolitical perspective and a

18 See, for instance, Erez Manela, “A Pox on Your Narrative: Writing Disease Control Into Cold War History,” *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 4 (April 2010): 299–323; Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Knopf, 2012); William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

19 Zeiler, “Diplomatic History Bandwagon,” 1054–1055. It is possible that Zeiler’s statistics overstated the total size of SHAHR, but the basic trend he noted is clear enough. My thanks to Amy Sayward for her insight on this issue.

20 Connelly, “The Next Thirty Years of International Relations Research,” 91.

21 Herring, “A SHAHR Retrospective.”

22 Novick, *That Noble Dream*.



scholar who views U.S. policy toward Stalin's Soviet Union as a result of gender insecurities are really capable of doing much beyond talking past one another.²³ Similarly, is there much fruitful exchange between someone who studies U.S. foreign relations through the lens of nuclear arms control and someone who studies it through the lens of post-colonial theory or the sexual politics of U.S. imperialism?²⁴ More profound still is the question of whether historians who emphasize deconstructionism — the belief that truth and facts are merely social constructions — and post-modernism are simply in a dialogue of the deaf with those who take more traditional approaches to empiricism and epistemology. There remains, certainly, some intellectual commonality in that diplomatic historians are all examining key relationships across national boundaries and trying to explain America's myriad interactions with the world. But beyond such gauzy generalities, diplomatic historians have less and less in common with one another. As Marc Trachtenberg has observed,

The work that's being produced, especially in recent years, is all over the map: the field seems fractured, Balkanized — there doesn't seem to be any overarching sense of purpose.²⁵

Indeed, even the relatively recent innovations in diplomatic history have themselves been all over the map. The "internationalization" of diplomatic history that resulted from the end of the Cold War kept the analytical focus substantially on issues of statecraft and diplomacy, even as it exploited new sources to enrich the study of those issues enormously. Debates about whether the Cold War was inevitable, if there was really a "lost chance" to avert Sino-American hostility after 1949, and what level of responsibility the United States bore for the violence and upheaval that roiled the Third World during the postwar decades were all informed — and sometimes upended — by new work that gave diplomatic history a more global character.²⁶ Yet the turn toward diplomatic history as cultural, social, or gender history often pulled the field in a very different direction, one that dramatically deemphasized matters of foreign policy as it was traditionally understood. The upshot was that even as diplomatic history was being invigorated by new sources and a more international perspective, the field was also becoming far more fragmented — and far less congenial to the topics that had long been at its core.

One can push the point further by noting that diplomatic history has, in some ways, been so thoroughly transformed as to become unrecognizable. In writing about the larger

23 Compare John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), and Costigliola, "Unceasing Pressure for Penetration."

24 There are, of course, areas in which the interchange between the "new" and "old" diplomatic history can be fruitful. Studies of nuclear strategy and nuclear war, for instance, can be enriched considerably by combining traditional military and diplomatic history with the insights provided by scholarship on public health. See "How a Nuclear War in Korea Could Start, and How It Might End," *The Economist*, August 5, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21725763-everyone-would-lose-how-nuclear-war-korea-could-start-and-how-it-might-end>.

25 Marc Trachtenberg, "The State of International History," *E-International Relations*, March 9, 2013, <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/09/the-state-of-international-history/>.

26 See John Lewis Gaddis, "The Tragedy of Cold War History," *Diplomatic History* 17, no. 1 (January 1993): 1-16; Melvyn Leffler, "Inside Enemy Archives: The Cold War Reopened," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 4 (July/August 1996): 120-135.

historical profession, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Gordon Wood once lamented that newer approaches — social, cultural, gender history — had become so dominant that they pushed older approaches to the side.²⁷ In diplomatic history, too, one sometimes gets the impression that the field has essentially reinvented itself out of existence.

The best jobs — in history departments at top-tier universities in the United States, at least — tend to go to highly talented scholars whose work is heavily influenced by social and cultural history or other relatively new approaches; scholars who study diplomacy, war, and peace through more traditional lenses are usually less competitive. Doctoral students are often, and with good reason, discouraged from taking up the more traditional approach, which perpetuates this dynamic into the next scholarly generation. Special issues of historical journals more often focus on the role of sports, gender, or ideology in international affairs than on traditional hard-power questions or key episodes in American statecraft.²⁸ Courses on “America in the World” are more likely to emphasize approaches of the “new” diplomatic history than details of the Monroe Doctrine or the Lend-Lease program. To give one anecdotal example, when I was pursuing my PhD at Yale University I was a teaching assistant for a course on U.S. foreign relations since 1898 that contained virtually no content on the major foreign policy initiatives of the period. Similarly, at Duke University, where I began my career as a professor, the history department offered a class on World War II — one that all but ignored issues of grand strategy, decision making, military operations, and the course of the war itself so as to focus on films, novels, and the cultural and social implications of the conflict.

In other words, newer approaches are often touted as complementing the older diplomatic history, but in a world of finite resources and opportunities they frequently displace it instead.²⁹ Reasonable people can debate whether this is a good or a bad thing, and it is the nature of intellectual inquiry that certain approaches recede as others advance. But this shift has resulted in a second major problem:

that at a time of surging international conflict and tension, as matters of statecraft and diplomacy, war and peace, loom large indeed, the American historical profession has less and less to say about these issues.



One reason for the decline and corresponding reinvention of diplomatic history was that these changes occurred in an era when it was possible to assume that the international environment was steadily becoming more benign. During the 1990s, the world seemed to be moving away from great-power competition, major war, and other geopolitical phenomena that had characterized international relations throughout the 20th century. At a time when even brilliant scholars — as well as U.S. government officials — could claim that history had ended, that major-power war was obsolete, and that countries everywhere were converging toward markets and democracy, it is hardly surprising that traditional issues of national security were no longer fashionable within the historical profession.³⁰

Today, of course, such beliefs seem naïve given the resurgent great-power rivalries, ideological conflict, and general disorder roiling the international arena. In this new age of instability and geopolitical revisionism, who can seriously deny that a historical understanding of American statecraft and issues of war and peace is essential? And yet the American historical profession in general, and diplomatic history in particular, are poorly situated to provide that understanding because such matters have been intellectually marginalized.

The statistics are sobering. According to the American Historical Association, whereas roughly 7 percent of practicing academic historians described themselves as diplomatic historians in 1975, only 3 percent did so in 2015. Whereas 85 percent of all history departments employed a diplomatic historian in 1975, only 44 percent did so four decades later.³¹ In academic year 2014-

27 Gordon Wood, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 2-6.

28 See, as one example, the September 2008 issue of *Diplomatic History*. To be clear, roundtables and special issues on diplomatic history subjects are still offered, but they are more likely to appear in publications such as the *Journal of Strategic Studies* than in journals such as *Diplomatic History*. This is another manifestation of how traditional diplomatic history has increasingly taken up residence in institutions and outlets not dominated by the historical profession itself.

29 A version of this argument is offered in Cohen's "Great Caesar's Ghost!"

30 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989): 3-18.

31 Townsend, "The Rise and Decline of History Specializations Over the Past 40 Years." Interestingly, the number of historians identifying themselves as military historians remained relatively stable between 1975 and 2015. One suspects that, as in diplomatic history, these statistics may understate the changes at work in the field, given how many military historians now prioritize cultural and social issues over more traditional subjects such as operations and strategy. On this trend, see Wayne Lee, "Mind and Matter — Cultural Analysis in American Military History: A Look at the State of the Field," *Journal of American History* 93, no. 4 (March 2007): 1116-1142.

2015, only nine out of 587 history jobs advertised with the American Historical Association were explicitly focused on diplomatic or international history; in 2015-2016, the number was three out of 572.³² In other words, any talk about a “revival” of diplomatic history needs to be kept in perspective, because if the decline has perhaps been halted, the fact remains that the subfield that has long been the locus of scholarship on diplomacy, statecraft, and American policy is a mere shadow of its former self. In fact, these statistics probably understate the degree to which traditional issues of war, peace, and statecraft have faded from the intellectual agenda. Given how broadly diplomatic history is now defined, it seems likely that some scholars who identify as diplomatic historians engage with these issues only peripherally if at all.

Anecdotal evidence confirms the larger trend. As anyone possessing a passing familiarity with the American historical profession can attest, there may be plenty of schools where one can earn a PhD in the broad area of “America in the World,” but the number of institutions that offer serious, top-flight graduate education in diplomatic history, traditionally defined, can be counted on perhaps two hands. Bright doctoral students who are serious about seeking a tenure-track job in a history department are frequently advised to stay away from issues of statecraft and diplomacy altogether or, at the very least, to study those issues through a cultural or gendered lens. Eminent diplomatic and military historians have retired and been replaced by cultural and social historians working on international topics. And, of course, classes on traditional statecraft, diplomacy, and other “hard power” topics are increasingly hard to come by; in many cases, they have either dropped off the rolls or been so thoroughly redesigned that the great issues of war and peace hardly figure in the curriculum.

According to statistics compiled by the historian Niall Ferguson, for instance, in fall 1966 the Harvard history department offered multiple courses that

dealt significantly with World War I, World War II, the Cold War, and the history of the British Empire. Fifty years later, in fall 2016, the department offered only a single course dealing with any of these subjects. Similar trends are evident at other elite universities.³³ The historical profession in the United States has simply deprioritized the study of statecraft and international relations, at least as those subjects were conventionally understood.

To be clear, this is not to say that excellent, even path-breaking historical work is not being done on such issues. In just the past few years, major studies have been published on the statecraft of John Quincy Adams, the origins and aftermath of World War I, the early history of the Vietnam War, the remaking of U.S. foreign policy and the international order in the 1970s, the U.S.-Cuban-Soviet struggle for influence in Southern Africa, the end of the Cold War, the history of American nuclear strategy, and U.S. statecraft in the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East.³⁴ Classes — where they are offered — on the history of American foreign policy and international relations continue to draw large enrollments; were it not for those classes, the ongoing slide in undergraduate history majors would surely be even more severe. (From 2007 to 2014, the share of undergraduate degrees awarded in history fell from 2.2 percent to 1.7 percent.³⁵) And, of course, popular histories — those written not for academics but for broader public audiences — continue to emphasize issues of strategy, statecraft, and decision making, and to draw a wide readership.

Yet much of this work is being done outside of the American academic historical profession *per se*, by individuals who have made their intellectual homes elsewhere. Schools of public policy and international affairs; professional military education institutions; war studies and strategic studies programs; and universities in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Europe have emerged as refuges for scholars who still do traditional diplomatic history; the majority of work produced

32 Robert Townsend and Emily Swafford, “Conflicting Signals in the Academic Job Market for History,” *Perspectives on History*, January 2017, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2017/conflicting-signals-in-the-academic-job-market-for-history>.

33 The statistics are from the chart in Niall Ferguson’s “The Decline and Fall of History,” remarks accepting the Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education, October 28, 2016.

34 See Charles Edel, *Nation Builder: John Quincy Adams and the Grand Strategy of the Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War, America, and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916-1931* (New York: Penguin, 2014); Logevall, *Embers of War*; Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations During the 1970s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Sarotte, *1989*; Francis Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); Michael Green, *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia-Pacific since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Jeffrey Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); Piero Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976-1991* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War* (London: Profile Books, 2014); Ray Takeyh and Steven Simon, *The Pragmatic Superpower: Winning the Cold War in the Middle East* (New York: Norton, 2016).

35 Julia Brookins, “New Data Show Large Drop in History Bachelor’s Degrees,” *Perspectives on History*, March 2016, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2016/new-data-show-large-drop-in-history-bachelors-degrees>.

on the subjects just cited, in fact, has come from historians who reside in such institutions.³⁶ Other diplomatic historians have gone to work for the U.S. government or moved into think tanks or political science departments.³⁷ As a result, classes on the history of U.S. foreign policy, traditionally understood, are still being taught and books are still being written, albeit less frequently. But most of this is happening *outside* the structures that dominate the historical discipline.

Why does it matter *where* the work gets done so long as the work — or at least some of it — *is* getting done? The reason is that there is only so much that historians working outside history departments can do to offset the larger changes within their profession. A significant proportion of the institutions where the best diplomatic history is being done these days do not educate undergraduates. A higher proportion still either does not train doctoral students or trains PhD students who mostly go on to do things other than taking traditional academic jobs.³⁸ This means that a generation of American undergrads — the educated public and future leaders of the United States — is less likely to emerge from college with any meaningful exposure to the history of American foreign policy and international affairs. It also means that the intellectual pipeline is drying up — that in a few decades, when the current generation of diplomatic historians has departed the scene, there may not be a critical mass of successors to take its place.

In other words, the death of diplomatic history may not have been averted but merely deferred. In the meantime, diplomatic history's shift away from its intellectual roots means that the historical profession as a whole is devoting less intellectual energy to understanding those matters of geopolitical competition and international rivalry that loom so large today.

America's rivals are not making the same mistake. Chinese scholars and the Chinese government are aggressively exploring the past for insights about what makes great nations rise and fall and how Beijing might navigate its conflicted

relationship with the United States. In the mid-2000s, for instance, the Chinese regime produced a multipart documentary on the history of great-power ascendancy and decline based loosely on Paul Kennedy's classic work on the same subject. More broadly, the study of diplomatic and military history is reportedly central to the education and professional development of Chinese strategists, and a number of classic works in U.S. military and diplomatic history have apparently become required reading for Chinese cadres.³⁹

Beijing is intensively engaging with these issues not just for intellectual pleasure, of course, but because it understands that mastery of such questions is likely to be critical to the fate of Chinese power and policy in the 21st century. One example that illustrates the disparity: In April 2017, the journal *Diplomatic History* featured three articles by Chinese scholars affiliated with Chinese universities that focused on issues such as U.S.-China relations, Chinese grand strategy in the 1960s, and Chinese policy on nuclear arms control. In contrast, the two original research articles by American scholars teaching at American universities focused on issues of public health in U.S.-Bolivian relations in the 1950s and U.S. planning on how to treat Japanese civilians living in Japan's overseas colonies during World War II.⁴⁰

It is not difficult to determine which country is better using history — and historians — to prepare for what is likely to be the defining geopolitical competition of the 21st century. And this, in turn, points to a third problem with diplomatic history: that the field has become less engaged with the policy community on issues of greatest importance to American statecraft.

IV

There is sad and abundant irony here, because policymakers are hungry, as they always have been, for the wisdom that history has to offer. One survey published in 2014 found that U.S. national security officials consider the lessons of history to be more relevant to their work than those provided

36 Of the authors cited previously, Edel, Logevall, Gleijeses, Gavin, Sarotte, Takeyh, Simon, and Green all work primarily (or at least half the time) in institutions other than history departments. So too do (or did) Trachtenberg, Jeremi Suri, Westad, John Bew, Inboden, and other leading diplomatic historians. MacMillan is a professor of history in the United Kingdom.

37 Robert Kagan, Ted Bromund, Frederick Kagan, Ray Takeyh, and James Graham Wilson are prominent examples.

38 This description applies to most professional military education institutions (except the service academies, which do have undergraduates), for instance, and a substantial proportion of policy or international affairs schools.

39 See Joseph Kahn, "China, Shy Giant, Shows Signs of Shedding Its False Modesty," *The New York Times*, December 9, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/09/world/asia/09china.html>; also James Holmes, "How Chinese Strategists Think," *The Diplomat*, June 19, 2013, <https://thediplomat.com/2013/06/how-chinese-strategists-think/>; James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

40 See the April 2017 issue of *Diplomatic History*.

by political science or other disciplines.⁴¹ There is, moreover, endless anecdotal evidence that policymakers regularly look to history as a source of insight and perspective.

George W. Bush read dozens of works of history each year while president; Barack Obama periodically convened a council of presidential historians for reflection.⁴² The current secretary of defense, James Mattis, is a famously avid consumer of history; the national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, is a card-carrying historian who has argued that the only way to understand the future of warfare is to look to the past.⁴³ The military services regularly send some of their most promising officers to study for PhDs in military and diplomatic history; the Office of Net Assessment in the Department of Defense has funded major historical studies on the premise that such work can help American strategists understand the current and future challenges of the global security environment.⁴⁴ During my own brief service in the Pentagon, I found that officials almost never had to be persuaded of the value of history; they frequently asked what insights the past might offer in addressing issues as varied as U.S. counterterrorism strategy and strategic competition with Russia. And today, at a time when security threats are increasing and historical patterns of global competition are reasserting themselves, the salience of history — diplomatic history especially — ought to be greater than ever. The problem, then, is not a slackening of demand for policy engagement by historians. The problem is that academic historians are not providing an adequate supply.

The reasons for this diffidence are tightly interwoven with long-running shifts in the field. Just as the Vietnam War fanned academic disillusion with diplomatic history as an undertaking, it also created a deep ideological cleavage between diplomatic historians and government officials. In the wake of Vietnam, a broad swath of academia

concluded that its proper purpose was not cooperating with power but “speaking truth to power.”⁴⁵ In diplomatic history as in other fields, that ethos was imbibed by the generation that trained during and shortly after the Vietnam War and was then passed down — through PhD education, hiring decisions, and other seemingly mundane but profoundly influential ways of shaping the field — to the generations that followed.⁴⁶

The predictable effects of this phenomenon, in turn, were compounded by the subsequent transformation of diplomatic history, which shifted the focus of the field away from those geopolitical and strategic issues of greatest importance to policymakers, and toward subjects and approaches with less obvious relevance to the day-to-day workings of foreign policy. Throw in the historical profession’s perverse but persistent aversion to “presentism” — the seemingly radical idea that the past should be studied primarily for the light it can shed on the present — and the strictures of a tenure process that rewards obscure academic publications but often penalizes efforts to cultivate influence with the policy world, and the result is the unfortunate situation in which diplomatic history finds itself.⁴⁷ Diplomatic historians, at least of the academic variety, are focusing less on questions of priority interest to policymakers; the professors who study the history of American statecraft are increasingly removed from meaningful interaction with the people who make that history.

This history-policy gap is hard to quantify, but it manifests in a number of ways. Leading historians do occasionally take time away from academia to serve or consult at high levels of government, as scholars such as Philip Zelikow, William Inboden, and Richard Immerman have done in the past two decades. But historians seem to go this route less frequently than political scientists and international relations scholars (to say nothing of economists),

41 Paul Avey and Michael Desch, “What Do Policymakers Want From Us? Results From a Survey of Current and Former Senior National Security Decision Makers,” *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (June 2014): 227-246.

42 See Kenneth Walsh, “Obama’s Secret Dinner With Presidential Historians,” *U.S. News & World Report*, July 15, 2009, <https://www.usnews.com/news/obama/articles/2009/07/15/obamas-secret-dinner-with-presidential-historians>; Peter Feaver and William Inboden, “Looking Forward Through the Past: The Role of History in Bush White House National Security Policymaking,” in Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri, eds., *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2015).

43 Paul Szoldra, “This Viral Email From General James ‘Mad Dog’ Mattis About Being ‘Too Busy to Read’ Is a Must-Read,” *Business Insider*, November 21, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/viral-james-mattis-email-reading-marines-2013-5>; H.R. McMaster, “On War: Lessons to Be Learned,” *Survival* 50, no. 1 (March-April 2008), 19-30.

44 An excellent example is Williamson Murray and Allan Millet, eds., *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

45 For one recent example of this ethos, see David Armitage and Jo Guldi, *The History Manifesto* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), which has the “speak truth to power” concept on its cover.

46 The impact of the Vietnam War on diplomatic history has not, so far as I know, been fully explored in any full-length academic treatment. But it is alluded to in Mark Stoler, “What a Long, Strange Trip It’s Been,” *Diplomatic History* 31, no. 3 (June 2007): 427-433.

47 “The American historical profession,” Jill Lepore has written, “defines itself by its dedication to the proposition that looking to the past to explain the present falls outside the realm of serious historical study. That stuff is for amateurs and cranks.” Lepore, “Tea and Sympathy: Who Owns the American Revolution?” *The New Yorker*, May 3, 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/05/03/tea-and-sympathy-2>.

and those historians who do enter the policy arena — particularly in Republican administrations — risk being rewarded with more opprobrium, or simple bemusement, than praise from their academic colleagues. Likewise, young historians participate in programs such as the Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellowship (which sends young academics into government for a year) at a lower rate than their colleagues in international relations and political science; in most years, the number of historians who take advantage of this program is zero, or perhaps one.⁴⁸

Historians also seem to publish in leading policy journals such as *Foreign Affairs* or *Foreign Policy* far less frequently than their friends in political science and international relations; it is quite rare to find a peer-reviewed historical journal, or a prestigious university press series, that encourages authors to reflect on the policy implications of their research as political science and international relations outlets often do.⁴⁹ More broadly, diplomatic historians — particularly those in mainline history departments — are far too averse to choosing topics motivated by their relevance to contemporary policy challenges. They tend, even more so than political scientists, to focus on filling gaps in the literature, exploring some (often deservedly) understudied period or subject, or examining the past purely for its own sake. “History,” one prominent diplomatic historian has argued, “cannot in the first instance be concerned with navigating the ship of state.”⁵⁰

In sum, policymakers see a great deal of value in historical knowledge, and they would probably be enthusiastic were historians to more energetically apply their insights to the great matters of the present. But diplomatic historians are often reluctant to take up the challenge or traverse the pathways along which academic knowledge enters policy debates.

This situation is deeply impoverishing for all involved. Academics often think of policy engagement as a way of educating historically ignorant decision makers. In reality, such engagement often makes *academics* smarter. It acquaints them more intimately with the dynamics

of policy and decision making; it gives them a better appreciation of the uncertainty and severe constraints under which policymakers labor, the often-irreconcilable demands they must satisfy, and the inevitable imperfection of all options available. As Melvyn Leffler noted in his award-winning study of national security policy during the Truman era, the year he spent at the Pentagon gave him greater insight into the making of U.S. strategy — and, undoubtedly, greater empathy regarding the agonizing choices that policymakers so often face.⁵¹ The common academic conceit is that close association with power is the enemy of good scholarship. Yet excessive distance from the policy world can be just as damaging.

If academic-policy estrangement is thus problematic for academics, it is potentially tragic for policy. For all their critiques regarding direct policy engagement, virtually no diplomatic historian would quarrel with the premise that more historical knowledge is needed in U.S. foreign policy, and few have hesitated to condemn policymakers for acting on the basis of an insufficient or incorrect understanding of history. But if more and better history makes for better policy, then the discipline’s continuing diffidence appears all the more damning.

This approach will not, after all, prevent policy-relevant history from being written and aggressively marketed to decision makers. It will not prevent policy officials from seeking historical insights and analogies. But it *will* ensure that professional, academic historians are too frequently absent from these undertakings, and that the quality of the history being used — and thus the policies being produced — suffers. *Someone* will certainly scour the history of U.S.-China relations, or the Cold War, or some other subject for clues as to how Washington might handle the future of Sino-American relations or great-power competition.⁵² If academic historical training is worth the time that professional historians invest in it, then they should, presumably, prefer that they be the ones undertaking the task. The alternative is that a sort of intellectual Gresham’s law will take hold: When good history is ambivalent about making itself

48 Consult the historical roster of fellows, “International Affairs Fellows: 1967-2017,” https://www.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/2017%20IAF%20Historical%20List.pdf. In 2015, an outlier year, two historians (neither of whom work in history departments) were selected as fellows.

49 Indeed, historians who wish to draw out the policy implications of their work are usually best advised to take their writing to *International Security*, the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, or other outlets that fall outside the corpus of mainline history journals.

50 Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War From Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 159.

51 Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

52 For a recent example of bad history informing bad policy prescriptions, there is Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017). For a sharp critique of historical inaccuracies in Allison’s book, see Ian Buruma, “Are China and the United States Headed for War?” *The New Yorker*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/19/are-china-and-the-united-states-headed-for-war>.

accessible and competing for policy influence, bad history will effortlessly drive it from the field.

Historians ought to be particularly keen to avoid this scenario today. On an array of pressing national security matters — how to handle U.S.-China or U.S.-Russia affairs, matters of nuclear strategy and arms control, questions of counterterrorism strategy and “gray zone” competition, debates about what an American retreat into protectionism or retrenchment would mean for global order and U.S. security — there is a wealth of historical knowledge that could enrich policy debates. Likewise, so many of the adversaries and rivals the United States confronts today — Vladimir Putin’s Russia, Xi Jinping’s China, Kim Jong Un’s North Korea, the Islamic Republic in Iran, the Islamic State, and other jihadist groups — are driven by ideologies and narratives that are comprehensible only if one understands their respective histories.⁵³

Now, as ever, there is nothing truly new under the sun; there is no foreign policy issue on which the U.S. response cannot be improved by a fuller understanding of history. What *is* new and alarming is that the threats to American security are greater, the U.S. margin for error is slimmer, and the penalties for getting policy wrong are therefore higher than at any moment since the end of the Cold War.⁵⁴ In the Trump era, moreover, we are already getting a taste of what it is like to have a president whose historical and geopolitical ignorance is often breathtaking; one shudders to think what might happen if an entire generation of leaders should be deprived of the perspective, insight, and vicarious experience that an understanding of diplomatic history can provide. It is, in sum, a spectacularly bad time for a significant gap to have emerged between diplomatic historians and the national security community — and yet this is precisely what has happened. The consequences for U.S. policy and interests, as well as for the field of diplomatic history, are likely to be regrettable indeed.



In his classic work *The Lessons of History*, the British historian Sir Michael Howard wrote of the recurring strategic calamities that have been caused by a dearth of historical knowledge. A proper understanding of history, he argued, offers “an awareness for which no amount of strategic or economic analysis, no techniques of crisis-management or conflict-resolution ... can provide

a substitute.”⁵⁵ Howard’s wise words are a timeless reminder that policymakers must take history seriously. They should also give pause to those who celebrate the state of diplomatic history today.

On the one hand, diplomatic history is a more diverse, methodologically pluralistic field than it was a half-century ago; it incorporates a broader range of insights and methods than ever before; and for precisely those reasons it has been able to maintain a beachhead in the academic world. On the other hand, the transformation of diplomatic history has left that discipline less intellectually coherent; less engaged with core issues of strategy, diplomacy, and national security in a competitive international environment; and less relevant to the critical foreign policy debates of the present era.

Given the existential pressures that diplomatic history faced at its nadir, it is hard to fault the field’s practitioners from choosing the course that they did. Given all that has been lost along the way, it is hard not to lament those changes as well. Perhaps the steady encroachment of a more threatening world will eventually lead to the resurgence of diplomatic history as it was traditionally defined. Yet until such sad vindication occurs, the present state of diplomatic history will not make the solution to America’s most pressing geopolitical challenges any easier. ●

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53 Bruno Tertrais, “The Revenge of History,” *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 7-18.

54 See Hal Brands and Eric Edelman, “The Upheaval,” *The National Interest* 150 (July/August 2017), 30-40.

55 Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 19.