

REVISE!

FRANCIS J. GAVIN

In his introductory essay for Volume 4, Issue 2, the chair of our editorial board, Frank Gavin, emphasizes the importance of taking a second look at history and challenging our assumptions about the past.

Scholarship is not only about discovery of the new. It is also about challenging the old, or rather, what we *think* we already know. This can be difficult, even controversial, and never more so than when the subject being reexamined and revised is our own history. It is easy to forget that history is not simply a recounting of what has happened, but also the way we decide to remember, recount, and make sense of the past.

We often hold stylized narratives of the past in our heads that we believe to be unassailable. Ask an intelligent observer to outline the story of America's engagement with the world after 1945, and he or she might offer a clear, bifurcated story: There was the Cold War and the post-Cold War era. The Cold War would likely be identified as an uninterrupted geopolitical and ideological conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States that began soon after World War II was over and ended with the revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989. The analyst might suggest that the United States prevailed by relentlessly pursuing the decades-long strategy of containment, articulated by George Kennan in his 1946 "Long Telegram." With the collapse of the Berlin Wall and eventually the Soviet Union itself, the United States rapidly switched, like the film *The Wizard of Oz*, from black and white to color and to something completely different: America's hegemonic, unipolar moment and the rise of liberal internationalism.

Upon closer examination, this seamless portrayal obscures as much as it reveals. Kennan's version of political and economic containment was abandoned as a failure in the early 1950s, replaced by a more muscular military posture that he spent the rest of his career disparaging. Two especially intense periods of confrontation when global war was a distinct possibility — 1949 to 1953 and 1958 to 1962 — were interposed between longer periods of simmering competition and occasional détente and even cooperation. Even as ensuing administrations worked to craft comprehensive and effective national security strategies, as Paul Lettow's article in this issue ably chronicles, America's policies shifted while defense budgets rose and fell and rose again, in a rhythm driven as much by the

vicissitudes of domestic politics as by any coherent long-term plan. As late as 1979, few would have assessed that the United States was ahead in the competition with the Soviet Union, to say nothing of being poised to ultimately prevail, and as late as 1986, fewer still would have predicted the great rivalry would soon be over forever. The United States did not appear to be especially hegemonic in the early years of the post-Cold War era: U.S. economic prospects seemed uncertain and American grand strategy stumbled, appearing ineffectual against such noted great-power political foes as the Somali rebels, Rwandan Hutus, Haiti, and Serbia.

Historical revisionism — the kind that dares us to challenge and interrogate strongly held assumptions about the past — helps push against our natural, if somewhat unhelpful, tendency toward retrospective or outcome bias: Since we know how a story like the Cold War ended, we can't help but construct a neat narrative of inevitability. Revisionism also allows us to complicate our understanding of chronology and periodization. The conventional narrative of postwar international relations and U.S. grand strategy focuses on Europe and the U.S.-Soviet competition. The reality of world politics after 1945 was far messier, and a variety of forces — such as decolonization and the emergence of new nations; regional rivalries and conflict; European integration and eventual union; the rise of political Islam; and globalization and the financial, telecommunications, and rights revolutions — shaped global affairs as much, if not at times more, than the Cold War superpower rivalry.

The problem with a simplistic Cold War/post-Cold War narrative is exposed in Samuel Helfont's fascinating reexamination of the 1991 Gulf War. The conventional wisdom sees the war as a military triumph for the United States that exorcised the demons of the Vietnam War and helped establish the practice of collective security while reinvigorating global institutions for an American-led liberal international order. This picture, however, was clouded by a post-conflict sanctions regime that impoverished the Iraqi people without unseating Saddam Hussein's brutal Baathist regime, harming America's global image while splintering the wartime coalition. The Gulf War was only the start of greater difficulties



in a region that has been the cause of much grief for the United States ever since.

Re-thinking the Gulf War also complicates the issue of periodization, or how we mark and define historical eras. For many, the Gulf War was the first major event of the post-Cold War world. Another way to look at the conflict, however, was as an outgrowth and culmination of political dynamics that had been brewing in the region for years. The two key dates here are 1967 and 1979. Up through the mid-1960s, the Middle East was not a grand strategic priority for the United States, trailing well behind Europe, East Asia, and even Latin America in importance. Britain was the major Western presence in the region. The 1967 Six-Day War changed all of that. The Soviet Union appeared to seek greater influence in the Middle East, providing weapons and egging on client states Egypt and Syria, while financial and monetary burdens forced Britain to drastically reduce its footprint. Stuck in an unwinnable war in Southeast Asia, the United States could do little on its own to counter the Soviet gambit. While Israel easily prevailed in the conflict, America's concern for Soviet regional influence drove it to establish deeper strategic ties with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Within a decade, America's efforts to reverse Soviet influence in the region had been largely successful but at a steep cost: The Middle East had been elevated as a grand strategic priority while the United States had tied itself closer to arguably problematic regimes and even more problematic, complex regional dynamics. This left America exposed during the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran that not only transformed Iran but also the larger politics in the region. In this viewing, the Gulf War was not the clean, resounding start of a new era, but the messy interlude of a complex American commitment whose relation to the Cold War was uncertain.

Lindsey Ford and Zack Cooper similarly force us to re-think periodization and stylized histories in their excellent analysis of what 1969 can teach us today. The Nixon administration, which was reeling from the Vietnam War, facing powerful domestic calls for retrenchment, and hoping to reset American grand strategy in a more sustainable fashion, declared that its allies in East Asia had to do more to provide for their own security. Ford and Cooper reveal the varying paths different countries in the region took in response to this mandate, ranging from moving closer to the United States to accommodating threatening powers in the region.

Nixon's Guam doctrine reflected Cold War and

regional dynamics in East Asia that were much different than those in Europe. Korea was divided, Vietnam a disaster, integrative alliances like NATO and the European Union elusive, and China, after 1972, an ally of convenience. As Adam Tooze reminds us, "The simple fact is that the US did not prevail in the Cold War in Asia." As the Communist Party's ruthless massacre of protestors in Tiananmen Square revealed, Beijing did not share America's view of history and world order. The Communist Party leadership was obsessed, then and now, with avoiding what it saw as the Soviet Union's grave mistakes in the Cold War competition with the United States. Looking at today's rivalry with China, Tooze suggests,

The mistake in thinking that we are in a 'new Cold War' is in thinking of it as new. In putting a full stop after 1989 we prematurely declare a Western victory. From Beijing's point of view, there was no end of history, but a continuity — not unbroken, needless to say, and requiring constant reinterpretation, as any live political tradition does, but a continuity nevertheless.

In other words, not only did the Cold War play out differently in East Asia than in Europe, the history, meaning, and lessons from the conflict are understood much differently in Beijing than they are in Washington D.C. China, no doubt, has the lessons from the history of the Soviet-U.S. Cold War rivalry in mind as it reflects upon the utility of proxy wars as a tool of great-power political competition. Dominic Tierney's analysis of the future of Sino-U.S. proxy war provides an excellent way to assess such conflicts, should they emerge as he expects.

Historical revisionism can be applied not only to events, but to institutions and practices. Since 9/11, as Susan Bryant, Brett Swaney, and Heidi Urben remind us, the military has been held in especially high esteem within American society. But as their fascinating survey reveals, such exceptionalism can come at a cost: The long-held and cherished notion of the non-ideological citizen-soldier gives way to a more politicized and perhaps isolated servicemember. Jim Golby and Hugh Liebert suggest that lessons from ancient history — particularly the classic works of Plato, Aristotle, and Polybius — may provide a better understanding and guide to the important norms of civilian control of the military.

My guess is that, like me, you will come away from this issue with a mix of reactions, from nod-

1 Adam Tooze, "Whose Century?" *London Review of Books* 42, no. 15, July 30, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n15/adam-tooze/whose-century>.

ding acknowledgement to seeing an old problem in a different way to a fierce desire to contact the authors and argue with them. That is the desired outcome for any good journal. Challenging and revising history — and the assumptions and myths behind that history — is rarely comfortable, especially as the past provokes strong feelings for many people. I have long thought that an underappreciated but important measure of a nation's underlying social and civic health is its ability to tolerate, and even encourage, historical revisionism. It is easy to forget how hard — and how rare — it is to create an intellectual, political, and socio-cultural environment that encourages a willingness to challenge any conviction, no matter how widely shared or deeply held. The results are often messy and contentious and unpopular. It is well worth the price, however. Historical revisionism — to ruthlessly examine and wrestle with our most treasured beliefs and assumptions — is a critical path to humility, understanding, and wisdom. ❏

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