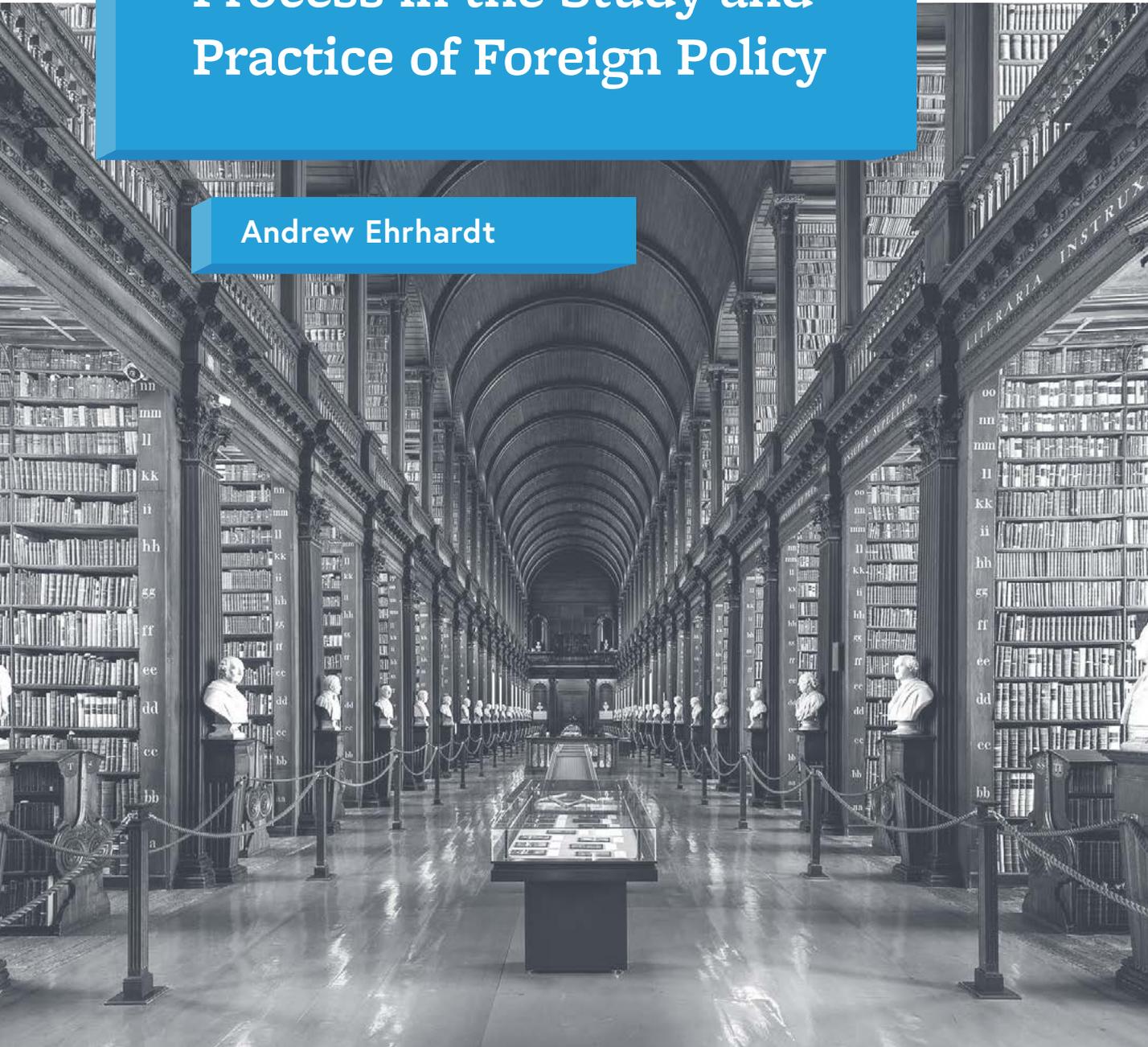




# Everyman His Own Philosopher of History: Notions of Historical Process in the Study and Practice of Foreign Policy

Andrew Ehrhardt



The renewed interest in the utility of historical study — sometimes referred to as "applied history" — is a growing trend in both Europe and the United States. But while an invaluable foundation for understanding political, economic, and social issues, the movement often lacks a deeper examination into the way that individuals regularly gather, arrange, interpret, and incorporate historical facts into their daily existence. Every man and woman, whether consciously or unconsciously, engages in these activities, giving rise to a notion, unique unto themselves, of the way that history unfolds. Such historical constructs — sometimes known as "speculative philosophy of history" — represent a more powerful intellectual force than is often recognized, and it should be interrogated more in the future, especially as it relates to foreign policymaking. For scholars and practitioners of foreign policy, in particular, there is something to be gained by embracing what is here termed "applied historicism." At its root is a wariness of large generalizations in history, including various philosophies of history, and a reliance on approaches to historical study that value the uniqueness of individuals, societies, and phenomena across time and space.

In the days and weeks after Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election, scholars and commentators scrambled to piece together an image of the president-elect's foreign policy. Focus turned to Steve Bannon, the former head of *Breitbart News* and one of Trump's key political strategists. Following the election, a series of articles appeared that sought to describe Bannon's worldview. There were mentions of the Italian philosopher Julius Evola, a man whose writings in the 1930s caught the attention of Mussolini and who has been an intellectual force for some leaders of the Alternative Right. More alarming for many was his admiration for the authors Neil Howe and William Strauss.<sup>1</sup> In their book *The Fourth Turning*, Howe and Strauss advanced a theory that the history of the United

States proceeds in cycles of around 80 years, with four "turning points" lasting 20 years each (or one generation). By the fourth turning point — what they termed a "crisis" period — "institutional life is reconstructed from the ground up," either through external threats or ones devised by political leaders. The American Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II, Howe explained, all ushered in "founding moments" in the history of the country.<sup>2</sup> Continuing along this trajectory, the authors predicted that "[s]ometime before the year 2025, America will pass through a great gate in history ... [T]he nation could erupt into insurrection or civil violence, crack up geographically, or succumb to authoritarian rule."<sup>3</sup>

It is a crackpot theory, one as shocking as it is baseless. Yet, it reflected a broader trend — namely,

1 Jeremy W. Peters, "Bannon's Worldview: Dissecting the Message of 'The Fourth Turning,'" *New York Times*, April 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/08/us/politics/bannon-fourth-turning.html>.

2 Neil Howe, "Where Did Steve Bannon Get His Worldview? From My Book," *Washington Post*, Feb. 24, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/where-did-steve-bannon-get-his-worldview-from-my-book/2017/02/24/16937f38-f84a-11e6-9845-576c69081518\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/where-did-steve-bannon-get-his-worldview-from-my-book/2017/02/24/16937f38-f84a-11e6-9845-576c69081518_story.html).

3 William Strauss and Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning: What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America's Next Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997), 6.



that 2016 represented a moment when many were returning to first-order considerations about the way that events unfold across time. Far more serious and insightful thinkers such as Robert Kagan gave more attention to such conceptions of historical process. In his essay titled *The Jungle Grows Back*, Kagan opened with a discussion of how Americans tend to view the development of history along a linear, progressive plane — a view that he believed was bankrupt. “The story of human progress is a myth ... Nor is history rightly viewed as a progressive upward march toward enlightenment ... When it comes to human behavior, history is a jagged line with no discernible slope.”<sup>4</sup> This particular view of historical processes represented, for Kagan, a foundational assumption from which his recommendations for future American foreign policy flowed.<sup>5</sup>

At the root of Kagan’s conception, as well as that of Howe and Strauss, was an instinctive application of history — the idea that historical study is not only useful for, but essential to, contemporary experience. Howe, Strauss, and Kagan, to varying degrees of competence and subjectivity, sought to glean from historical study an insight into present and future conditions. Though they arrived at vastly different conclusions, their work was representative of an essential, if often overlooked, fact: that the way in which scholars collect, arrange, analyze, and interpret historical facts helps determine some of the key intellectual pillars of one’s international thought.<sup>6</sup>

These notions of historical process — what scholars refer to as the philosophy of history — have important bearing on the practice of foreign policy and strategy-making. In examining this relationship, we can better understand not just the bond between history and strategy, but the way in which certain notions and constructions of the former lay the foundation for the practice of the latter. Crucially, engagement with ideas related to the philosophy of history reveals an important aspect

of political strategy-making — namely, that the practice itself is something deeper than the mechanistic application of theoretical principles. Such an approach tends to ignore the fact that individuals, and more importantly the societies to which they belong, harbor dynamic living forces that should be recognized and accounted for in grand strategic thinking. There is, in other words, a kind of “animating spirit” that can, and should, permeate the development of national strategy.

In examining the idea of historical process and its relationship to the conduct of foreign policy, this essay proceeds as follows. The first section looks at the concept of the philosophy of history and briefly discusses how it developed. In the second section, the article puts forward a new proposition that holds that all individuals, whether consciously or unconsciously, have some notion of how history unfolds. The third section examines some of the attempts to develop a robust philosophy of history in the 20th century and the pushback this received. In the fourth section, the article then describes the concept of historicism and why this approach might be relevant to modern discussions about the study of history. Finally, the essay concludes with a look at how these concepts relate to American foreign policymaking, particularly in regard to the practice of grand strategic thinking.

## The Philosophy of History

The philosophy of history corresponds to a broad range of investigations undertaken by philosophers and historians alike. It can apply to efforts to examine the nature of facts, methods, and categories used by historians — an approach that some scholars refer to as analytical philosophy of history.<sup>7</sup> There is also another type of philosophy of history that explores the idea that history has meaning, purpose, or direction. This is often re-

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4 Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2018), 5.

5 It is worth noting that Kagan, in his 2004 essay *Of Paradise and Power*, described Fukuyama’s central thesis as “irrefutable.” Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 81.

6 Martin Wight used the phrase “international thought,” which he saw as “the least pretentious phrase describing speculation about international relations.” He adds, “International thought is what we find in the discussions of the man-in-the-street or in the popular press. International theory is what we find in the better press and hope to find in diplomatic circles and foreign offices. The political philosophy of international relations is the fully conscious, formulated theory, illustrations of which you may find in the conduct of some statesmen.” Martin Wight, “An Anatomy of International Thought,” in Martin Wight, *Four Seminal Thinkers in International Theory: Machiavelli, Grotius, Kant & Mazzini*, ed. Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 143. Ian Hall, in his examination of Wight’s international thought, defined the phrase as “the account of the nature of international relations and of the various modes in which they have been interpreted by scholars and by practitioners.” Ian Hall, *The International Thought of Martin Wight* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2.

7 Arthur Danto distinguishes between substantive and analytical philosophy of history, with the former aiming “to give an account of the whole of history.” Analytical philosophy of history, on the other hand, is “philosophy applied to the special conceptual problems which arise out of the practice of history as well as out of substantive philosophy of history.” Danto writes, “I feel ... that substantive philosophy of history is a misconceived activity, and rests upon a basic mistake. It is a mistake ... to suppose that we can write the history of events before the events themselves have happened.” Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 1, 14.

ferred to as speculative philosophy of history, and it is what this essay is primarily concerned with.<sup>8</sup>

The term itself was first used by François-Marie d’Arouet, known better by his pen name Voltaire, in the mid-18th century. He used it in response to a major work of history published decades before that attempted to show the hand of divine providence throughout history, an argument that Voltaire believed was misguided. His target was Jacques Bénigne Bossuet’s *A Universal History: From the Beginning of the World, to the Empire of Charlemagne*, originally published in 1681.<sup>9</sup> Moving from antiquity to the reign of Charlemagne, Bossuet traced both the rise and decline of empires as well as the continuous progression of the Christian faith, historical movements that, he wrote to the son of Louis XIV, would “imprint upon your memory.”

As religion and political government, are the two hinges, whereon all human things turn, to see whatever concerns those particulars summed up in an epitome, and by this means to discover the whole order and progression of them, is to comprise in thought all that is great among men, and to hold, so to say, the thread of all the affairs of the world.<sup>10</sup>

As the title suggests, Bossuet’s argument corresponded to what is known as a universal history — an effort whereby a historian, through a study of long periods of time, aims to uncover the key phenomena driving human societies (and more broadly, history itself).<sup>11</sup> Voltaire, in his 1759 *Essay on Universal History, the Manners, and Spirit of Nations*, took exception to what he saw as Bossuet’s “theology of history” and sought to replace it with a “philosophy of history,” which, by tracing the influence of reason upon human societies, would effectively substitute divine providence with a kind

of secular providence.<sup>12</sup>

Far from an anomaly, Voltaire embodied a new approach to history being undertaken by French historians during the mid-18th century. Deeply interested in the social, economic, and political events of their time, these so-called Enlightenment historians looked to history to inform the present. As Hugh Trevor-Roper noted, these men “looked back and saw a new meaning in the past. They saw history as a process, and a process, moreover, of improvement, of ‘progress.’”<sup>13</sup> One of the thinkers who embodied this approach was Marquis de Condorcet, who was not only active during the French Revolutionary period, but at one point served as the president of the Legislative Assembly. In an essay entitled *The Future Progress of the Human Mind*, he wrote,

If man can, with almost complete assurance, predict phenomena when he knows their laws, and if, even when he does not, he can still, with great expectation of success, forcast [sic] the future on the basis of his experience of the past, why, then, should it be regarded as a fantastic undertaking to sketch, with some pretence to truth, the future destiny of man on the basis of his history?<sup>14</sup>

These approaches to history — specifically the idea that, through the collection, arrangement, and interpretation of fact, one could come to uncover truths or laws governing human behavior — came to embody the modern understanding of the philosophy of history. Despite the concept gaining traction as a distinct activity or approach to historical study in the 18th century, thinkers had long engaged with the idea of wider historical processes, ones to which individuals were, at times and to varying degrees, subject. Historians from Hajo Holborn to Iskander Rehman have highlighted such

8 Patrick Gardiner, ed., *Theories of History* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 8.

9 Patrick J. Barry, “Bossuet’s ‘Discourse on Universal History,’” *Catholic Historical Review* 20, no. 3 (October 1934): 260–80, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25013297>.

10 Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, *An Universal History: From the Beginning of the World, to the Empire of Charlemagne*, trans. Elphinston (New York: Robert Moore, 1821), 13.

11 Brett Bowden has explored the relationship between universal history and political thought in the Western world. He writes, “The idea of universal history denies people agency, it denies them a choice of path through history, and it denies them a say in the destination.” Brett Bowden, “The ‘Idea of Universal History: What the Owl Heard, the Angel Saw, and the Idiot Said,’” *New Global Studies* 11, no. 3 (2017): 201, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ngs-2017-0021>. See also Brett Bowden, *The Strange Persistence of Universal History in Political Thought* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

12 Donald Bloxham, *Why History? A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 163–64; and Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The Historical Philosophy of the Enlightenment,” in Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 3–4. R.G. Collingwood wrote that Voltaire “meant by it no more than critical or scientific history, a type of historical thinking in which the historian made up his mind for himself instead of repeating whatever stories he found in old books.” He then says that Hegel took it to mean “universal or world history,” while later positivists saw the philosophy of history as “the discovery of general laws governing the course of the events which it was history’s business to recount.” R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, [1946] 2014), 1.

13 Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The Romantic Movement and the Study of History,” The John Coffin Memorial Lecture delivered before the University of London, Feb. 17, 1969 (University of London: The Athlone Press, 1969), 23.

14 Marquis de Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* [1796], quoted in Gardiner, ed., *Theories of History*, 57.



thinking in Greek thought.<sup>15</sup> Rehman has described an element of Polybius' thought that held that "nations were ensnared within a quasi-biological cycle of growth and degeneration from which there can be no escape."<sup>16</sup> Centuries after these Greek historians, the Islamic philosopher Ibn Khaldun laid out a complex cyclical view of history to explain the history of Spain and North Africa, one that went against concurrent theories of history propagated by Muslim mystics.<sup>17</sup>

## Many of the intellectual giants of the late 18th and 19th centuries, from Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel to Henri de Saint-Simon and Karl Marx, had distinct, often robust philosophies of history that served as pillars of their political thought.

Though abstract and speculative, these conceptions of historical processes bore great influence on the shape of Western political thought. Scholars of Machiavelli have pointed out that the Florentine's motive for writing *The Prince* was inspired, among other factors, by the thinking of certain Greek historians, including Polybius who argued that there are constitutional cycles to which all republics were subject.<sup>18</sup> In writing *The Prince*, therefore, Machiavelli hoped to elaborate on more timeless political principles that could help the Medicis to avoid a similarly determinist fate.<sup>19</sup> Felix Gilbert noted that the French invasion of the Italian states in 1494 had a profound effect on the way that Renaissance thinkers viewed historical process, as

well as the political insights that could be drawn from history:

History ... once more appeared as the manifestation of an incomprehensible and uncontrollable power. Underlying the political rationalism of Machiavelli and the *cinquecento* was a passionate concern to discover the hidden laws of history's involutions. The principle of political realism was born on men's striving to learn the laws of politics by penetrating to their very essence. By the application of those laws, once they had been discovered, Machiavelli's prince would have it within his power to be the master of politics.<sup>20</sup>

Many of the intellectual giants of the late 18th and 19th centuries, from Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel to Henri de Saint-Simon and Karl Marx, had distinct, often robust philosophies of history that served as pillars of their political thought. In his *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, Kant wrote that "one can regard the history of the human species in the large as the completion of a hidden plan of nature."<sup>21</sup> Here, the force of universal reason was viewed as a key phenomenon that, as it continued to exercise its control over modern man, would lead to a future cosmopolitan world order.<sup>22</sup> Kant's basic idea of progress — which might be considered teleological because it had the sense of moving toward some higher purpose — had an important influence on subsequent thinkers, namely Hegel, who offered one of the more comprehensive, if complex, philosophies of history in the 19th century. History, Hegel posited, was a rational process that could be understood by the unfolding of *Geist* ("world-spirit") as it proceeded

15 Hajo Holborn, "Greek and Modern Concepts of History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 10, no. 1 (January 1949): 6, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2707196>.

16 Iskander Rehman, "Polybius, Applied History, and Grand Strategy in an Interstitial Age," *War on the Rocks*, March 29, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/polybius-applied-history-and-grand-strategy-in-an-interstitial-age/>.

17 Stephen Frederic Dale, "Ibn Khaldun: The Last Greek and the First Annaliste Historian," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 3 (August 2006): 431–32, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3879761>; and Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophic Foundation of the Science of Culture* (London: Routledge, [1957] 2016), 255–57.

18 Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Reason D'Etat and Its Place in Modern History*, trans. Douglas Scott (New Haven: Yale University Press, [1924] 1962), 32, 166; J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, [1975] 2003), 189; and Wight, *Four Seminal Thinkers in International Theory*, 6.

19 In examining Machiavelli's historical approach, Herbert Butterfield wrote that he "uses the doctrine of historical recurrence with remarkable effect. It enables him to go to history for the discovery of general rules and political precepts, and he can regard these as possessing universal validity, since they have reference to conjunctures that are always likely to recur." Butterfield, *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1940), 31.

20 Felix Gilbert, "The Humanist Concept of the Prince and the Prince of Machiavelli," *Journal of Modern History* 11, no. 4 (December 1939): 470, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1871604>.

21 Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim," in *Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim: A Critical Guide*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and James Schmidt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 19.

22 Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea, 1815 to the Present* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 16–17.

through dialectical stages. As he described, “The history of the world is nothing other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom.”<sup>23</sup>

Hegel’s outlook, specifically his idea of a historical process that advances through dialectical stages, had a profound effect on the writings of Karl Marx in the 1840s and 1850s. Though his revolutionary program is well known to scholars and individuals around the world, the degree to which this program rested on an underlying theory of historical process has been given less attention. “What the bourgeoisie ... produces, above all, are its own gravediggers,” Marx wrote. “Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”<sup>24</sup> The philosopher Karl Löwith was alert to this particular intellectual current in Marx’s thinking, writing that “the outstanding characteristic” of Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* and *Capital* “is not the dogmatic emphasis on class struggle and on the relation between labor and capital but the absorption of all these categories into a comprehensive historical pattern.”<sup>25</sup>

In the 20th century, the major works of Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee became two of the more famous works that put forward notions of historical processes. In 1918, Spengler argued in the first volume of his *Decline of the West* that Western civilization was in a precipitous, inevitable decline. His determinist view of history posited that civilizations, similar to organisms, were beholden to certain life cycles that, while distinct to themselves, followed a broad pattern. “Let the words youth, growth, maturity, decay ... be taken at last as the objective descriptions of organic states.”<sup>26</sup> Spengler was opposed to what he called the Ptolemaic system of history, which held that history moved through linear stages. His historical framework led to his warning that the West was suffering from inevitable political and cultural decay that would eventually end in its disintegration. Although Spengler wrote *The Decline of the West* before the war, the horrors of that conflict coupled

with the book’s publication in the final year of the war, led to Spengler’s volume becoming one of the most popular works of the post-war period.<sup>27</sup>

Sixteen years later, the first volumes of Toynbee’s monumental *A Study of History* appeared. Like Spengler, he studied civilizations, and in doing so, believed they followed parallel trajectories. But Toynbee also saw Spengler’s thesis as one that was “unilluminatingly dogmatic and deterministic.”<sup>28</sup> In turn, he set out to examine the development, growth, breakdown, and disintegration of 21 distinct civilizations, among them the Egyptian, Mayan, Hellenic, and Persian civilizations, as well as the four remaining Western, Islamic, Hindu, and Far Eastern civilizations. He differed from Spengler in important ways, notably in his rejection of Spengler’s thesis that civilizations follow a type of biological cycle of birth, growth, and death and his reliance on race as a distinguishing feature of civilizations. For Toynbee, civilizations broke down as a result of conscious choices as opposed to a natural life cycle. Much of the survivability of a particular civilization, in Toynbee’s view, depended on how the society reacted to certain decisive challenges throughout its development. By the period of breakdown, however, the society was no longer able to adapt to changes and overcome challenges. Failed attempts to right the course, usually under a banner of “rescuing” society, ultimately led to its disintegration. Toynbee’s system was not necessarily determinist — he thought a civilization could escape demise under certain conditions — but, in tracing human history through the development of different civilizations and comparing them, he advanced a grand narrative of the historical process.

Though few historians attempted such an ambitious feat in the decades after Toynbee, the urge to find in history a defining feature or motive of historical process reappeared toward the end of the 20th century, most notably in Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History” thesis. Though a more learned and rich idea than is often given credit, Fukuyama’s

23 Quoted in A.C. Grayling, *The History of Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 2020), 289, 293–94. For another brief overview of Hegel’s philosophy of history, see Gardiner, *Theories of History*, 59–60. Karl Löwith has argued that Hegel’s idea of “the cunning of reason” was “a rational expression for divine providence ... [Hegel] is the last philosopher of history because he is the last philosopher whose immense historical sense was still restrained and disciplined by the Christian tradition.” Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), 55–57. Collingwood has written that not only was Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* not as original as many claimed, but that it was also “an illogical excrescence on the corpus of Hegel’s works. The legitimate fruit of his revolution in historical method ... is the eight volumes entitled *Aesthetics*, *Philosophy of Religion*, and *History of Philosophy*.” Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 113–14, 121–22. For Collingwood’s writing on Hegel’s philosophy of history, see 113–22.

24 Karl Marx, *Communist Manifesto*, quoted in Gardiner, *Theories of History*, 138.

25 Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 33.

26 Quoted in Gardiner, *Theories of History*, 197. Spengler wrote, “In this book is attempted for the first time the venture of pre-determining history, of following the still untravelled stages in the destiny of a Culture, and specifically of the only Culture of our time and on our planet which is actually in the phase of fulfilment — the West-European-American.” Quoted in Gardiner, *Theories of History*, 190.

27 Bloxham, *Why History?* 240.

28 Toynbee, *Civilisation on Trial*, chap. 1, quoted in Gardiner, *Theories of History*, 207.



central aim was to construct a universal history that followed two main tracks. First was the role of technology and its impact on wealth and human desires, a process that he believed “guarantees an increasing homogenization of all human societies, regardless of their historical origins or cultural inheritances.”<sup>29</sup> Following from this, Fukuyama built on certain ideas of Hegel and Alexandre Kojève — namely the search for “recognition” — and saw liberal democracy as the answer, regardless of whether societies had realized it. “History is being driven in a coherent direction by rational desire and rational recognition,” he wrote, and “liberal democracy in reality constitutes the best possible solution to the human problem.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Everyman His Own Philosopher of History**

The philosophy of history — and universal history as one of its forms — has long been considered an elite art, the domain of historians or political scientists who take long views based on an immense range of research or of the philosopher who is comfortable with metaphysical speculation. The eminent American historian Carl Becker once noted that even those who did not set out to write their own universal histories have engaged, to some degree, consciously or unconsciously, with the philosophy of history.<sup>31</sup> As his mentor Frederick Jackson Turner had told him, “The question is not whether you have a philosophy of history or not, but whether the one you have is good for anything.”<sup>32</sup>

But can the same be said for those who are not professional historians? As a starting point, we might look to Becker, who, in 1931, delivered his famous lecture entitled “Everyman His Own Historian.” Though the thrust of his argument concerned the presence of relativism in historical study, perhaps the most memorable point to come from the

lecture was, as the title indicates, the idea that all individuals, largely through their own memory and experience, carry with them what might be considered a knowledge of history:

In a very real sense it is impossible to divorce history from life: Mr. Everyman can not do what he needs or desires to do without recalling past events; he can not recall past events without in some subtle fashion relating them to what he needs or desires to do. This is the natural function of history, of history reduced to its lowest terms, of history conceived as the memory of things said and done: memory of things said and done (whether in our immediate yesterdays or in the long past of mankind), running hand in hand with the anticipation of things to be said and done, enables us, each to the extent of his knowledge and imagination, to be intelligent, to push back the narrow confines of the fleeting present moment so that what we are doing may be judged in the light of what we have done and what we hope to do.<sup>33</sup>

But if Everyman can be considered to think historically and to carry with him or her a historical consciousness, it is worth asking whether every individual holds some notion related to the philosophy of history. It is certainly a conception noticeable in some political leaders. Lloyd Ambrosius has written about Woodrow Wilson’s more linear progressive view, which was bounded and shaped by his religious faith.<sup>34</sup> The extent to which this influenced his foreign and domestic policy decisions is a larger question, but his own philosophy of history provided an important intellectual handrail. President Barack Obama acknowledged such considerations in his recent memoir in which he outlined his own thinking about the way in which history unfolds:

29 Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), xiv.

30 Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 338. He also writes, “Rather than a thousand shoots blossoming into as many different flowering plants, mankind will come to seem like a long wagon train strung out along a road. Some wagons will be pulling into town sharply and crisply, while others will be bivouacked back in desert, or else stuck in ruts in the final pass over the mountain . . . . But the great majority of wagons will be making the slow journey into town, and most will eventually arrive there.” Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 338–39.

31 Milton M. Klein, “Everyman His Own Historian: Carl Becker as Historiographer,” *The History Teacher* 19, no. 1 (November 1985): 106–07, <https://doi.org/10.2307/493617>. On the question of philosophy of history itself, Becker wrote elsewhere that he was opposed to certain forms, particularly those associated with notions of progressive directionality. “The word Progress, like the Cross or the Crescent, is a symbol that stands for a social doctrine, a philosophy of human destiny.” Carl Becker, *Progress & Power* [1949], 1–2, quoted in Richard Nelson, “Carl Becker Revisited: Irony and Progress in History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48, no. 2 (April 1987): 314, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2709560>.

32 Carl Becker, “Review of *A Historian’s Creed* by Henry Osborn Taylor, *Historian and Scientist: An Essay on the Nature of History and the Social Sciences* by Gaetano Salvemini, *On the Writing of History* by Charles Oman,” *American Historical Review* 45, no. 3 (April 1940): 593, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/45.3.591>. This was quoted in Klein, “Everyman His Own Historian,” 104.

33 Carl Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” *American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (January 1932): 227, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/37.2.221>.

34 Lloyd Ambrosius, “Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for Orderly Progress,” in *Traditions and Values: American Diplomacy, 1865–1945*, ed. Norman A. Graebner (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 73–100. Reprinted in Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 31–47.

The truth is, I've never been a big believer in destiny. I worry that it encourages resignation in the down-and-out and complacency among the powerful. I suspect that God's plan, whatever it is, works on a scale too large to admit our mortal tribulations; that in a single lifetime, accidents and happenstance determine more than we care to admit; and that the best we can do is to try to align ourselves with what we feel is right and construct some meaning out of our confusion, and with grace and nerve play at each moment the hand that we're dealt.<sup>35</sup>

But what about citizens outside the political and intellectual classes? Ideas of decline or regression have certainly become more popular in the last six years, giving life to rhetorical tropes like "Make America Great Again." At other times, these notions are guided by theological constructs, as seen in Drake's Grammy Award-winning song "God's Plan."<sup>36</sup> More cyclical ideas also present themselves, perhaps unconsciously. The artist Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest describes introducing his father to hip-hop in the early 1990s. "My pops used to say, it reminded him of Bebop / I said, 'Well Daddy, don't you know that things go in cycles? / Way that Bobby Brown is just amping like Michael [Jackson] / It's all expected.'<sup>37</sup> There are also the classic kitchen table clichés that one might hear from older relatives or acquaintances: "Things aren't like they used to be"; "Look how far we've come"; or "History always repeats itself." These kinds of assessments, while outside of what one might call professional history, reveal a profound aspect of an individual's historical consciousness.

Arriving at such judgments relies on at least four different processes within historical thinking. We might take the second of these remarks — "Look how far we've come" — and consider a grandmother living in the 1990s uttering it. First, she registers a historical fact about the past and the present. She might recall waiting in a bread line in the early 1930s, but note that in the last decade of the 20th century she can order from the McDonald's dollar menu without leaving her car. Second, she makes a basic value judgment about these disparate experiences. In this case, she might say that the drive-thru is preferred to the bread line. Third, there is a causal historical explanation built up around these experiences. She might have come to believe that her need to wait in a bread line was caused by the

failure of greedy bankers, whereas today, the stability of financial markets enables her to eat her french fries on the way home. The fourth step, and the one that helps this grandmother to arrive at a kind of explanation of the historical process, is the comparison between these different time periods. What accounts for the difference between the bread line and the drive-thru? "We will never be in bread lines again," she might say, "because now we *know* enough not to make those same mistakes again."

Whether such an assessment is true is, in this case, irrelevant. What is important is the historical manner of thinking. These four steps — registering a historical fact, making a value judgment, holding a causal explanation, and comparing historical experiences — are themselves a form of thinking that embodies an element in the philosophy of history. This mental activity reflects a principal reality: namely, that all individuals are historically conscious, and that a part of this consciousness is defined by the way in which one attempts to construct historical processes from disparate historical events. Indeed, we might build on Becker's famous phrase and say, "Everyman His Own Philosopher of History." According to this view, every person holds some conception, whether spoken or unspoken, about the way that history unfolds. These explanations may resemble more mythical notions of history rather than anything one might expect from professional historians, but, nonetheless, they exercise important influences on one's worldview.

One's perception of historical processes — as can be seen in Obama's quote above — has profound implications. Among other things, these notions help to shape one's moral framework and perception of human agency. They also give rise among groups of people to wider beliefs about the development of their societies and, perhaps more importantly, the future direction of those societies. Every student of American history is cognizant of the influence that a belief in "manifest destiny" played in the growth of the country, but these notions, often constitutive of broader national myths, exercise a profound influence on collective behavior. As the historian J.G.A. Pocock has written:

There is a point at which historical and political theory meet, and it can be said without distortion that every society possesses a philosophy of history — a set of ideas about what happens, what can be known and what

35 Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (United Kingdom: Viking, 2020), 65.

36 Drake, "God's Plan," Youtube video, Feb. 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpVfcZ0ZcFM>.

37 A Tribe Called Quest, "Excursions," Track 1 on *The Low End Theory*, Jazz Merchant Music & Zomba Enterprises, Sept. 24, 1991.

done, in time considered as a dimension of society — which is intimately a part of its consciousness and its functioning.<sup>38</sup>

In the last two years, the experience of a global pandemic has led some to reflect on the nature of the historical moment and its consequences going forward. And here some more subtle, though no less serious, notions of historical processes have presented themselves. During the spring and summer of 2020, at the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars, journalists, and business leaders described it as being a moment when history was “accelerating.” Richard Haass of the Council on Foreign Relations estimated that the outbreak would “accelerate history rather than reshape it,” while others, including the management consultancy firms McKinsey and Deloitte, echoed similar themes.<sup>39</sup> The editors of the magazine *NOEMA* published their first edition in spring 2020 under the heading “the great acceleration.” In introducing the volume, they declared with confidence,

Though so much remains unclear in these rapidly evolving days, what is clear is that the COVID-19 pandemic will be seen in retrospect as the “great accelerator” that suddenly moved us from the continuity of the past into a new era. Only such an event that uproots all preconceived notions, an epistemological break, has that widespread transformative power to alter the human condition.<sup>40</sup>

While these excitable arguments can be written off as rhetorical flair, it would be more accurate to say that these writings are representative of the way in which individuals harbor certain fundamental assumptions about how history unfolds. To posit that a pandemic will “speed up”

certain existing trends presupposes that such trends were already heading in a certain direction and would eventually arrive at a general destination. In other words, acceleration assumes that the method and rate of change were already fixed along some trajectory — a notion that reveals a certain degree of determinism.

Such thinking about history’s acceleration, whether moving in a positive or negative direction, is not new. Intellectuals in Victorian England wrote of similar perceptions about their temporal reality.<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere in the 19th century, Marx and, before him, Saint-Simon, described an inevitable class revolution. And though each man differed as to which sector of society would carry out a revolution, they both believed certain enlightened and charismatic leaders could bring about its occurrence more quickly. Importantly, in their view there existed a conception of “peaks” and “troughs” in the historical process, ones that leaders should seize upon. It was a notion that, as Isaiah Berlin pointed out, influenced certain decisions of Joseph Stalin in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>42</sup>

Stepping back, it becomes clear that such notions of historical processes are pervasive in Western societies. Taken together, they can create larger historical narratives that shape modern experience. As Trevor-Roper once noted, “Every age has its historical philosophy, and such a philosophy is seldom, if ever, the work of historians only.”<sup>43</sup> But one might argue that these modern ideas — from an acceleration of history, to historical inevitability, to there being an arc of history — tend to fall down in the face of events. Indeed, to assume that such processes are at play is to engage in a kind of speculative philosophy of history, one that, as the efforts of past historians have shown, tends to fracture under rigorous examination. “Anything can be said about world history, things that might enter the head of only the most disordered imagination,” Dostoyevsky’s

38 J.G.A. Pocock, “Time, Institutions and Action: An Essay on Traditions and Their Understanding,” in *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1968] 2009), 187.

39 Richard Haass, “The Pandemic Will Accelerate History Rather than Reshape It: Not Every Crisis Is a Turning Point,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-07/pandemic-will-accelerate-history-rather-reshape-it>; Chris Bradley et al., “The Great Acceleration,” McKinsey & Company, July 14, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/the-great-acceleration>; and Daniel Sunde-Hansen and Bastiaan Walenkamp, “2020: A Year of Acceleration and Collaboration: 5 Insights from COVID-19 to Drive Organizational and Global Change,” Deloitte, accessed Feb. 25, 2022, <https://www2.deloitte.com/no/no/pages/human-capital/articles/scaling-our-learning-from-covid-19.html>.

40 Nathan Gardels, Kathleen Miles, and Nicolas Berggruen, “Introducing Noema, Issue I: The Great Acceleration,” *NOEMA*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.noemamag.com/introducing-noema-issue-i-the-great-acceleration/>.

41 Ryan Anthony Viera, “Connecting the New Political History with Recent Theories of Temporal Acceleration: Speed, Politics, and the Cultural Imagination of *Fin de Siècle* Britain,” *History and Theory* 50, no. 3 (October 2011): 373–89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2303.2011.00591.x>.

42 Isaiah Berlin, “The Artificial Dialectic: Gernerallissimo Stalin and the Art of Government [1952],” in *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture Under Communism*, ed. Henry Hardy (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 100–01.

43 Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The Romantic Movement and the Study of History,” in *History and the Enlightenment*, 176.



narrator in *Notes from the Underground* acknowledges.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Friedrich Nietzsche, reflecting on the state of historical consciousness among men of his own time, wrote, “Historical knowledge streams on him from sources that are inexhaustible, strange incoherences come together, memory opens all its gates and yet is never open wide enough.” He goes on:

The modern man carries inside him an enormous heap of indigestible knowledge-stones that occasionally rattle together in his body, as the fairy tale has it. And the rattle reveals the most striking characteristic of these modern men—the opposition of something inside them to which nothing external corresponds, and the reverse.<sup>45</sup>

### **Applied Historians and Notions of Historical Process**

Over the last six years, there has been a renewed appreciation for the practical relevance of historical study. Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson’s call for a “Council of Historians” in September 2016, followed by their “Applied History” manifesto the following month, sparked the trend. The *Washington Post*’s “Made by History” blog and the new *Journal of Applied History* reflect the ways that this mindset has seeped into popular and academic writing. The result has been an intellectual environment in which historical insight is no longer viewed as supplementary to discourse and debate, but integral to them. In the days after a mob stormed the American Capitol in January 2021, the historian Timothy Snyder was featured in the *New York Times*, where he made the case for taking a historical view of the event. “Greater knowledge of the past,” he wrote,

44 Dostoyevsky continues, “The only thing that cannot be said is that it’s rational. You’d choke on the first word . . . . It is just his fantastic dreams, his abject foolishness that he wants to cling on to, solely in order that he can convince himself (as if it were absolutely necessary) that people are still people and not piano-keys, on which the laws of nature themselves are playing to the point when they would no longer be able to want anything beyond the directory . . . . This whole human business seems really only to consist of the fact that man has been continually proving to himself that he’s a man and not an organ-stop.” Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground* and *The Gambler*, trans. Jane Kentish (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 30–31. The author originally found this passage in Jonathan Haslam, *The Vices of Integrity: E.H. Carr, 1892-1982* (London: Verso, 2000), 45.

45 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrian Collins (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Company, [1873] 1957), 23.



“allows us to notice and conceptualize elements of the present that we might otherwise disregard and to think more broadly about future possibilities ... This is not because the present repeats the past, but because the past enlightens the present.”<sup>46</sup>

**In England, too, prominent historians in the 19th and early 20th centuries were pushing for historical study to adopt more scientific methods that might produce generalizations that would have practical utility.**

But although few can disagree with the utility of historical study, a modern debate about its methods, nature, and purpose is lacking. Such discussions are essential to the comprehension and practice of international politics, given that some of the major narratives of our time — from warnings about a “Thucydides trap” to notions of Western decline — are defined by particular methodological and analytical approaches. Chief among these approaches is constructing generalizations from disparate historical facts. From the more developed theories of a Bossuet or Toynbee to the mental constructs of Obama or the Everyman, how one collects, arranges, and interprets facts from the past says much about one’s view of historical processes, and, in turn, about one’s perception of the present and future.

On the subject of making generalizations in historical study, John Lewis Gaddis has distinguished between the “general particularization”

made by social scientists and the “particular generalization” made by some historians. Taking the work of R.G. Collingwood as a basis, he writes, “Historians are prepared to acknowledge tendencies, or patterns: these are certainly not laws applying in all instances, but they’re certainly not useless either.”<sup>47</sup> Elsewhere, the historian and practitioner Philip Zelikow has also addressed the prevalence and importance of identifying historical patterns, writing that “inside every judgment there are generalizations.” But there is a difference between what he considers “hard” and “soft” generalizations, the former presenting a statement rooted in fact and the latter based more on presumption. Historians, he writes, tend to weaken hard generalizations whereas social scientists aim to strengthen soft generalizations.

“These two professional tendencies combine in unfortunate ways. The historians are weakening, not shoring up, the factual foundation. The social scientists are eagerly building ever higher towers atop this soft soil.”<sup>48</sup>

The question of whether one can — and should — look to develop patterns or even laws in history has sparked memorable debates among historians. One of the more famous was the so-called *Lamprecht Streit*, which occurred between German historians in the 1890s. Karl Lamprecht, in a series of articles attacking the methods of his predecessors, argued that the purpose of historical study was to discern certain laws of causality.<sup>49</sup> Some of his contemporaries, including historians such as Otto Hintze, objected to this approach. Hintze noted that “[h]istory knows no driving forces other than those carried out by man, not only man as an individual but, above all, man in historical connections.”<sup>50</sup>

46 Timothy Snyder, “The American Abyss,” *New York Times*, Jan. 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/magazine/trump-coup.html>. See also “Timothy Snyder: Lessons from History,” *BBC Hardtalk*, Feb. 22, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cscz37>.

47 John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 63. Gaddis quotes from a passage from Collingwood, which reads: “To regard such a positive mental science as rising above the sphere of history, and establishing the permanent and unchanging laws of human nature, is therefore possible only to a person who mistakes the transient conditions of a certain historical age for the permanent conditions of human life.” Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 224. John Lewis Gaddis, in his book *Strategies of Containment*, also references J.H. Hexter’s distinction between historians who are “lumpers” and those who are “splitters” — the former searching for generalizations and the latter looking to emphasize more individual detail. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), vii.

48 Philip Zelikow, “The Nature of History’s Lessons,” in *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft*, ed. Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 291–92.

49 The key polemic from Lamprecht was titled, “Old and New Trends in German Historical Scholarship,” (1896). See Felix Gilbert, “Otto Hintze, 1861–1940,” in *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze*, ed. Felix Gilbert (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 7–8. Georg G. Iggers has also commented on this debate, writing, “In retrospect, the differences between the two positions seem much less pronounced than they did at the time when they were obscured behind the vehement language and the peculiar phraseology of both sides.” Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, [1968] 1983), 197.

50 Otto Hintze, “The Individualist and the Collective Approach to History [1897],” in *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze*, ed. Gilbert, 362.

In England, too, prominent historians in the 19th and early 20th centuries were pushing for historical study to adopt more scientific methods that might produce generalizations that would have practical utility. Thomas Buckle was the most notable, but other influential historians, such as the famed Cambridge historian John Robert Seeley, encouraged similar approaches.<sup>51</sup> Seeley, who had once called modern history the “school of statesmanship,” lectured to his students that,

[w]e live in a universe which proceeds according to regular laws; the same causes produce the same effects; therefore if we would guide ourselves aright we must register what we observe, then we must compare our observations and generalise upon them; so we shall obtain general laws, and thus the knowledge of the past will lead us to a knowledge of the future.<sup>52</sup>

It was an approach adopted to varying degrees by succeeding generations of historians, including Charles Webster and Alfred Zimmern.<sup>53</sup>

But this brand of studying international politics was not without its critics. Some, such as H.A.L. Fisher, argued strongly against such notions, writing,

I can see only one emergency following upon another as wave follows upon wave, only one great fact with respect to which, since it is unique, there can be no generalizations, only one safe rule for the historian: that he should recognize in the development of human destinies the play of the contingent and the unforeseen.<sup>54</sup>

Fisher was writing in a period during which European writers like Spengler, Toynbee, and H.G. Wells were constructing robust theoretical arguments based on sweeping surveys of history. The patterns, and even the laws, of civilizations that they devised were borne of historical study and thus, in theory, provided some measure of empirical insight into how future events should be expected to unfold.

Toynbee, in particular, was the target of sustained criticism by some of his more famous peers.<sup>55</sup> The most prominent was the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl who wrote several essays arguing against Toynbee’s theory of history and its relevance to contemporary politics. While Geyl agreed with the idea of history being useful for the present day, noting that such study was “absolutely indispensable for the life of mankind,” he took exception with the way in which Toynbee sought to draw general theories from his comparison of civilizations.<sup>56</sup> For Geyl, each of these distinct civilizations were unique phenomena in history and therefore could not be easily compared to one another. “Generally speaking, parallels in history, however indispensable and frequently instructive, are never wholly satisfactory, because each phenomenon is embedded in its own circumstances, never to be repeated, from which it cannot be completely detached.”<sup>57</sup>

In January 1948, Toynbee and Geyl went head to head in a debate broadcast on the BBC, an event that Toynbee referred to as a kind of “historians’ cricket match” in which each man took turns bowling arguments at the other. Their debate concerned a perennial question of historical study: whether — and to what extent — one can draw

51 Influenced by the work of Auguste Comte in the first half of the 19th century, Buckle sought to apply scientific methods to the study of society. “I hope to accomplish for the history of man something equivalent, or at all events analogous, to what has been effected by other inquirers for the different branches of natural science.” Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilisation in England*, quoted in Gardiner, *Theories of History*, 109.

52 John Robert Seeley, “Lecture 1 [1885-86],” in *Introduction to Political Science: Two Series of Lectures* (London: Macmillan, [1896] 1908), 6.

53 In his first inaugural lecture as professor of international history in 1914, the 28 year-old Webster said, “It is possible to make large generalizations of the utmost possible value to the human race . . . . Progress is made, not by ignoring, but by reconciling, conflicting evidence, and our hypotheses must be able to stand the same tests as those of the natural sciences.” Charles Kingsley Webster, *The Study of Nineteenth Century Diplomacy: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered Before the University of Liverpool on Friday, 10 December 1914* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1915), 37–38. Alfred Zimmern, *The Study of International Relations: An Inaugural Lecture, Delivered Before the University of Oxford on 20 February 1931* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931). For School of Statesmanship, see Robert Crowcroft, “Still the One and Only School of Statesmanship,” *War on the Rocks*, Jan. 7, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/still-the-one-and-only-school-of-statesmanship/>; and Andrew Ehrhardt, “Historians and Policymaking: A New Chorus Singing an Old Ballad,” *War on the Rocks*, Feb. 15, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/historians-policymaking-new-chorus-singing-old-ballad/>.

54 H.A.L. Fisher, *A History of Europe* (London: Edward Arnold, 1936), v.

55 For a number of reviews and critiques of Toynbee’s work, see M.F. Ashley Montagu, ed., *Toynbee and History: Critical Essays and Reviews* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1956).

56 Pieter Geyl and Arnold Toynbee, *Can We Know the Pattern of the Past? Discussion Between P. Geyl and Arnold Toynbee Concerning Toynbee’s Book ‘A Study of History’* (Amsterdam: Drukkerijen Ellerman Harms, 1948), 47–48.

57 Geyl, *Debates with Historians*, 150. As to the application of Toynbee’s system to the present day, Geyl wrote elsewhere that, though it appeared to be a neat and tidy scheme for approaching questions of international politics, “When we try to apply it to the multiform world of reality we fare like little Alice at the croquet game in Wonderland. The mallet turns out to be a flamingo, which twists its long neck the moment we want to strike; the ball is a hedgehog, which unrolls itself and runs off; while for hoops there are doubled-up soldiers, who rise to their full height and get together for a chat just when you are aiming in their direction.” Geyl, *Debates with Historians*, 141.



generalizations from individual facts. Toynbee, for his part, took exception with those historians who uncovered material yet avoided drawing conclusions, however slight. He argued, “Historians who genuinely believe they have no general ideas about history are ... simply ignorant of the workings of their own minds.” All historians, he said, carried with them some general ideas about history. But those who neglected to recognize or even admit this were dangerous to both the profession and the public discourse. “The intellectual worker who refuses to let himself become aware of the working ideas with which he is operating seems to me to be about as great a criminal as the motorist who first closes his eyes and then steps on the gas.”<sup>58</sup>

Geyl agreed to a certain extent, noting that the historian who merely collected facts and ruled out all theory was an “uninteresting being” and even “naïve.” But he was hesitant to go as far as Toynbee in drawing broad generalizations, particularly in reference to a subject so large and so complex as more than 20 civilizations across 6,000 years. For him, a danger as real as the tendency to ignore general themes was the desire to develop laws and theories that attempt to discern the future.

One of the great things to realise about history is its infinite complexity, and, when I say infinite, I do mean that not only the number of the phenomena and incidents but their often shadowy and changing nature is such that the attempt to reduce them to a fixed relationship and to a scheme of absolute validity can never lead to anything but disappointment. It is when you present your system in so hard and fast a manner as to seem, at any rate to me, to dictate to the future, that I feel bound to protest, on behalf both of history and of the civilization whose crisis we are both witnessing.<sup>59</sup>

Geyl’s critique of Toynbee’s view of history would not be his last. In several essays and lectures, he discussed the pitfalls of such a conception of history, arguing that it was in line with a “presumptuous and egocentric” tendency among certain historians to craft historical facts into a pattern of their own creation. Such thinkers as Hegel, St. Augustine, and Spengler were guilty of adopting such approaches.

“I seem to see these system builders exulting, joyfully or gloomily, at the spectacle of the world and its bewildering past, of all great happenings, of nations, kings, and centuries, obediently falling into a pattern at the behest of *their* imagination and ingenuity and to the greater glory of *their* principle,” Geyl concluded.<sup>60</sup>

These discussions about laws, generalizations, and patterns in history may be seen by some as classic historiographical debates, the reserve of graduate students soon to embark on their own historical investigations. That they may be. But these questions and viewpoints are also timeless and should be re-examined across generations. Today, applied historians do well to champion the need to link historical study and policy, but they fail to interrogate the essential ingredients — namely, the nature of their own historical knowledge. Given that these individuals join a glut of scholars, including political scientists and political theorists, wishing to influence policy, it is imperative that those interested in applied history begin to examine more precisely their methods and application. What follows is a description of a particular approach to historical study that contains valuable insights for those analyzing and directing American grand strategy in the present day.

### Applied Historicism<sup>61</sup>

Geyl’s critique of Toynbee revealed an approach to historical study — and on a different level, a view about history’s purpose and utility — that had developed in response to earlier efforts to advance a universal history during the 18th century. A number of Enlightenment historians, among them Voltaire and Condorcet, had looked at historical facts and induced a larger explanation about the movement and purpose of nations, of civilizations, and, more broadly, of history itself. But such approaches were vigorously opposed by certain historians, especially those in Germany in the late 18th century and the first half of the 19th century. It was a resistance that gave rise to what became known as historicism, a concept that is applicable to modern scholarship and policy.

Friedrich Meinecke, in his classic work *Historicism*, traced the development of the historicist mindset through its early tributaries in Germany

58 Geyl and Toynbee, *Can We Know the Pattern of the Past?* 44–45.

59 Geyl and Toynbee, *Can We Know the Pattern of the Past?* 47.

60 Geyl’s emphasis. Pieter Geyl, *The Use and Abuse of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 36.

61 I owe Professor John Bew credit for coining this term and for introducing me to the concept of historicism, as well as a number of the thinkers discussed in this essay.

and across Europe. It had constituted “one of the deepest and most incisive revolutions in the history of Western thought in general” and “represented not only a new vision for the historian, but also for the whole of human life.”<sup>62</sup> The concept of historicism is multifaceted, but a few general points are worth bearing in mind.<sup>63</sup> First, it grew up in opposition to Enlightenment philosophies, particularly those that attempted to trace the path and triumph of human reason in history.<sup>64</sup> Historicists saw in these ambitious undertakings a tendency to ignore historical facts that did not fit into the overarching philosophy of history. There was, they believed, a distinct lack of interest in (or attention to) individual or unique characteristics of societies throughout human history. More generally, early historicists sought to treat historical knowledge as on par with that of philosophy and mathematics. What emerged was an idea that all human action that occurred in the past could be explained by historical study — a position that placed it in opposition to metaphysical principles or positivist approaches, the latter holding that the methods used to study natural science could be applied to human societies.<sup>65</sup> In explaining some of the basic tenets of historicism, Hans Meyerhoff wrote,

The special quality of history does not consist in the statement of general laws or principles, but in the grasp, so far as possible, of the infinite variety of particular historical forms immersed in the passage of time. The meaning of history does not lie hidden in some universal structure, wheth-

er deterministic or teleological, but in the multiplicity of individual manifestations at different ages and in different cultures. All of them are unique and equally significant strands in the tapestry of history.<sup>66</sup>

For Meinecke, the key idea of the historicist approach was an emphasis on uniqueness and individual development. Large generalizations of historical processes, including those that the Enlightenment historians had sought to construct, led scholars and publics astray. The focus of the historian should instead be on the “individualizing observation,” which placed emphasis on the unique and individual characteristics of historical events.<sup>67</sup> Closely related to the individualizing observation was the respect for the organic development of societies. Here, Meinecke drew upon the work of Edmund Burke who, while not a historicist himself, nonetheless cast light on an untrodden path. For Burke, Meinecke wrote, the “innermost enemy who must be slain in order to understand human life and history on a deeper level was the spirit of Natural Law, further exaggerated by the Enlightenment.”<sup>68</sup>

In tracing the various sources of historicism, from diverse thinkers such as Voltaire, Burke, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Johann Gottfried Herder, Meinecke arrived at Leopold von Ranke, the historian whose thought marked the “climax” of historicism. Ranke is best known for his insistence on using methods of scientific investigation in the study of history; understanding historical events and thinkers in context; and acknowledging history’s autonomy from other

62 Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. J.E. Anderson (New York: Herder and Herder, [1959] 1972), 491–92.

63 This essay does not make a distinction between “historism” and “historicism,” although some authors have done so in the past. Calvin G. Rand, “Two Meanings of Historicism in the Writings of Dilthey, Troeltsch, and Meinecke,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1964): 503–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708183>.

64 Concerning the origins of historicism, Meinecke wrote, “The whole process depended on breaking down the rigid ways of thought attached to the concepts of Natural Law and its belief in the invariability of the highest human ideals and an unchanging human nature that was held to be constant for all ages . . . . The cognizing subject of Descartes and the subsequent French Enlightenment working under his influence, was not yet the individual subject in all its manifold historical forms, but a generalised subject, the abstract man of Natural Law. And the universal laws discovered in him therefore only served at first to confirm the upholders of Natural Law in their dogmatic certainty that it held the key to the understanding of human affairs.” Meinecke, *Historism*, 3.

65 Frederick Beiser, “Historicism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy*, ed. Michael Rosen and Brian Leiter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

66 Hans Meyerhoff, ed., *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 10.

67 Meinecke, *Historism*, lv.

68 He continues, “It was the measurement of all things according to a supposedly eternal reason, which was yet confined within the limits of the contemporary horizon, and exalted the intellect whilst neglecting the deeper places of the human soul.” Meinecke wrote elsewhere that there were “features in Burke’s historical thought, which look, from the point of view of historism, like dross deposited by relics of Natural Law within a mighty process of melting.” Meinecke, *Historism*, 223, 231. Bew has highlighted Burke’s influence on Meinecke, the latter being, in Bew’s view, a prominent “theorist of Realpolitik.” Bew writes of Meinecke that “[i]n Burke he saw the best defense of an organic conception of state development. . . . Burke stuck the most effective blow against prevalent notions of natural law. He taught his readers a deeper respect and understanding for the irrational components of political life, for the power of tradition, customs, instinct, and impulsive feelings.” John Bew, *Realpolitik: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 78.



disciplines, including law, literature, and philosophy.<sup>69</sup> In explaining the difference between history and philosophy, Ranke revealed his views of the Enlightenment philosophers who had come before him. Practicing philosophy, he believed, meant constructing images of the future from “a priori ideas.”<sup>70</sup> “There are really only two ways of acquiring knowledge about human affairs,” he wrote, “through the perception of the particular, or through abstraction; the latter is the method of philosophy, the former of history.”<sup>71</sup>

The focus on the individual and the unique phenomena of societies had the greatest influence on Ranke’s view of international politics. Drawing from earlier ideas of Herder and jurists such as Frederick Charles von Savigny, Ranke was against the idea that societies operated according to fixed principles or laws.<sup>72</sup> Instead, he saw in nations infinite complexity and uniqueness and thought that historians as well as statesmen needed to recognize that fact. In his celebrated essay titled *The Great Powers*, Ranke described the nations of Europe in the years after the Napoleonic Wars. Having defeated Napoleon’s universal and cosmopolitan forces, these national populations — a “living thing, an individual, a unique self,” as Ranke described them — were rejuvenated and allowed to develop according to their own national consciousness.<sup>73</sup> In observing their development, Ranke made a great historical insight, one with the most profound consequences for statesmen:

World history does not present such a chaotic tumult, warring, and planless succession of states and peoples as appear at first sight. Nor is the often dubious advancement of civilization its only significance. There are forces and indeed spiritual, life-giving,

creative forces, nay life itself, and there are moral energies, whose development we see. They cannot be defined or put in abstract terms, but one can behold them and observe them. One can develop a sympathy for their existence. They unfold, capture the world, appear in manifold expressions, dispute with and check and overpower one another. In their interaction and succession, in their life, in their decline or rejuvenation, which then encompasses an ever greater fullness, higher importance, and wider extent, lies the secret of world history.<sup>74</sup>

In his writing, Ranke revealed an important reality about the interaction between individual and universal ethical notions. Nations, though unique in every way, were also similar in the fact that they held ideas and values that they considered to be universal. The interaction between these competing universal conceptions would continue to give rise to new and unique ethical notions within the nation-state itself. It was a reality that he believed reflected a certain order among European nations, one that could be maintained by a balance of power. In this way, nations might be free to develop on their own, though constantly shaped by their social, economic, and political interactions with one another. Elsewhere, he wrote that the interaction between these states — each with their own organic notions of the universal — was what drove world history:

This allows one to see the central idea in the history of the human race; namely, that in the conflicts which occur between the opposing interests of states and nations, more and more potent forces are constantly arising, which cause the universal element to be

69 Ranke famously argued in an 1854 lecture that “[e]ach age is immediate to God and its value depends not on what comes out of it but in its own existence, in its very self.” In other words, he opposes treating certain periods as more important than others, and he is against historians judging certain periods of individuals by standards of the present. Ranke is also well known for his advocacy of treating history “wie es eigentlich gewesen” (“as it essentially was”). John Toews, “Historicism from Ranke to Nietzsche,” in *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, ed. Warren Breckman and Peter Gordon (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 315, 307. For difficulties related to the translation of the latter phrase, see Felix Gilbert, *History: Politics or Culture? Reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 34–35.

70 Quoted in Gilbert, *History: Politics or Culture?* 24.

71 Quoted in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 58–59. It is important to note the work of the jurist and historian Frederick Charles von Savigny here, who, as Georg Iggers notes, had drawn “a line between a philosophical and an Historical School.” Ranke, following Savigny, was more in line with this Historical School. Savigny had written in the introduction to the first volume of the *Journal of Historical Jurisprudence* that “[h]istory is by no means a mere collection of examples but is the only way to true knowledge of our own condition.” Quoted in Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, 66.

72 Robert Rodes, who has examined the influence of Savigny as the founder of the Historical School of Jurisprudence, writes, “The basic tenet of the [Historical] school [of Jurisprudence] is that law in its essence is not something imposed on a community from above or from without, but is an inherent part of its ongoing life, an emanation of the spirit of the people.” Robert E. Rodes, Jr., “On the Historical School of Jurisprudence,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 49, no. 1 (2004): 165, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ajj/49.1.165>.

73 Leopold von Ranke, “A Dialogue on Politics [1836],” in *Theory and Practice of History: Leopold von Ranke*, ed. Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1973), 112.

74 Ranke, “The Great Powers [1833],” in *Theory and Practice of History*, ed. Iggers and Moltke, 100.

altered and adapted, and are repeatedly giving it a new character.<sup>75</sup>

Despite their influence on historical thought in the 19th century, both Ranke and the concept of historicism more broadly have been the target of criticism. Some saw in Ranke an idealization of the state, and with it, the intellectual foundations of National Socialism in the 20th century.<sup>76</sup> The concept of historicism, on the other hand, has suffered from conceptual and definitional confusion. Among its staunchest critics was the anti-Marxist liberal philosopher Karl Popper, who considered historicism “an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principal aim, and which further assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns,’ the ‘laws’ or the ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history.”<sup>77</sup> In this way, historicism, according to Popper and other scholars, came to embody the very approach to historical study that it originally sought to resist.<sup>78</sup>

Another prominent critic of historicism, though for reasons different than Popper’s, was the historian Geoffrey Barraclough, who, in 1955, warned of a “turning point” in which “we are beset by a sense of uncertainty because we feel ourselves on the threshold of a new age, to which previous experience offers no sure guide.” He lamented that the West lived in an “age of historicism,” one that he believed was ill suited to the profound changes taking place around him. The “cult” of historicist thinking, he claimed, with its emphasis on the unique and the individual in history, “has done almost as much to obscure and bewilder as it has to enrich and enlighten our perceptions.” What was

needed, he argued, was a new universal history that would pull from disparate events and time periods a “meaning” of history that could guide individuals in the present day.<sup>79</sup>

A natural problem with the historicist approach and outlook, it should be said, is the danger of relativism — a situation whereby the focus on respecting the unique and the individual within societies leads to a lack of consensus on certain fundamental ethical and moral principles between them. Leo Strauss famously denounced the historicist approach in his classic *Natural Right and History*, arguing that this view had been brought to the United States after World War II.<sup>80</sup> Geyl, who considered historicism “as the true way of looking at the past,” was quick to warn that, if taken too far, it would descend into “boundless relativism.”<sup>81</sup> On the level of power politics, a state could use a historicist approach to justify its actions and attempt to legitimize its behavior, claiming that its actions were done in order to survive or realize its individual destiny. In explaining this dilemma, Meinecke wrote,

It is precisely this pluralism of individual values, which we discover on every hand, that may throw us into confusion and perplexity, particularly now in our state of clouded vision. Everything has individuality and is a law to itself, everything has its law of life, everything is relative and in a state of flux: then give me something, man cried out, on which I can stand firm. How can we emerge from this anarchy of values?<sup>82</sup>

Those using a historicist methodology had long been sensitive to the pitfalls that could arise if

75 Leopold von Ranke, *History of the World*, quoted in Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, 384.

76 Pieter Geyl quotes an anonymous article — one that he considered “unfair” in its critique of Ranke — that appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1950, which read, “Ranke spoke of historians as priests; he regarded kings as the most sacred of priests. The State could never sin, and if it did, this was not his affair. This was the spirit of the learned classes in Germany which brought Hitler to power and which still dominates academic circles.” Quoted in Geyl, *Debates with Historians*, 21–22.

77 Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 3. Popper dedicated the book to those “who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny.” He first published these views in two articles that appeared in 1944. Karl Popper, “The Poverty of Historicism, I,” *Economica* 11, no. 42 (May 1944): 86–103, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2549642>; and Popper “The Poverty of Historicism, II. A Criticism of Historicist Methods,” *Economica* 11, no. 43 (August 1944): 119–37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2550285>.

78 Wight, among others, noted, “Historicism’ is a word that has changed its meaning since Meinecke wrote the history of *Historismus*. Then it had its original sense, of the doctrine that all values are historically conditioned, that reality itself is a historical process, and that history can teach nothing except philosophical acceptance of change. Now it has a new sense: the doctrine that history has a purpose and direction, that its movement is largely predictable, and that it can (under proper interpretation) teach everything we need to know about life and prescribe our duties. In this new sense it is a label for Hegel and Marx, Spengler and Toynbee.” Wight, “An Anatomy of International Thought,” 148–49.

79 Geoffrey Barraclough, “The Historian in a Changing World,” in *History in a Changing World* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1955), 1–30.

80 Thomas L. Haskell, “The Curious Persistence of Rights Talk in the Age of Interpretation,” in *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 118. Leo Strauss had denounced historicism, writing that it “culminated in nihilism.” Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1953] 1965), 18.

81 Geyl, *The Use and Abuse of History*, 51. Geyl said elsewhere that he found historicism “abhorrent,” but here his conception of the term is different from what he considered historicism. Historicism he defined as “an interpretation of history which acknowledges no standards outside the object.” Pieter Geyl, *Debates with Historians* (Fontana, [1955] 1967), 29.

82 Friedrich Meinecke, “Ernest Troeltsch and the Problem of Historicism [1923],” quoted in Carl Hinrich, “Introduction,” in Meinecke, *Historism*, xlvii–xlviii.



that methodology were adopted as a worldview.<sup>83</sup> Did the fact that a particular phenomenon was “unique” or “individual” imply that it embodied a positive value?<sup>84</sup> The theologian and historian Ernst Troeltsch, as well as Meinecke himself, attempted to overcome “the bottomless pit of relativism” by advancing the idea that common ethical principles, instead of originating outside of history, could only be grasped through historical experience.<sup>85</sup> More specifically, history — as an unbroken stream in which individuals and societies developed according to their own version of the ideal — contained within it eternal (or universal) ethical and moral precepts.<sup>86</sup> This was an argument that lacked broad acceptance. Troeltsch himself died before he could address it in full, and Meinecke, shaken by the horrors of Nazism in the 1940s, later questioned whether the contradictions in a historicist philosophy could be fully overcome.<sup>87</sup>

Despite the dangers of an extreme historicist approach, there remained a number of influential historians and thinkers who saw value in its basic methodological precepts. In the early 1980s, Alasdair MacIntyre, in a similar effort to that of Meinecke and Troeltsch, sought to escape the nihilistic depths of radical relativism. To the questions of how one might determine sound ethical or moral principles from what Meinecke had referred to as the “anarchy of values,” he posited, somewhat unconvincingly, that it was in the very exchange between these traditions that an answer could be

found. “If two moral traditions are able to recognize each other as advancing rival contentions on issues of importance, then necessarily they must share some common features.”<sup>88</sup> Perhaps more useful to the approach of applied historicism presented here is the work of Thomas Haskell. Wandering the path that MacIntyre’s initial investigations had carved, Haskell described what he termed a “moderate variety of historicism” that placed great importance on historical conventions as indications and guides for individual and collective moral choices.<sup>89</sup> “I am committed to the view,” Haskell stated in an essay from 1987, “that moral choices cannot be understood without reference to historical conventions.”<sup>90</sup>

Historicism as it relates to ethical principles, and even political philosophy, can serve as a useful concept for students and practitioners of statecraft. But the suggestion here is perhaps humbler than the search for an all-embracing view. Specifically, it advances a view that certain aspects of the traditional historicist outlook — namely, the focus on the individual and the particular, as well as the organic development of states (and ethical systems within them) — are pertinent for historians and policymakers today. To adopt certain historicist methods is to be wary of grand historical narratives or all-embracing philosophies of history, whether those of Marx and Toynbee or Spengler and Fukuyama. An “applied historicist” mindset sees historical study as essential for life, but it also

83 Beiser, “Historicism.”

84 Felix Gilbert, “Friedrich Meinecke,” in *History: Choice and Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 84.

85 Quoted in Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, 174–75. Iggers is critical of both Troeltsch and Meinecke, writing, “Troeltsch’s entire intellectual career was a pathetic attempt to find norms through the study of history by which the ‘endless restlessness of the historical lifestream’ might be damned in, and his own belief in meaning in human history be justified. To a lesser extent, the same holds for Meinecke, who never traveled as far on the road to pessimism as Troeltsch did.” Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, 175.

86 Meinecke wrote of the “great mysterious fact underlying all history, that one and the same phenomenon can be altogether individual and inimitable, and yet part and parcel of a universal context.” Meinecke, *Historism*, 509. On Meinecke’s attempt to address problems inherent in historicism, see Gilbert, “Friedrich Meinecke,” 82–83; and Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, 216–17. On Troeltsch’s attempts, see Hintze, “Troeltsch and the Problems of Historicism: Critical Studies,” 372–73, 413–14; and Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, 190–95.

87 Hintze wrote, “had this work been completed as Troeltsch had planned it, it would doubtless have had a powerful and enduring influence.” Otto Hintze, “Troeltsch and the Problems of Historicism: Critical Studies [1927],” in *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze*, ed. Felix Gilbert, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 371. On Meinecke’s writings after World War II, see Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, 226–28; and Henry Pachter, “Masters of Cultural History II: Friedrich Meinecke and the Tragedy of German Liberalism,” *Salmagundi*, no. 43 (Winter 1979): 17–19, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40547197>.

88 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, [1981] 2007), 276.

89 Haskell viewed the spectrum as extending from Leo Strauss to Nietzsche, the former seeking to grasp immutable truths based on nature and reason and the latter representing a radical historicism in which ethical and moral systems were irrelevant because of power considerations. He writes, “Having declared rights and other kinds of moral obligations to be conventions, we do not thereby expose ourselves to an inexorable logic that will ultimately pull us down into Nietzsche’s world. We are not on a frictionless slope, but on level ground, free to decide where we stand. Once we have ventured out into this sparsely settled land, far from the seductive, but unreal, comforts of Reason, and uncomfortably close to the maelstrom of History, the next question is whether the ground is stable enough to build on.” Thomas Haskell, “The Curious Persistence of Rights Talk in the Age of Interpretation,” in *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality*, 136.

90 Haskell, “The Curious Persistence of Rights Talk in the Age of Interpretation,” 139. More recently, James Kloppenberg has struck a similar chord, advocating for what he terms “pragmatic hermeneutics.” James T. Kloppenberg, “Thinking Historically: A Manifesto of Pragmatic Hermeneutics,” *Modern Intellectual History* 9, no. 1 (April 2012): 201–16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244311000564>. In reviewing Robert Novick’s classic *That Noble Dream*, Kloppenberg objected to what he saw as a false duality — between objectivity and relativism — presented by Novick. Kloppenberg instead called for “pragmatic hermeneutics,” which he said offered a middle road that had been exemplified, at times, by American historians such as Carl Becker and James Harvey Robinson in the early 20th century. James Kloppenberg, “Objectivity and Historicism: A Century of American Historical Writing,” *American Historical Review* 94, no. 4 (October 1989): 1011–30, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/94.4.1011>.

respects the role of contingency and circumstance in history, phenomena that chip away at the more simplistic notions of linear progress or cyclical repetition. Additionally, this approach values the individual and the unique in history. Persons and societies are not inanimate objects easily categorized and placed into formulae, but rather, they are infinitely complex beings and phenomena that should be recognized and studied as such.

It is an approach to history described by Isaiah Berlin who, in introducing the 1972 edition of the English translation of Meinecke's *Historism*, returned to points that he had articulated nearly 20 years earlier.<sup>91</sup> The problem with large generalizations or laws about history is their deterministic quality, which, Berlin believed, limited individual agency and initiative.<sup>92</sup> In a later lecture, he put it more sharply:

To claim to be able to construct generalisations where at best we can only indulge the art of exquisite portrait-painting, to claim the possibility of some infallible scientific key where each unique entity demands a lifetime of minute, devoted observation, sympathy, insight, is one of the most grotesque claims ever made by human beings.<sup>93</sup>

### **Historical Processes, Historicism, and American Foreign Policymaking**

Admittedly, drawing the connection between the philosophy of history, historicism, and the practice of foreign policy might seem to be too intellectual or academic an exercise. What can these grand historical narratives of progress, decline, or recurring cycles really mean for the policymaker inundated with immediate demands? What can a historicist mindset — ranging from a methodological approach to a full-blown *Weltanschauung* — offer American officials grappling with crafting policy to-

ward Beijing and Moscow in the coming years?

To answer these questions, it is worth beginning with an overlooked and undervalued aspect of foreign policymaking, yet one that is fundamental to grand strategic thinking. It was captured in a letter from Walter Lippmann to John Maynard Keynes in 1942, in which the former lamented Britain's inability to develop a vision of the post-war world. "There is no general conception," he wrote, "which provides any political philosophy into which all of the mighty changes now going on in the world might fit."<sup>94</sup> Lippmann's point here can be seen as a call for propaganda or rhetoric that might galvanize domestic and foreign populations in the service of some foreign policy aim. But on a deeper level, Lippmann was appealing to what might be described as the "animating spirit" of foreign policy — the domestic currents born of ideas, experiences, and visions that give rise to some national purpose.

It is engagement with this animating impulse — one that is domestically rooted, historically conditioned, and focused on the future — that is a fundamental part of grand strategic thinking. On one level, it calls for comprehension of historical and intellectual forces that shape the international system, while on another next level, it grapples with the aspirations of unique and individual societies working toward their versions of world order.<sup>95</sup> It is a reality that has been highlighted by the British historian turned senior adviser to Downing Street John Bew, who has written in these pages that,

[t]he pursuit of world order speaks to a higher objective than the pursuit of the national interest or the mere preservation of stability and security in one's neighborhood. All versions of world order are, to some extent, aspirational and visionary. They express a wish to guide the international future towards a more desirable destination ... . When ideas of world order are simply cast out as vapid utopianism, or "globalist" delusion, British

91 Berlin wrote of Meinecke that "[he] was an unswervingly honest man, and although the prejudices of his time and class shine through, his unerring — sometimes painful — consciousness of where the true moral centre of gravity of a given social or moral situation lies seldom fails him. This, together with his prodigious learning and his feeling for the complex web of ideas, movements, institutions, events and personalities of the principal actors, makes his account of the rise of German historical thought a still unsurpassed classic." Isaiah Berlin, "Meinecke and Historicism," Foreword to Meinecke, *Historism*, reprinted in Isaiah Berlin *The Power of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 258.

92 Isaiah Berlin, *Historical Inevitability* (London: Oxford University Press, [1953] 1957), 16.

93 Berlin's lecture entitled "The Sense of Reality" was originally delivered as "Realism in History," the Elizabeth Cutter Morrow Lecture at Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts on Oct. 9, 1953. It has been reproduced as "The Sense of Reality," in Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 20–21

94 Walter Lippmann to John Maynard Keynes, April 2, 1942, UK National Archives, FO 371/30655/A4574.

95 John Bew, Maeve Ryan, and Andrew Ehrhardt, "Rethinking the Origins and Evolution of British Grand Strategy: Lessons from the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy*, ed. Thierry Balzacq and Ron Krebs (forthcoming from Oxford University Press, 2021).



and American foreign policy loses form, spirit, purpose, vision, and a sense of direction.<sup>96</sup>

In this way, the practice of grand strategy itself is far from an inanimate process, something more than a colorless alignment of ends, ways, and means or the mechanical calibration of capabilities and objectives. That strategic thinking comprises more than material considerations, more than the shifting of pieces on a board, has been highlighted by the historian John Stone who, in his illumination of the strategic relevance of the writings of George Orwell and Berlin, helped to uncover an ignored aspect of high policy. On Berlin, Stone writes that the philosopher championed “a capacity to see beyond what was most obvious and generic about the times in which he lived, to glimpse something of its more fundamental and unique (if sometimes inefable) qualities, and to appreciate what these latter qualities meant for one’s own freedom of action at a political and strategic level.”<sup>97</sup>

And here is where notions of historical process — what we might refer to as the philosophy of history — are relevant. In many ways, these conceptions exert a silent influence on foreign policymaking that involves fundamental assumptions about the way that history unfolds over time and guides first-order considerations about statecraft. Chief among these considerations are the degree to which events can be shaped by individuals and whether the unfolding of history reveals any universal or timeless values. From robust theories of history to methodological approaches, like historicism, that seek to break these theories down, an inescapable reality is that how one approaches historical facts conditions one’s conception about the nature of international politics and the conduct of foreign policy.

It is a view that recently received some overdue attention in the pages of *Foreign Affairs*. Gideon Rose, in his farewell edition as editor, posited the following:

Theories of history, fundamental beliefs about how the world works, are usually assumed rather than argued and rarely get subjected to serious scrutiny. Yet these general ideas set the parameters for all the specific policy choices an administration makes. Know an administration’s theory of history, and much of the rest is easy to fill in.<sup>98</sup>

The point deserves some attention in the present day. Indeed, how one arranges and analyses historical facts — in particular the way that these facts help to explain causality — shapes one’s understanding of the origins and nature of international order, a nation’s perception of agency within that order, and the degree to which governments consider certain values to be universal.<sup>99</sup>

Western strategic traditions, as some scholars have pointed out, are imbued with notions of linear progressivism. Brett Bowden, in an illuminating study of the influence of universal history on political thought, has argued that the notion of the “ever-advancing development of human capacities has been fundamental to both the self-understanding of the modern West and its view of its relations to the rest of the world.”<sup>100</sup> In the British context, Casper Sylvest has highlighted the fact that James Bryce, a diplomat and writer whose views exercised important influence on the League of Nations, viewed history as moving “upwards.”<sup>101</sup>

Looking to American foreign policy, the idea of progress, destiny, or even divine guidance can be more explicit. The concepts of national exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny have been the subject

96 John Bew, “World Order: Many-Headed Monster or Noble Pursuit?” *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 1 (October 2017): 15–16, <https://doi.org/10.15781/T21834K2H>.

97 Stone quotes Orwell, who wrote: “A poet or philosopher who does not even know how to load a .303 rifle, but who does at least know something about the nature of Fascism is a better guide to grand strategy than an elderly soldier who has given his life to the study of war but who, politically and philosophically, has learnt nothing since 1918.” John Stone, “George Orwell on Politics and War,” *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 2 (April 2017): 238, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021051600036X>. See also John Stone, “So Many Butterflies: Isaiah Berlin and the Challenge of Strategy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 5 (2021): 640–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1612376>.

98 But Rose takes what was a stimulating point and immediately reduces it to a common oversimplification, writing, “There are a lot of possible theories of history, but they tend to fall ... into two main camps: optimistic and pessimistic.” Gideon Rose, “Foreign Policy for Pragmatists: How Biden Can Learn from History in Real Time,” *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 2 (March/April 2021): 48, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/untied-states/2021-02-16/foreign-policy-pragmatists>.

99 The relationship between the philosophy of history and international politics has recently received some overdue attention from scholars as well. Joseph Mackay and Christopher David Laroche have written that the connection is “both necessary and desirable for the development of IR [international relations] theory.” See Joseph Mackay and Christopher David Laroche, “The Conduct of History in International Relations: Rethinking Philosophy of History in IR Theory,” *International Theory* 9, no. 2 (July 2017): 203–36, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175297191700001X>.

100 Bowden, *The Strange Persistence of Universal History in Political Thought*, 77.

101 Duncan Bell and Casper Sylvest, “International Society in Victorian Political Thought: T. H. Green, Herbert Spencer, and Henry Sidgwick,” in Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 242–43.

of historians of American diplomacy for decades.<sup>102</sup> The famous 1950 strategy document “Objectives and Programs for National Security” — also known as “NSC 68” — quoted a portion of the Declaration of Independence, especially the portion that spoke of a “firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence.”<sup>103</sup> In examining the influence of these ideas on American foreign policy, Robert Nisbet wrote,

We have, as Tocqueville noted, a proneness ourselves to general ideas. And of all general ideas, Progress is the one with deepest roots in the American mind; Progress conceived as unalterable destiny with our own civilisation as the essence .... Many of us subordinate foreign policy to a world view that has the development of American culture as its model. The American dream becomes a cosmic principle.<sup>104</sup>

**From robust theories of history to methodological approaches, like historicism, that seek to break these theories down, an inescapable reality is that how one approaches historical facts conditions one’s conception about the nature of international politics and the conduct of foreign policy.**

Following on from Nisbet, the historian Robert Merry has offered one of the more astute and provocative accounts of how American statecraft has been shaped by certain ideas related to the philosophy of history. Seeing Fukuyama’s “End of History”

thesis and Thomas Friedman’s *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* as dubious intellectual strains, he warned that they had “seeped inexorably into the American consciousness, guiding the thinking and debates that surrounded the country’s geopolitical actions” in the period between the end of the Cold War and the early 2000s. Viewing such conceptions as unhistorical and dangerous to the conduct of foreign policy, Merry highlighted the relevance of more cyclical views of history, especially those of Spengler, which he believed eschewed “universalist orthodoxy” and warned of possible decline. Though not embracing Spengler’s thesis wholesale, Merry offered it up as a counterweight that might balance the idea of progress in the post-9/11 world.<sup>105</sup>

In many ways, Merry was right. American foreign policy in the decades after the end of the Cold War not only engaged with certain ideas related directly to the movement and speed of history, but it was also guided by a triumphalist notion based on a progressive theory of history.<sup>106</sup> National Security Adviser Anthony Lake’s speech at Johns Hopkins University in September 1993 — a moment when the Clinton administration was attempting to articulate its foreign policy approach — noted that “the pulse of the planet has accelerated dramatically” and that “we must decide whether to make change our ally or allow ourselves to become its victims.”<sup>107</sup> Weeks later President Bill Clinton delivered his first address to the United Nations General Assembly, and, citing Franklin Roosevelt, declared, “The democratic aspiration is no mere recent phase of human history. It is human histo-

102 Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995); Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); and Hilde Eliassen Restad, “Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science: US Foreign Policy and American Exceptionalism,” *American Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (May 2012): 53–76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/664586>.

103 Michael Lind, *The American Way of Strategy: U.S. Foreign Policy and the American Way of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4. Elsewhere, Walter Russell Mead has suggested that “the special providence shaping American foreign policy for success bore the fingerprints of Adam Smith’s invisible hand. The endless, unplanned struggle among the schools and lobbies to shape American foreign policy ended up producing over the long run a foreign policy that more closely approximated the true needs and interests of American society than could any conscious design.” Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 310.

104 Robert A. Nisbet, “Foreign Policy and the American Mind,” *Commentary* (September 1961): 194–203, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/robert-nisbet/foreign-policy-the-american-mind/>. Reprinted as Robert A. Nisbet, *Foreign Policy and the American Mind* (Menlo Park, CA: Institute for Humane Studies, 1961).

105 Robert W. Merry, *Sands of Empire, Missionary Zeal, American Foreign Policy, and the Hazards of Global Ambition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), ix–xvi, 37, 253. See also Robert W. Merry, “Spengler’s Ominous Prophecy,” *National Interest*, (January/February 2013): 11–22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42896533>. For a more recent critique of Fukuyama and Friedman, see David Martin Jones, *History’s Fools: The Pursuit of Idealism and the Revenge of Politics* (London: Hurst, 2020), 5–6, 18–20.

106 Eminent historians in these years, including William McNeill and Walter McDougall, lamented the effect of such assumptions and their practical implications. William H. McNeill, “Decline of the West?” *New York Review of Books* XLIV, no. 1 (January 1997), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1997/01/09/decline-of-the-west/>; and Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 11.

107 Anthony Lake, “From Containment to Enlargement,” Speech to Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, D.C., Sept. 21 1993, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/lakedoc.html>.

ry.”<sup>108</sup> Such a historical view provided fertile soil for Clinton’s notion of “democratic enlargement,” an outlook that had important implications for the administration’s economic approach as well as its interventions in Haiti and Kosovo.<sup>109</sup> Though scholars looking to draw distinct and recognizable lines between Lake and Clinton’s views on democracy, history, and specific policy choices might be frustrated in their search, the lack of direct causal links should not obscure the significance that notions of historical process hold for one’s wider worldview.

Clinton’s successor in the White House also had an idea about the direction of history, one that clearly fed into the momentous decisions that decided his administration’s foreign policy legacy. William Inboden and Peter Feaver, scholars who were on President George W. Bush’s National Security Council, have rightly noted that the 43rd president, perhaps even more than his predecessors in the 20th century, was concerned not only with history but also with what he considered to be large historical patterns and the role of the United States therein. As Bush told members of the National Endowment for Democracy in November 2003, “Historians in the future will reflect on an extraordinary, undeniable fact: Over time, free nations grow stronger and dictatorships grow weaker.”<sup>110</sup> In the same speech, Bush relayed his theory of history even more explicitly: “From the Fourteen Points to the Four Freedoms, to the Speech at Westminster, America has put our power at the service of principle. We believe that liberty is the design of nature; we believe that liberty is the direction of history.”<sup>111</sup>

Scholars have referred to this element of Bush’s foreign policy as the “Freedom Agenda,” and though it may not have led directly to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 — this was instead rooted in a security decision, however poorly informed from an intelligence perspective — the policy toward Iraq following the invasion (namely, building up a democracy) was driven, to a great degree, by an underlying assumption, based on a particular reading of the historical past and on Western precedents, that Iraqis would embrace democratic institutions. Born of a teleological philosophy of history, this

universalism had dire implications for America’s policy in Iraq and its foreign policy in the Middle East more broadly.

## Conclusion

As of spring 2022, Howe and Strauss’s prediction of a “fourth turning” has yet to be realized, while their most famous champion in Steve Bannon is far from the corridors of power he once coveted. This is not to say that notions of historical process were absent from the Trump administration. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo surprised some when he alluded to his belief in the rapture — the complex biblical prophecy regarding a coming cataclysm in which faithful Christians will be rescued by God.<sup>112</sup> Whether and to what extent this influenced his approach to Israel and the Middle East is a question for future diplomatic historians, but to say it played a negligible role is overly dismissive. It is evidence, however, of the fact that ideas related to the broad spectrum of philosophy of history seep their way into the realm of practical politics. And on a more fundamental level, these ideas can shape the contours of individual and collective international thought.

As this essay has argued, speculation about historical processes and the direction of history is not just the pursuit of the elite or the enlightened. It is a more common phenomenon than is often realized. Given that all individuals engage, on a basic level, with the collection, arrangement, and interpretation of historical facts, they can be said to hold, consciously or unconsciously, a philosophy of history. These theories might range from the vague to the robust, and they may even claim to be biblical or scientific. Yet each, in its own way, is closer to a mythical notion than anything that can be irrefutably proven. But the essential element, both for scholars and policymakers alike, is to recognize and interrogate this kind of thinking in the study of international politics and in the conduct of foreign policy. The starting point is an understanding of how approaches to historical study shape larger

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108 Bill Clinton, “Remarks to the 48th Session of the United Nations General Assembly,” Sept. 27, 1993, U.S. Department of State, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/io/potusunga/207375.htm>.

109 Douglas Brinkley, “Democratic Enlargement: The Clinton Doctrine,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 106 (Spring 1997): 110–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1149177>; and Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard, “Bill Clinton’s ‘Democratic Enlargement’ and the Securitisation of Democracy Promotion,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 26, no. 3 (2015): 534–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2015.1067529>.

110 George W. Bush, “Remarks by President George W. Bush at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy,” Nov. 6, 2003, quoted in Peter Feaver and William Inboden, “Looking Forward through the Past: The Role of History in Bush White House National Security Policy-making,” in *The Power of the Past*, ed. Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri, 269.

111 Bush, “Remarks,” quoted in Feaver and Inboden, “Looking Forward through the Past,” 270.

112 Edward Wong, “The Rapture and the Real World: Mike Pompeo Blends Beliefs and Policy,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/30/us/politics/pompeo-christian-policy.html>.

foundations of international thought. Do generalizations — from the “Thucydides trap” to notions of decline — reveal fundamental truths? Or do they build bridges over rich swamps of historical detail that might reveal some essential characteristic of statecraft, one that might provide a kernel of insight for the policymaker overwhelmed by short- and long-term challenges?

Here, ideas related to historicism, particularly its methodological tenets, might bear some relevance. Scholars may critique the risk of relativism, and some may cast judgment on what they believed to be the 20th-century outgrowths of Ranke’s political thought. But there are pearls of wisdom in the historicist mindset as well as Ranke’s approach to history and diplomacy. First is that nation-states are individual living entities, each the product of innumerable internal and external forces, and they should be treated as such both from a scholarly and diplomatic perspective. In this way, grand ideas about the exceptionalism or universalism of the Western or American model — especially that other nations will adopt more liberal economic and political outlooks, whether they know it or not — should be resisted, for the benefit of both scholarship and politics.

But on another level, the approach of Ranke and others associated with the historicist mindset warns against base interpretations of realism or *raison d’état*. The national interest itself, as Ranke recognized, involved a good deal of universal or cosmopolitan beliefs about which political leaders and policymakers should always be cognizant. Crucially, from a diplomatic perspective, those same leaders ought to recognize and observe these beliefs at play in other societies, and how, through interaction, one’s universal conceptions continually adapt into new and unique forms. In this way, the national interest — and to a greater extent *raison d’état* — is a more fluid phenomenon that encompasses moral and ethical principles.

The error of American policymakers in the decades after the Cold War was not that they held universal notions of right and wrong, of progress and destiny, but that they allowed such beliefs to color some of their most consequential decisions. The result of this unquestioned certainty — particularly in 2003 — was a righteousness devoid of prudence. Avoiding a similar mistake, this time with respect to other great powers with their own universal claims, will remain, to varying degrees, the responsibility of scholars and practitioners of American statecraft. The former, where possible,

should work to challenge grand generalizations that reinforce lazy assumptions about progress, decline, acceleration, or inevitability. The latter, in a similar fashion, should recognize the chaos and complexity inherent to their craft, as well as the degree to which phenomena are conditioned, but not determined, by history. 

**Andrew Ehrhardt** is an Ernest May Postdoctoral Fellow at Harvard’s Belfer Center. He would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of his late father, Malcolm Ehrhardt, who passed away recently.

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