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UNSPOKEN ASSUMPTIONS

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In his introduction to Volume 6, Issue 2, the chair of TNSR's editorial board, Francis J. Gavin, reflects on the unspoken assumptions during and after the attacks of 9/11. He asks what ideas today might similarly be so widely shared that no one is saying them aloud.

In April 1968, historian of modern Europe James Joll delivered an inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics entitled "1914: The Unspoken Assumptions."[1] He presented his reflections several months after the English language translation of German historian Fritz Fischer's controversial book, *German Aims During the First World War,* appeared. Joll had contributed an introduction to the English edition, after having written a review essay on the German language edition.[2]

Joll's essay confronted the challenge of surfacing unspoken assumptions — or what is left unsaid when people make consequential decisions.[3] When assessing any critical choice — either in the past or present — we analyze the process and debates over policies by looking at written documents and commentary made in public. But many times, the core assumptions and worldviews shaping decisions are not explicitly laid out.

> When political leaders are faced with the necessity of taking decisions the outcome of which they cannot foresee, in crises which they do not wholly understand, they fall back on their own instinctive reactions, traditions and modes of behaviour. Each of them has certain beliefs, rules or objectives which are taken for granted; and one of the limitations of documentary evidence is that few people bother to write down, especially in moments of crisis, things which they take for granted. Yet if we are to understand their motives, we must somehow try to find out what, as we say, 'goes without saying.'[4]

How do we uncover these unspoken assumptions? Historians regularly examine the *mentalities* of individuals, institutions, communities, and states that shape how decisions are made. This demands making sense of the intellectual, social, and cultural dynamics within which the decision-maker operates. Joll persuasively argued that it was impossible to understand how decisions were made in European capitals during the summer of 1914 without recognizing the pervasive influence of a "doctrine of a perpetual struggle for survival and of a permanent potential war of all against all" that emerged from a witch's brew of social Darwinism and popularized, if misunderstood, Nietzschean thought. According to Joll, there was a shared feeling in July 1914 that war was inevitable, which, in turn, produced almost a sense of relief when it finally came. Uncovering these underlying and unspoken assumptions help make sense of actions that, from only reading the diplomatic documents, are hard to fully comprehend.

> If we are to understand the conflicting beliefs which lie behind the actions of statesmen and the reactions of their followers, we must look at a number of ideas, attitudes and assumptions which are not always to be found in the archives ... . It is as important for the historian of international relations to understand these changes in what Hegel calls the spirit of the age as it is for him to understand changes in the structure of the economy or developments in military technology.[5]

What unspoken assumptions inform our contemporary world? When we think historically, we understand that, in our own times, as in the past, our actions are often influenced by shared understandings that we don't make explicit, common viewpoints so obvious "they needn't be said." These shape both how we see and act in the world. Almost by definition, however, it is hard to be aware of our own unspoken assumptions, even as they invisibly frame the decision-environment in which

1 James Joll, "1914: The Unspoken Assumptions," delivered on 25 April 1968, The London School of Economics and Political Science, Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

2 James Joll, "The 1914 Debate Continues. Fritz Fischer and His Critics," *Past & Present*, no. 34 (Jul., 1966): 100-113, https://www.jstor.org/stable/650057.

3 I am grateful to Ben Rhode for alerting me to this essay and highlighting its insight. See his own outstanding recent essay on the subject. Ben Rhode, "Historical Imagination and the Unspoken Assumptions of our Age," *Survival* 65, no. 2 (April-May 2023): 213–28, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2023.2193110.

4 Joll, "1914: Unspoken Assumptions," 6.

5 Joll, "1914: Unspoken Assumptions," 23.

we find ourselves. On the one hand, we are unlikely to fully recognize these shared, unspoken beliefs until years or decades later, after we gain enough distance and perspective. On the other hand, simply being aware that we hold and make decisions based on unspoken assumptions — many of which will be found wanting in time — might help us make better decisions in real-time.

I have been reflecting upon the issue of unspoken assumptions because of the recent 20th anniversary of America's March 2003 invasion of Iraq and the various ruminations and remembrances the milestone generated. In retrospect, there were many unspoken assumptions during the 2001-03 period that did not age especially well: a nation seized by intense fear and vulnerability combined with a mix of moral outrage, a feeling of unlimited power, and the (in retrospect, bizarre) sense that the 9/11 attacks somehow marked a profound turning point in world history. These unspoken assumptions, beliefs, and understandings that went without saying, perhaps more than the explicit arguments laid out in speeches or television interviews or even declassified documents, helped produce the policy choices that gave us the fiasco in Iraq, the quagmire in Afghanistan, and the uncomfortable residue from the global war on terror.

As a historian, two questions, in particular, haunt me. First, if policymakers, and indeed, the larger American culture, had possessed a greater historical awareness, might the blunders of post-9/11 U.S. grand strategy have been avoided? Second, what unspoken assumptions shape, and perhaps distort, our current worldview?

After the shock and trauma induced by the 9/11 attacks on the United States, it might have been too much to ask the nation and its leaders to reflect upon the charged environment in European capitals after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo that plunged the continent into catastrophe. That distant world of the July 1914 crisis, animated by train timetables and mobilization schedules, social Darwinism, and funny pith helmets, appeared to bear no resemblance to the high-tech, flat, and post-ironic world of the early 2000s. As American policymakers considered the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and other elements of the global war on terror after 9/11, however, there was more recent American history that could have been re-called with profit — the Vietnam War. Less than four decades earlier, the unspoken assumptions of what Fredrik Logevall has called "the long 1964" pulled the United States into an unwinnable conflict, marked by unclear political goals, faddish military tactics, and public deceit.[6]

The history of the United States in Vietnam was much on my mind as I began my academic career in 2000 at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. Looking out my office window, I stared directly upon the LBJ Presidential Library, where all the documents laying out the decisions to go to war were stored. During my first year of teaching, I developed a role-playing simulation for my policy development course, where the students would use archival materials to play an assigned historical character: Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, military officials and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and advisers who were against the war, like Vice President Hubert Humphrey and Undersecretary of State George Ball. Reenacting the policy debates and discussions found in the primary documents, we would try to examine and understand a set of decisions that made no sense at all to 20-somethings in 2000-01 — committing half a million U.S. troops to fight a war fought halfway around the globe that did little to advance America's interests in the world.

The students found the arguments presented by the principals in the written documents, oral histories, and memoirs unconvincing, which left them even more puzzled. The people who made these decisions were not unintelligent: They were widely respected and admired, and their policy choices reflected the views of the larger society. The only way to explain America's disastrous decisions in Southeast Asia was to get the students to recognize and interrogate the unspoken assumptions that shaped both the policy environment and the larger American culture in 1964 and 1965. In other words, to understand America's war in Vietnam, we had to identify worldviews and assumptions that weren't always explicitly laid out in the documents, because, as Joll said, the most important beliefs and ideas often went without saying.

It seemed, by 2001, that these lessons and insights were well understood. When I taught the Vietnam exercise during the 2001 spring semester, I wrote in my class notes, "At least we don't have to worry about anything like this ever again."

Needless to say, I could not have been more wrong.

After the terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda on the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, many of history's cautions, to say nothing of its lessons, were forgotten. Or when history was used, it was often used sloppily or inappropriately. The point is less to comment upon the wisdom or folly of America's "global war on terror," or its military interventions in Afghanistan or Iraq and their legacy. Rather,

6 Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

it is to wonder how we might best use history to understand and navigate our complicated current moment. We often use history to excavate explicit arguments about why a state or a leader or a people committed some act or pursued a policy which, decades later, seems inexplicable. While important, history's true power may be to remind us that people once understood their world much differently and carried far different, often hidden, shared assumptions, and that our own beliefs and shared assumptions, often unexplored and unchallenged, may lead to similar catastrophes that will one day puzzle our grandchildren.

Surfacing and challenging assumptions doesn't simply help you avoid disaster; it may open up unexpected opportunities. The Johnson administration, at the same time it unwisely escalated its war in Vietnam, cooperated with the Soviet Union to negotiate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the most consequential and successful arms control treaty in history. It did this while working together with its bitter foe to eliminate smallpox, a plague that once killed 2 million people a year worldwide.[7] Neither of these policies would have been imaginable only a decade earlier, when policymakers were gripped by a rigid Cold War mentality. At almost the same time that the Bush administration launched its disastrous war in Iraq, it also unveiled PEPFAR to help reduce the suffering caused by AIDS in Africa, an effort that is estimated to have saved 25 million lives. PEPFAR was remarkably forward-looking, bravely moving beyond many unspoken assumptions about who and what mattered in U.S. policy and why.[8] That far-sighted, bold, and wildly successful policies such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty, smallpox eradication, and PEPFAR were crafted by the same people who gave us disastrous wars in Vietnam and Iraq only highlights how difficult statecraft and strategy is, and how critical it is to constantly interrogate our core assumptions about the world.

Which leads me to our current time: What are the unspoken assumptions, held both in the United States and in other capitals, about international relations — beliefs so widely shared that they need not be spoken? And what mistakes — or extraordinary opportunities — could our unspoken assumptions lead us to, and might those mistakes be avoided if those assumptions were revealed and scrutinized?

One of the most important ambitions of the *Texas National Security Review* is to publish excellent scholarship that surfaces and interrogates our assumptions — spoken and unspoken — about national security and international affairs. You can see excellent examples of this in this issue. Megan Lamberth and Paul Scharre mine the long history of arms control to lay out principles that should guide the military uses of artificial intelligence. Paul Avey employs one of my favorite forms — the thoughtful, long-form review essay — to explore new thinking on how nuclear weapons affect world politics while overturning long-held (and indeed, often unspoken) beliefs about the so-called nuclear revolution. Rosella Cappella Zielinski and Samuel Gerstle tackle a subject that is often seen as dry but, historically, is of first-order importance: defense financing. Variations in defense funding is arguably what made Great Britain a great power in the 18th century and a superpower in the 19th. It is also an area where unspoken assumptions have shaped key decisions. Recall how obsessed the post-World War II generation was with paying off the massive national debt created by the conflict as quickly as possible. And Rose Gottemoeller reminds us that wartime is not a time to stop speaking to our adversaries, but in fact, a time to focus on diplomacy, especially when it involves the existential issue of nuclear weapons. Finland's and Sweden's application to join NATO, unthinkable two years ago, is analyzed by Katherine Kjellström Elgin and Alexander Lanoszka, highlighting how rapidly assumptions, both spoken and unspoken, can be transformed overnight.

It would be asking too much to identify all the things we believe to be true, to say out loud "the things that go without saying" that could lead us to trouble, or to figure out which assumptions we hold that are preventing us from realizing great opportunities. Scholars are not soothsayers. History, however, does remind us that our predecessors often got themselves in the most trouble, and limited their opportunities, when they were motivated by ideas so widely shared that they needn't be said aloud. ♜

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7 On President Lyndon B. Johnson's far-sighted arms control policies, including nuclear nonproliferation, see Hal Brands, "Progress Unseen: U.S. Arms Control Policy and the Origins of Détente, 1963–1968," *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 2 (April 2006): 253–85, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24915093. On smallpox eradication, see Erez Manela, "Globalizing the Great Society: Lyndon Johnson and the Pursuit of Smallpox Eradication," in *Beyond the Cold War: Lyndon Johnson and the New Global Challenges of the 1960s*, ed. Francis Gavin and Mark Lawrence (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

8 On the President's Emergency Plan for AIDs relief, see "On Oral History of PEPFAR," George W. Bush Presidential Center, Feb. 24, 2023, https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/an-oral-history-of-pepfar-how-a-dream-big-partnership-is-saving-the-lives-of-millions.