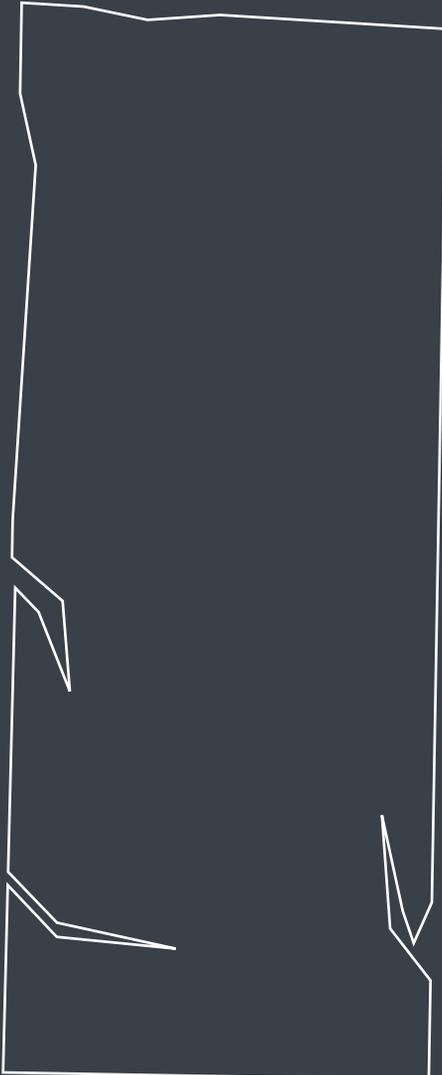


# WHAT IF WE ARE WRONG?

Francis  
J. Gavin



In his introductory essay for Volume 4, Issue 3, the chair of our editorial board asks the important question of "What if we're wrong?" and further explores how we can use history more wisely in the future.

I recently re-read historian Ernest May's slim classic, *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*. Published in 1973, the year the United States left Vietnam in defeat and disgrace, the book possesses a dark, gloomy feel. "Lessons," is in quotes, emphasizing May's belief that, while statesmen naturally mine the past for answers, more often than not they do so poorly. Makers of "foreign policy are often influenced by beliefs about what history teaches or portends" but "ordinarily use history badly."<sup>1</sup> Their primary sin is to fight the last war and draw linear analogies in a simplistic manner, usually based on the more recent events. With the sting of the Vietnam fiasco all too fresh, perhaps it is not surprising that May largely saw America's Cold War policies as erratic, shaped by bureaucratic in-fighting and often faulty logic. Even Franklin Roosevelt, the president who successfully guided the nation through a global depression and world war, was not immune from misunderstanding history. He is charged with an obsession with avoiding the mistakes Woodrow Wilson made after the previous world war, leading Roosevelt to over-emphasize the danger of a German and Japanese resurgence while underestimating the risk of post-war Soviet belligerence.

Reading this compelling issue, I was struck not only by how often we get things wrong, but how our judgments change over time. In their penetrating article, Dan Reiter and Paul Poast argue that the difference between deterrence success and failure in Korea between 1949 and 1950 turned upon a visible, meaningful U.S. military presence. When America reduced its forces to a mere token presence on the peninsula, deterrence weakened and North Korea invaded. For May, the surprise was not so much the failure of deterrence as the decision to fight at all. "It was the policy of the United States in June 1950 to avoid using American military forces in Korea."<sup>2</sup> Relying on overly simplistic compar-

isons to world politics in the 1930s, Harry Truman and his advisers "discarded previous calculations because of a presumed historical maxim"<sup>3</sup> in order to expend "life and large sums of money and some risk of precipitating general war" to defend territory that had, only months earlier, appeared to lie outside of America's declared area of interest.<sup>4</sup> Historical judgment changes with time. In 2021, the mistake the United States made was to have relied on tripwire forces to deter an adversary, whereas in 1973, in the shadow of Vietnam, the mistake was to have even considered fighting at all.

Other articles in this issue highlight how hard it is to get things right: Russia's surprising aggression in the Donbas, according to Brendan Chrzanowski, appears irrational when assessed through our standard materialist or ideological theories and lenses. When the Cold War ended, few would have expected the erosion of civil-military norms warned of by Polina Beliakova. Paul Scharre pushes back against the widespread use of an arms race frame to understand the future of artificial intelligence, which highlights the troubling implications of articles by Herbert Lin and Guy Schleffer/Benjamin Miller about the dangers presented by cyber technology and social media. A decade and a half ago, the consensus was that digital technologies and platforms that connected citizens from around the globe and made all the world's knowledge available to anyone, immediately and for free, would be a revolutionary force benefiting the world. Today, these technologies threaten not only America's military stability, but the very fabric of democracy.

Scholars and analysts appear to fare no better than decision-makers when it comes to getting things right. As the recent TNSR roundtable on Brendan Green's important new book, *The Revolution that Failed*, reveals, the best national and international security analysts and scholars misunderstood the nature and consequences of the strategic nuclear competition between the Soviet

1 Ernest R. May, *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), xi.

2 May, *"Lessons" of the Past*, 67.

3 May, *"Lessons" of the Past*, 86.

4 May, *"Lessons" of the Past*, 69.



Union and the United States during the Cold War.<sup>5</sup> Academics from the security studies community believed that the Strategic Arms Limitation and Antiballistic Missile Treaties captured the natural and inescapable state of mutual vulnerability, enshrining a nuclear revolution that they hoped would end arms races, prevent war, and dampen geopolitical competition. Green joins an emerging group of scholars who demonstrate how misguided this analysis was.<sup>6</sup> American and Soviet decision-makers continued to compete ruthlessly to achieve nuclear advantage, going to great lengths and taking some risk to escape mutual vulnerability. Strategic arms control limited the *number* of weapons, but not their quality. The superpowers engaged in an intense counterforce arms race to make their weapons more accurate, stealthier, mobile, and fast, with important consequences for the course — and the end — of the Cold War.

## Using History More Wisely

Can we be sure that we are any better now at using the past to make sense of contemporary and future challenges? Today's conventional wisdom, for example, proclaims a return to the kinds of great-power rivalry and geopolitical competition that dominated world politics in earlier eras. Perhaps this is right. But should we have much confidence in this assessment, when less than a generation ago, many believed that great-power politics was a thing of the past and that increased interdependence would make China, if not a partner, than at least not an adversary to the United States? The track record of predicting future national security challenges — both inside and outside of government — is not stellar. Few scholars were thinking about terrorism or counter-terrorism in 2000, an issue that would dominate American national security policy in the years following the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Nor was there a lot of debate in the policy or academic world in 1985 about

what the United States should do in a post-Cold War world without the Soviet Union, because few imagined such a world was possible.

Can we do better? I am not sure how we can improve our ability to forecast. As Yogi Berra purportedly said, "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future." Even May came up short in that category — his 1973 statement that "I would predict with highest confidence that there will not in the coming decade be another round of the Cold War" was, to put it mildly, off the mark.<sup>7</sup> When I honestly interrogate my own views over the past 30 years, I can think of plenty of forecasts I got wrong. While we all have plenty of reasons to crow about our successes, there is little professional incentive, either in government, think tanks, or the academy, to demonstrate humility or highlight our errors.

We can, however, use history more wisely. "*Lessons of the Past*" provides an excellent way to rigorously interrogate historical analogies, an exercise May's famous class and book with political scientist Richard Neustadt — *Thinking in Time* — took even further.<sup>8</sup> There are other terrific scholars and programs working to think about how to better apply history to the present and future. I would only add a few suggestions.

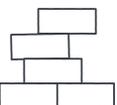
First, it is important to remember that history is more than a simple grab bag of examples and analogies you can ransack to fit your current question. The past is vast enough, if used indiscriminately, to provide whatever evidence you are looking for. The truth is that most people exploit history to validate their long-held theories and assumptions about how the world works. If you worry about the dangers that may emerge by not challenging a rising authoritarian state, a visit to the 1930s will provide ammunition for your argument. If, on the other hand, you want to decry America's overreach and meddling in the world, the Vietnam War is the place to take your time machine. One of the best ways to use history is not only to identify how the present is *similar* to the past, but also how it is *different*. Likening the current and future

5 "Book Review Roundtable: The Revolution that Failed," *Texas National Security Review*, June 14, 2021, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-the-revolution-that-failed/>.

6 Brendan R. Green and Austin Long, "The MAD Who Wasn't There: Soviet Reactions to the Late Cold War Nuclear Balance," *Security Studies* 26, no. 4 (2017): 608, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1331639>; James Cameron, *The Double Game: The Demise of America's First Missile Defense System and the Rise of Strategic Arms Limitation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020); Austin Long and Brendan Rittenhouse Green, "Stalking the Secure Second Strike: Intelligence, Counterforce and Nuclear Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 1–2 (2015): 38–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2014.958150>; John D. Maurer, "The Forgotten Side of Arms Control: Enhancing U.S. Competitive Advantage, Offsetting Enemy Strengths," *War on the Rocks*, June 27, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/the-forgotten-side-of-arms-control-enhancing-u-s-competitive-advantage-offsetting-enemy-strengths/>; John D. Maurer, "The Purposes of Arms Control," *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (November 2018), <https://tnsr.org/2018/11/the-purposes-of-arms-control/>; and Niccolò Petrelli and Giordana Pulcini, "Nuclear Superiority in the Age of Parity: US Planning, Intelligence Analysis, Weapons Innovation and the Search for a Qualitative Edge, 1969–1976," *International History Review* 40, no. 5 (2018): 1191–1209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2017.1420675>.

7 May, "*Lessons of the Past*," 170.

8 Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).



U.S.-Chinese relationship to the rise of Bismarck's Germany or the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union may risk obscuring more than it reveals.

How can we best determine how our present and future are different from the past? In his 1964 book *An Introduction to Contemporary History*, Geoffrey Barraclough reminded his readers that there were still people alive while he was writing who had met Bismarck, yet the worlds of the Iron Chancellor and that of Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson could not be more different or incomparable. The same is true today. There are still people alive who interacted with Konrad Adenauer, who was born during Bismarck's chancellorship. Why does this matter? There will be many elements of international relations that may appear, on the surface, much like the past. We would be wise to follow Barraclough's suggestions that we go beyond obvious political similarities to "clarify the basic structural changes" that mark our current and future world. These tectonic changes are harder to see but are arguably more consequential: "they fix the skeleton or framework within which the political action takes place."<sup>9</sup> Similar to Barraclough's time, we are in the midst of profound demographic, economic, socio-cultural, and technological changes that are upending our very notions of identity, power, purpose, and governance in the world. In terms of American national security policy, how will these powerful if murky forces shape who America is, if and how it fights, and for what purposes? Some of the answers will look similar to the past, while many others profoundly different.

Another way we can deploy history more effectively is to think about perspective. Sometimes perspective is chronological: Any assessment of the Korean War, China's ascension into the World Trade Organization, or the effectiveness of America's response to 9/11 will ultimately depend on *when* you make the evaluation. What will our choices today look like in 2040? There is rarely a correct, *a priori* answer. It all depends on what happens between now and then. My friend Janice Stein always says that when crafting policies, decision-makers should start with what they most want *not* to happen and work backwards from there. While that seems easy enough, the policy choices for the top two catastrophes decision-makers seek to avoid — a global war between China and the United States and a deepening climate cataclysm — may pull in different directions.

Historical perspective is also shaped by place. A few months ago, I gave a lecture for an applied history course in Stockholm, focusing on America's nuclear policies and the contours of the emerging geopolitical challenges of an aggressive, authoritarian China. An extraordinarily impressive student, who worked in international finance, asked me a searching question that I didn't have a great answer for. In the ensuing email exchanges, I saw how my views might have appeared less objective and derived more from the outlook of my own time, place, and view of history. For a smart, globally minded citizen of Sweden, it wasn't obvious that history revealed that the United States possessed a particular claim to wisdom and virtue when navigating world politics or our nuclear weapons future. Nor was the return to Cold War-style, great-power geopolitics wise given that the planet's terrifying climate disruptions are manifest all around us. She also sent me a link to a fascinating TedTalk — "Don't ask where I'm from, ask where I'm a local" — delivered by the writer Taiye Selasi, a founder of Afropolitanism, on the complex questions of identity.<sup>10</sup> It presented viewpoints I had not fully considered and reinforced the obvious but important lesson that our own thinking improves when we expose ourselves to voices and ideas we don't typically encounter.

What if we are wrong? While they rarely say so out loud, the best scholars, analysts, and decision-makers always wonder. Perhaps, however, we are asking the wrong question. History demonstrates time and again that, despite great effort, we will be wrong as often as not. The past demonstrates that world politics is so complex, historical processes so interdependent, that we should always expect the unexpected. Marc Bloch reminds us that "history is neither watchmaking nor cabinet construction" but "an endeavor towards better understanding and, consequently, a thing in movement."<sup>11</sup> The real question — and the true benefit of engaging with the past — is how we will respond when we are wrong. History provides no easy answers, obvious lessons, or clear blueprints on how to act. It does, however, provide something more important — intellectual flexibility and the capacity to be surprised, an ability to recognize when things are changing, the confidence to challenge and interrogate our own beliefs, and an ability to update our own assumptions and reactions and self-correct. Given the fast-moving, complex, and

9 Geoffrey Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1964), 16.

10 Taiye Selasi, "Don't ask where I'm from, ask where I'm a local" *TedGlobal 2014*, [https://www.ted.com/talks/taiye\\_selasi\\_don\\_t\\_ask\\_where\\_i\\_m\\_from\\_ask\\_where\\_i\\_m\\_a\\_local/transcript?language=en#t-24916](https://www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_from_ask_where_i_m_a_local/transcript?language=en#t-24916).

11 Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York, Vintage: 1953), 12.



uncertain nature of our changing world, these are qualities we most certainly could benefit from. 🏰

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