

*Introduction: Thinking about
History and Foreign Policy*

During the summer and fall of 2009, the U.S. policymaking community engaged in what one observer called an “official binge of historical consciousness.”¹ Amid intense debate over U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, policymakers sought insights from two books that seemed to be locked in a duel over the history of America’s earlier conflict in Vietnam. White House officials skeptical of expanded intervention, including President Barack Obama, devoured Gordon M. Goldstein’s *Lessons in Disaster*, a book that chronicled the folly of incremental escalation in Southeast Asia in the mid-1960s and argued implicitly against a similar approach in Afghanistan. Inside the Pentagon, however, the favored historical work was Lewis Sorley’s *A Better War*, which argued that the U.S. military had developed an effective counterinsurgency strategy during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and asserted that the United States might have salvaged a favorable result in Vietnam if not for the collapse of public support and political will at home. The “moral” of Sorley’s book, and one that military leaders deemed applicable to the Afghanistan debate, was that the U.S. military could master counterinsurgency if given the requisite time, backing, and resources. In 2009, as in other periods of policy transition, arguments about history were central to both sides of the debate about American national security.²

The Presence of History in Policy

Examining the course of American statecraft over the last century, one cannot escape the conclusion that history—historical knowledge, insights, lessons, analogies, and narratives—permeates the ways in which the United States interacts with the world. From World War I to the Cold War to the war on terror, American officials have frequently drawn on their perceptions and understandings of what came before as reference points in seeking to deal with the dilemmas of the here and now. They have used history to gain perspective on the world and its challenges; to impose familiarity on novel and perplexing issues; to channel the perceived verities of the past in grappling with the uncertainties of the future; or simply to frame and market their policies in an appealing fashion. Sometimes, as in the Sorley-Goldstein debate, these uses of history are explicit and deliberate; most often they are implicit, even unconscious. “Even when people think they are striking out in new directions,” observes Margaret MacMillan, “their models often come from the past.” Either way, history—an understanding, whether accurate or inaccurate, of the past—is omnipresent in foreign policy.³

This is not to say that policymakers use history as historians might like them to use it. Numerous scholars have noted that policymakers are often selective, uncritical, one-dimensional, and biased in their thinking about the past. Facile historical analogies litter the documentary record of U.S. foreign policy; misrepresentations, misunderstandings, and oversimplifications of the past are legion. Indeed, some of the most frequently used historical reference points for U.S. foreign policy—the Munich analogy, for instance—tend to obscure more than they clarify.⁴ And for every case in which policymakers seem genuinely interested in learning from history, there is another in which history appears to be used more as an *ex post facto* justification for a policy already decided upon.⁵ It is small wonder that even as historians encourage policymakers to use history in official deliberations, they often cringe when it is actually done. History and policy have an intimate, but frequently dysfunctional, relationship.

The purpose of this book is to work toward a more fruitful interaction between the production of historical knowledge and the making of U.S. foreign policy. The volume aims to explore the dynamics and intricacies of that relationship and to offer insights on how the study of the past can more usefully serve the present. The chapters in this book bring together a

distinguished group of thinkers: historians and policymakers who have long grappled with these issues in their research and professional endeavors. In the essays that follow, the contributors explore a series of interrelated questions: How and why do policymakers use history? How has policy benefited or suffered as a result? What are the potential avenues for using history more successfully, and what light can history shine on the dilemmas confronted by contemporary policymakers? How can scholars and policymakers improve the relationship between knowledge and practice? What are the limits of historical utility for policymaking? As a whole, this volume aims to shed light on the complex nexus of history and policy, and to engage policymakers and historians alike in thinking through the requirements for creating and deploying a more usable past.

This is not, of course, an original endeavor. The effort to use history to elucidate lessons of leadership traces back to Herodotus, Thucydides, Sallust, Petrarch, Niccolò Machiavelli, Edward Gibbon, and many other writers who came long before us. A more recent scholarly literature on the history-policy nexus is anchored in influential volumes written by Ernest May and Richard Neustadt in the 1970s and 1980s, and supplemented with additional, and often more specialized, works in the years since.⁶ This scholarship is still quite valuable—it offers useful frameworks for thinking about the history-policy relationship, shows just how pervasive the links between history and policy can be, and illustrates many of the pathologies that commonly afflict the relationship between the two through a spectrum of historical cases and examples. Nonetheless, and without slighting the contributions of these earlier works, we believe that there are at least five key reasons why renewed attention to this subject is necessary.

First, notwithstanding more recent contributions, discussions of the history-policy relationship are still dominated by the books written by May and Neustadt decades ago. This is not inherently a bad thing; the fact that these books have few peers today demonstrates the continuing validity of some of their insights about how history is used and how policymakers might use it better. But it also indicates that there is a need for a fresh look at the long-standing questions—questions whose relevance has only increased in the context of the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Scholarship on topics of foreign policy, international development, and military force has evolved since the 1970s and 1980s, and new studies of history and policy must take this research into account.⁷ Accordingly,

our aim in this book is less to criticize landmark works in the field than to revisit some of the issues they raise (as well as other questions) in a focused, rigorous, and up-to-date way.

Second, renewed exploration of the subject is necessary because historians as a whole have not done enough to cultivate sustained dialogue with the policymaking community. Scholarly books and articles that explicitly address the history-policy nexus, or attempt to engage current policy issues directly, are still the exception in a profession that generally views presentism as a sin rather than a virtue. “The American historical profession,” writes Jill Lepore, “defines itself by its dedication to the proposition that looking to the past to explain the present falls outside the realm of serious historical study.”⁸

Historians are often wise to be cautious about seeking to extract policy insights from a meditation on the past. The differences between two time periods are almost always more important than the similarities; lessons ripped from one context and dropped into another can easily mislead more than they can inform. Sir Michael Howard put this best when he wrote that he was “conscious above all of the unique quality of an experience that resulted from circumstances that would never, that could never, be precisely replicated.”⁹ Yet while the uniqueness of each historical occurrence is true enough, it is no excuse for historians to shirk engagement with contemporary policy debates and issues. As any informed observer can attest, the inescapable reality is that perceptions of history *do* influence policy—in ways both positive and negative. Whatever the limits of using history for policy, writes Jeffrey Record, “it is clear that policymakers invariably will continue to be influenced by past events and what they believe those events teach.”¹⁰ If historians as a whole seek to serve their broader society, they are therefore obligated to promote the most accurate and effective use of history in policymaking. Bringing together in this volume a group of leading scholars and practitioners to consider how this might be done, we hope to catalyze a broader and more sustained interest in these issues both within and outside the historical community.

Promoting this discussion seems all the more imperative in light of the third reason for this book: that the events of the post-9/11 era have once again demonstrated the inextricable links between history and policy, and the corresponding necessity of getting that relationship right. As one might expect, American officials have consistently sought historical reference points in their efforts to deal with the immensely challenging and often

frightening problems of the present era. The administrations of both President George W. Bush and Barack Obama have regularly invoked historical analogies, narratives, and insights in choosing or justifying policies, and they have relied heavily on the presumed lessons of the past in charting routes forward. One need only look at the multitude of historical frames used by the Bush administration in devising and defending its response to 9/11: the cautionary tale of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, the perceived lessons of World War II and the Cold War, and the successful postwar democratizations of Japan and Germany, among many others.¹¹ Likewise, President Obama's administration invoked "the lessons of Iraq" in responding to uprisings in Libya and Syria, and its reading of the Vietnam War had a powerful effect on the initial "surge" and subsequent drawdown of U.S. forces in Afghanistan.¹² As the essays in this volume illustrate, there is no shortage of contemporary policy issues that demand greater historical awareness. In these circumstances, scholars have a responsibility to engage the history-policy relationship as constructively as possible.

Fourth, we believe that there is great value in exploring the history-policy nexus through a collective endeavor such as this one. The subject under consideration is broad and complex, and the multitude of cases one could study to gain a better understanding of it is virtually infinite. At best, then, any single set of studies can only be suggestive rather than exhaustive or definitive, and it is crucial to draw on a diverse set of approaches and interpretations in analyzing the questions posed above. That is what we have done in this book. The contributors have long been engaged in thinking about these issues, and here, as elsewhere, they have done so in a wide range of creative and insightful ways. Their essays cover a broad span of subjects thematically and temporally—from the use of force to anti-human trafficking efforts, from the lessons of the humanitarian interventions of the nineteenth century through the applications of history during the administrations of Bill Clinton, Bush, and Obama. To the extent that a single book draws together such diverse perspectives and insights, it casts brighter light on an often obscure and slippery subject, and demonstrates just how pervasive the history-policy dynamic truly is.¹³

Fifth, and perhaps most important, we believe that there is a need for work that treats the history-policy nexus as an authentic dialogue, not simply as an opportunity to tell policymakers what they are doing wrong and what they ought to be doing instead.¹⁴ It should be self-evident that one cannot

fully appreciate the intricacies of the history-policy relationship without fully engaging both historians and members of the policymaking community. Policymakers may understand aspects of the relationship that elude talented historians, and vice versa. And as we make clear in the forthcoming chapters, both communities have obligations to meet if this relationship is to become a healthier one. Accordingly, this book draws on contributions from both of these “tribes”—leading historians whose work represents the cutting edge of scholarship on key policy issues, and several individuals with significant, high-level experience in the shaping of American statecraft. In bringing these two groups together and putting them in dialogue with one another, the book offers positive avenues for improving the historical content of policy and the policy content of history. We see great possibility in these integrated endeavors.

Historians and Policymakers

This book is divided into three sections, each of which engages a core aspect of the history-policy relationship. In each section, a group of leading scholars and/or policymakers explores a diverse set of subjects clustered around a single overriding question or theme. This approach combines the benefits of ecumenism and of structure. It offers a sustained approach to key issues in the history-policy relationship while also leveraging the broad range of experiences and expertise that the contributors possess.

In part I, four leading diplomatic historians explore the complex and varied ways that history *does* influence U.S. foreign policy. In chapter 2, Jeremi Suri begins this section by examining how one prominent statesman—former secretary of state Henry Kissinger—has conceived of the relationship between historical knowledge and diplomatic practice. History, notes Suri, has long been essential to Kissinger’s understanding of how talented practitioners can and should wield power, and Kissinger has used history to anticipate some of the deep structural forces at work in the international system. He has also made use of his historical knowledge to pursue possibilities for creative statecraft that can exploit or subtly shift broader international currents.

In chapter 3, Mark Atwood Lawrence provides a deeply textured analysis of the numerous historical “lessons” that American observers have drawn from the Vietnam War in the decades since that conflict ended. He notes

that the Vietnam analogy has been interpreted in different—and often contradictory—ways by policymakers and pundits, and he evaluates the ways in which lessons drawn from that conflict have both informed and misinformed debates about post-Vietnam foreign policy. He concludes by reflecting on the utility and limits of the Vietnam analogy as a tool for informing statecraft.

In chapter 4, H. W. Brands builds on Lawrence's analysis by explicitly examining the role of analogies in U.S. policy during the Persian Gulf crisis and war of 1990–91. He reveals how two particular analogies—those of Munich and Vietnam—were pervasive in shaping the George H. W. Bush administration's confrontation with Saddam Hussein. These analogies, Brands argues, had both salutary and less salutary effects on the quality of American statecraft, demonstrating both the power of analogical reasoning and the need to treat such reasoning with great care.

Finally, in chapter 5, Jennifer Miller analyzes the interplay between historical narratives—prevailing understandings of the recent past—and U.S.-Japanese relations after World War II. Focusing on debates over Japanese rearmament, Miller shows that narratives forged from complex international interactions had a powerful role in shaping the U.S.-Japanese relationship. Shifts of policy, in turn, required efforts to revise those historical narratives. The chapters in this section thus cover a broad chronology and subject matter; together they demonstrate the rich, complex, and sometimes contradictory qualities of the relationship between history and policy.

Part II is prescriptive as well as descriptive: it engages the question of how historical knowledge *can* and *should* inform better policy. In this section four top scholars—including two with significant policymaking experience—analyze particular themes or episodes in the history of U.S. foreign policy, and they offer insights into how to make those subjects more “usable” in dealing with contemporary global challenges. Starting off the section, Thomas Mahnken and William Inboden combine the insights derived from their scholarly work with those gained during their time in government. Mahnken in chapter 6 analyzes how understandings of America's Cold War-era strategy of containment continue to inform—and mislead—discussions of contemporary problems. He suggests how policymakers and pundits might apply a firmer grasp of containment's history to clarify options, alternatives, and debates on a range of foreign policy questions today.

In chapter 7, Inboden reexamines a widely misunderstood subject—the history of the National Security Council (NSC) during the administration of President Ronald Reagan. Inboden argues that William Clark’s management of the NSC in 1982–83 was actually more rational and purposeful than scholars have often assumed. He also uses this deeply researched reinterpretation of the Reagan NSC as a way of promoting creative thinking about how presidents and their national security advisers should approach the task of managing and implementing foreign policy in pivotal eras.

The final two chapters of this section deal with the history-policy relationship through the lens of humanitarian issues. In chapter 8, Michael Cotey Morgan studies the complex dilemmas that humanitarian military intervention has long posed for U.S. and British officials, and he points to several useful ways in which this history can shed light on questions about whether, when, and how to use force for humanitarian purposes today. In chapter 9, Gunther Peck examines the role of historical analogies, narratives, and symbols in current approaches to combating human trafficking. He argues that a better understanding of how these historical legacies shape current policy debates—and how they sometimes distort the nature of the challenge—can help policymakers test assumptions, identify blind spots, and elucidate opportunities for more effective action. As each of the chapters in part II underscores, history *can* play a constructive role in policy, provided that scholars and policymakers are willing to interrogate the past with self-awareness and rigor.

Part III, the final section of this book, draws out more extensively the insights that policymakers can contribute to the healthy dialogue we hope to foster. In each chapter, scholars with extensive policy backgrounds bring their experiences to bear on the central questions explored in this volume. In chapter 10, James Steinberg reflects on how various forms of history—personal history, historical analogies, and historical learning—informed U.S. responses to the wars in Yugoslavia during the 1990s. He then traces the role that the lessons drawn from those conflicts played in subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and Libya. Steinberg offers practical suggestions for how scholars and policymakers might think about the problem of incorporating historical insights into policy decisions.

Likewise, Peter Feaver and William Inboden discuss in chapter 11 the crucial role that historical knowledge, analogies, and awareness played in policy initiatives undertaken by the George W. Bush administration, particularly during the authors’ time at the NSC from 2005 to 2007. They

argue that “a historical sensibility pervaded the thinking of President Bush and many senior members of his administration,” and that the overall quality of policy was better for this characteristic. Their analysis provides a firsthand account of how sound policy must be simultaneously prospective and retrospective, and how good historical knowledge can illuminate pathways for creative action.

Concluding this volume, Philip Zelikow describes in chapter 12 the kinds of “lessons” history actually offers. Through a sophisticated analysis that draws on his extensive experience in both the policymaking and scholarly worlds, Zelikow cautions against using history as a storehouse for facile generalizations that can be applied across time and space. Rather, he argues that the “historian’s microscope” is a powerful tool for appreciating the complexity of the past, accumulating vicarious experience, and better positioning ourselves to address the possibilities, challenges, and choices of our own times. This volume illustrates how history can become a source of wisdom and perspective for policymakers. Zelikow’s chapter and others provide careful analysis and concrete examples for moving a constructive history-policy dialogue forward.

Themes and Insights

As the foregoing discussion indicates, the chapters in this volume are rich and diverse. They capture a range of viewpoints on the central questions about how historical knowledge already contributes, and should contribute moving forward, to policymaking. They also come together around a number of shared themes and conclusions that anchor the book as a whole. Although the reader can trace these themes across the chapters, we have chosen to highlight several of particular importance at the outset.

The Nature of the History-Policy Relationship

The first theme is the complex, multifaceted, and often contradictory ways in which history influences policy judgments. As nearly all of the chapters in this volume demonstrate, there is no single model for how historical knowledge shapes the policymaking environment or guides particular decisions. Analogical reasoning is probably the most common way in which policymakers directly apply history to policy issues, and the chapters by H. W. Brands, Mark Atwood Lawrence, Gunther Peck, and other contributors demonstrate just how compelling—if sometimes misleading—this

type of reasoning can be. Accordingly, the potential utility of analogies, and the ways that they can be used productively, constitutes a key theme of the book. It is important to recognize, however, that analogies are but one pathway through which the past influences the present.

Personal experience—an individual’s own history—is another such pathway. Past experiences provide the intellectual framing through which we interpret current events, and as James Steinberg’s chapter illustrates, they powerfully shape how new challenges and opportunities are perceived. Likewise, historical narratives—the inherited accounts of what happened and why—profoundly influence the cultural milieu in which policy options are considered and decisions are made. Historical symbols and metaphors—the notion of containment, for instance—can also shape policy, by providing the reference points that pull officials toward certain solutions and away from others.¹⁵ In some cases, policymakers even bring their own understanding of history as an intellectual endeavor to bear on their approach to contemporary problems. As Jeremi Suri notes, this was certainly true of Henry Kissinger, who relied less on simple analogies than on his studied reflections about how historical forces interacted with policy opportunities. This list of pathways for history’s influence on policy could easily go on further, but the key point is that any discussion of the history-policy relationship must begin with an acknowledgment of just how many diverse forms that relationship can take.

Discussion should also begin with a recognition that the policy insights to be drawn from history are not always as objective or unarguable as we might like them to be. One of the difficulties inherent in applying historical knowledge to policy is that reasonable observers can draw entirely different—and contradictory—implications from the same historical episode. For the Clinton administration in the early 1990s, was the “correct” lesson to be drawn from 1914 that great powers should not meddle in long-standing ethnic and national conflicts in the Balkans? Or was it that decisive intervention was imperative, lest those conflicts fester, metastasize, and trigger systemic instability? Smart people could and did make both arguments based on plausible readings of the past. For decades, intelligent observers have also drawn diametrically opposed conclusions from the U.S. war in Vietnam. For some, the key lesson of that conflict is the need to respect the limits of American power; for others, the history of the war, and its aftermath, show the danger of not using American power assertively enough.¹⁶

We should not attribute these disagreements to bias on one side or the other, for as historians surely understand, interpretive disputes are the rule rather than the exception even when history is studied rigorously. The fact is that history does not lend itself to a single, incontestable set of policy-relevant takeaways; it lends itself—particularly with new research—to continuing contestation and debate.

These points should be a source of humility and self-awareness for historians and policymakers alike. Policymakers should realize that history shapes their actions in myriad ways, and through numerous channels, whether they perceive that to be the case or not. Policymakers and historians should also understand that history almost never produces a single correct answer to a policy problem. This need not be a cause of discouragement for those who would like to make history serve policy in concrete and useful ways, because there is still great utility in such efforts. Historical thinking about policy must, however, begin with a clear understanding of how policy and history interact, and what the limits of that relationship often are.

Historical Analogies

A second theme concerns the utility—and limits—of historical analogies. Analogies are unavoidable in policymaking, they are often misleading, but they can be immensely useful if treated with care.

As noted above, analogical reasoning is perhaps the most common way in which policymakers use history, and it is a practice that many historians view with deep suspicion. The entire endeavor seems to reek of indifference to the importance of context and complexity, to suggest that an insight—usually an oversimplified one—drawn from one distinct experience can apply accurately to another. As Jeffrey Record notes: “Reasoning by historical analogy can be dangerous, especially if such reasoning is untempered by recognition that no two historical events are identical and that the future is more than a linear extension of the past.” There is much truth in this assessment. One has only to look at the influence of the Munich analogy on U.S. policy in Vietnam, or on British policy during the 1956 Suez Crisis, to understand how badly the uncritical application of historical analogies can distort policy.¹⁷ When analogies dull policymakers’ sensitivity to the particularities of their current context—to the differences between two situations separated by time and space, or to the danger of devising historical “laws” from a single episode in the past—they can have pernicious impacts indeed.

Those impacts can be especially problematic when analogies become politicized. Precisely because analogies can be so powerful and evocative, there is a temptation for policymakers to invoke them less as an opening for critical inquiry than as a blunt rhetorical object. The Munich analogy, the Vietnam analogy, and countless others have often been deployed not as a means of carefully interrogating the past for insights about the present, but as a political device to sell a particular policy or discredit an opponent's alternative.¹⁸ This rhetorical tactic is part and parcel of democratic politics, of course, but it is an invitation to simplistic and overwrought readings of history—and a key reason why so many scholars are skeptical of whether policymakers can really use analogies with integrity.

This caution about analogies confronts both historians and policymakers with a real dilemma. Policymakers inevitably grasp for comparisons to make sense of new information and uncertainty. This is why historical analogies are so unavoidable—they help decisionmakers who are under intense pressure grapple intellectually with their challenges and opportunities. For all its drawbacks and abuses, analogical reasoning is therefore a perfectly natural way to bring the wisdom of experience to current dilemmas. As Yuen Foong Khong writes in his highly critical study of analogical reasoning during the early escalation of American intervention in the Vietnam War, “Because policymakers often encounter new foreign policy challenges and because structural uncertainty usually infuses the environment in which responses to such challenges must be forged, policymakers routinely turn to the past for guidance.”¹⁹ Other critics of analogical reasoning have reached the same conclusion.²⁰ Historians may deplore the way that analogies are routinely misused in policy decisions, but it is unrealistic to think that analogies will ever be purged from that process.

The good news is that this is not necessarily a bad thing. Historical analogies do not always have a negative impact on policy debates; at times, they push decisionmakers in helpful directions that open new possibilities and protect against dead ends. One can argue that the Munich analogy actually served U.S. policymakers well in the case of the Korean War, for example, by encouraging the administration of President Harry S. Truman to combat a Soviet-backed assault on South Korea that, if successful, might have seriously destabilized the postwar environment.²¹ In the same vein, one interpretation of H. W. Brands's contribution to this volume is that the Munich and Vietnam analogies—both ubiquitous during the run-up to the

Persian Gulf War—had some positive effects on U.S. policy. Whatever its limitations, the Munich analogy helped inform George H. W. Bush’s decision to resist Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait; the Vietnam analogy motivated the president to emphasize the decisive use of military power for carefully defined and delimited objectives. Mark Lawrence, James Steinberg, Peter Feaver, and William Inboden make similar observations (with varying degrees of emphasis) in their chapters: analogies have influenced policy in beneficial as well as pernicious ways.

This point touches on a fundamental reality about historical analogies. Although the uncritical or selective deployment of analogies is obviously fraught with peril, a more discerning use can be quite illuminating. Carefully employed, analogies can help spark the intellectual curiosity that leads to sharper, textured interpretations of complex situations, integrating attention to details with insights about the relationships between different actors and events. Carl von Clausewitz famously called this the *coup d’oeil* (the flash of insight) that allows the skilled commander to make sense of the chaotic battlefield—understanding its development and anticipating its trajectory.²²

The key here is to understand that analogies should serve as the beginning of an inquiry into the continuities between past and present, rather than an end to such an analysis. Observing that the present situation is “like” something that came before need not foreclose further critical examination of context and discontinuity; it can actually serve as an intellectual point of departure for interrogating how the present is both similar and different from what came before. If a leader is warned that some foreign intervention will become “another Vietnam” or “another Iraq,” for instance, such admonitions can provide useful frames of reference for exploring how applicable these comparisons really are—and thus better fleshing out the true dynamics of the challenge. Likewise, the comparative use of analogies—looking at current events in light of not just one prior episode, but two, three, or four—can reveal potential continuities between past and present, while also underscoring the need to avoid becoming locked into any single analogical paradigm.

Analogies can aid decisionmaking so long as they are viewed as an invitation to scrutiny and critical assessment, rather than a means of closing off such important intellectual work. Analogies themselves are neither good nor bad, neither helpful nor harmful. It is how they are used—and how rigorously they are examined—that makes all the difference.

Historical Sensibility

The rigorous use of analogies is a starting point for understanding history as more than just a repository of facts and comparisons. May and Neustadt observed that during policy discussions President Truman frequently invoked historical details gained from his readings about other eras. He invoked these details, generally, to constrict debate and focus it on a few “necessary” options, rather than to open new questions and perspectives on pressing problems. In contrast, general (and later secretary of state) George Marshall had read little history, and he rarely based his policy arguments on facts about the past. Instead, he pushed his advisers (including Dean Acheson, George Kennan, and Charles Bohlen) to explore new opportunities and use knowledge of past efforts to inform creative adjustments in the present.²³

The launching of the Marshall Plan stands out as an endeavor in constructive historical imagination. George Marshall’s landmark speech at Harvard University in June 1947 did not include many detailed facts or any long excursions into the history of America or Europe. Rather, Marshall began with a basic proposition, drawn from an understanding of how societies had struggled to recover from war in the past. Marshall focused on what he called the “fabric of European economy”:

The feverish preparation for war and the more feverish maintenance of the war effort engulfed all aspects of national economies. Machinery has fallen into disrepair or is entirely obsolete. Under the arbitrary and destructive Nazi rule, virtually every possible enterprise was geared into the German war machine. Long-standing commercial ties, private institutions, banks, insurance companies, and shipping companies disappeared, through loss of capital, absorption through nationalization, or by simple destruction. In many countries, confidence in the local currency has been severely shaken. The breakdown of the business structure of Europe during the war was complete.

Marshall did not pretend that the events in Europe after World War II were “like” any past moment, but he drew on the historical knowledge that conditions of suffering and stagnation bred extremism and instability. He and his colleagues also drew on the historical knowledge that prolonged

turmoil in Europe had negative repercussions for the United States. Despite the heavy burden of debt from World War II, and the fears of a return to the prewar conditions of economic depression, American leaders in the late 1940s used this history to justify an unprecedented commitment to European recovery. American aid was “logical” to restore “normal economic health in the world,” Marshall said, “without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace.”²⁴

He then went one step further. Marshall had learned from his own military experiences in the Philippines and other areas that the United States could not impose solutions. Acheson, Kennan, and Bohlen learned similar lessons from their experiences in Washington and Europe during the war. The resulting emphasis on multilateralism and partnership in reconstruction was unprecedented in American history, but it was the best route forward because of the knowledge that isolationism and unilateralism had failed to produce the intended results in the past.

Many of Marshall’s successors have sought to replicate the achievements of the Marshall Plan in other regions. They have been less successful, in part, because they have tried to replay past policies, rather than understand broader historical trends.²⁵ Marshall and his colleagues did not make that mistake in 1947. They saw strong historical reasons for why postwar turmoil in Europe was dangerous, why Washington should care, and why America should build on-the-ground partnerships with local Europeans. Their sense of historical change led them to reject the standard American separation from Europe and embrace experimentation with new and bold solutions. Historical thinking about alternatives offered an escape from the imprisonment of the past.

This is the best way to understand how a historical sensibility—rather than a mere repetition of historical facts—can help policymakers confronting enormous challenges under conditions of great uncertainty. Reading history offers an opportunity to think about the broad dynamics (economic, geopolitical, and cultural) that influence contemporary events, whether such dynamics are or are not recognized by current actors. Fernand Braudel called this perspective the *longue durée* (the long term),²⁶ and policymakers must indeed take the time to develop (and continually reassess) their understanding of how their immediate crises fit into the long term. Unless they do so, they will never get ahead of the daily pressures. Putting out fires is a technical skill, but anticipating where fires are most

likely to occur, and how they can best be prevented, requires historical awareness.²⁷

A historical sensibility is not only about broad dynamics. It focuses on contingencies and tipping points: places where a focused effort can make an enduring difference. These are the “windows of opportunity” that a policymaker can only identify correctly if he or she understands the relationships among various actors, trends, and events. In the late 1940s American policymakers perceived a window of opportunity in postwar Europe because they recognized the potential partners on the ground, the areas where their incentives would align with U.S. interests, and the extent to which the disjunctures caused by the war had created an opening for decisive action. Reading history can give policymakers the knowledge to identify similar moments and devise plans for them in the present day. A historical sensibility helps one to see the links between various crises and the potential points of leverage for pushing events toward a new result. A historical sensibility builds agency through awareness of connections, and the places where they are susceptible to influence.

This is something that the wisest analysts of statecraft have long understood. Clausewitz famously argued for a historical sensibility in generals because only that would allow them to understand the complex interplay of forces that shaped events on the battlefield, and to identify—and exploit—opportunities as they arose.²⁸ The same logic applies to foreign policy writ large. A sense of how the international landscape is evolving and where the spaces for productive action might exist are key issues in effective leadership. Reading history reminds us that we must lift our heads above the chaos of our in-boxes to find a broader order in events, and to exert influence at critical junctures. American policymakers did this in 1947 because they thought in historical terms about the past and future of postwar Europe. This book aims to encourage similar ways of thinking.

Responsibilities of Historians and Policymakers

Reflections on the need for a historical sensibility bring us to a final point: the reciprocal responsibilities of historians and policymakers. One often detects among historians a sense that the travails of the history-policy relationship reside primarily in the unwillingness of policymakers to engage high-quality history in a serious fashion. As the chapters in this book indicate, there is indeed some truth to this assertion, and policymakers simply

must do a better job of being sensitive to the requirements of employing history effectively. They need to approach the use of history in systematic and rigorous fashion, rather than doing so selectively, carelessly, or disingenuously. As Philip Zelickow emphasizes in his chapter, policymakers cannot treat history as a grab bag of ready-made analogies or a strip mine from which universally relevant lessons can be extracted. Analogies must be carefully scrutinized and weighed against competing analogies; context must be given its due weight in determining the relevance of insights from the past; and the temptation to seek simple affirmation (or ammunition) from history's embrace must be assiduously avoided. Policymakers need to grapple meaningfully with competing interpretations of the past; they need to think seriously about the historical currents and trends that shape their world; and they must be willing to go beyond potted histories and favored writers to engage rigorous academic research on the relevant subjects. Above all, policymakers need to be explicit in recognizing that they will use history whether they acknowledge it or not. The real question is whether they will make the intellectual investment necessary to use it well.

To be clear, we are under no illusion that high-level policymakers will devote days on end to poring over back issues of academic journals; nor do we believe that any of the tasks mentioned above represent a magical formula for resolving tensions in the history-policy relationship. After all, the very nature of history is that it rarely produces a single answer to any problem, and the very nature of policy is that there remain inherent limits on how much effort policymakers can devote to the search for historical insight. To say that perfection is unattainable, however, is not to concede that progress is impossible. To the extent that policymakers can be *more* systematic, *more* rigorous, and *more* deliberate in approaching the use of history—even if only at the margins—we believe that they will be better able to profit from what the past has to offer, and more likely to avoid the common pitfalls that so often plague the history-policy relationship.

These admonitions to policymakers should not stand alone, of course, because historians have responsibilities too. They must begin by avoiding the condescension, narrowness, and insularity that frequently close off their work to policymakers eager for assistance. There are, certainly, numerous historians who avoid these characteristics and whose work combines rigorous scholarship with a policy focus. What is true of individual historians, however, is not broadly true of the discipline as a whole. It is rare indeed

to find a historical journal that encourages authors to include a “policy implications” section in their articles, and the same silence can be found in most books on diplomatic history published by university presses.²⁹ Similarly, historians seem far less likely than their colleagues in political science or international relations to publish in influential opinion-making journals like *Foreign Affairs* or *Foreign Policy*. Nor, unfortunately, is this particularly surprising, because policy-relevant work is generally unrewarded (and sometimes penalized) within the discipline of history. Many historians, especially those who are at the early stage of their careers, are discouraged from acknowledging any policy connection in their work, for fear they might be categorized as unserious or presentist.³⁰

Perhaps most problematic, the relative isolation of scholars from policymakers means that historians rarely have the opportunity to contemplate the challenges that policymakers confront: the severe time pressures and resource constraints, the competing and often irreconcilable demands, the radical uncertainty in which key decisions must be made, and the fact that the alternative to one imperfect option is often something even worse.³¹ Many of these situational factors are not well represented in the extant documents, especially when they are studied as discrete topics and not integrated into a holistic understanding of what it was like for policymakers to deal with multiple issues (and crises) at the same time. From a distance, it is very hard for historians to empathize with policymakers regarding “what it was like to be there.” That is, of course, why so many policymakers view academic history as unhelpful; it is simply out of touch with the realities officials face on a daily basis.

If the history-policy relationship is to work as well as it should, the historical discipline will have to meet the policy world halfway. This means cultivating a professional culture that values relevance as well as originality, and gives its members real incentives to engage directly in policy debates. It means creating attractive, prestigious outlets for such work within the discipline, while also encouraging historians—even young historians—to go beyond an audience of specialists and make their work accessible to those outside the field. Not least, it means balancing the proper and necessary desire to be critical in assessing policy, on the one hand, with empathy and a willingness to engage in constructive dialogue with policymakers, on the other.

If historians are to have real credibility in addressing policy issues, they also need to be more directly involved in the world that they describe. A

profound oddity of diplomatic history is that comparatively few practicing diplomatic historians have spent time working in a policy capacity. There are exceptions, such as Melvyn Leffler, Philip Zelikow, or Richard Immerman, but these examples are notable precisely because they are exceptions. It is relatively rare to hear of young historians serving in government through a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellowship or through the Intergovernmental Personnel Act, for instance, or of historians otherwise taking a more direct role in policy issues while also maintaining good standing within academia.³²

This state of affairs hardly disqualifies historians from producing good scholarship on policy-relevant issues, but it does have the effect of ensuring that the profession as a whole includes too few people who have first-hand knowledge of how the policy world really works on a day-to-day basis. One cannot help but think that this is not a desirable state of affairs, that it would be better for historians and policymakers alike if historians spent more time actively engaged in the sort of activities they write about.³³ More than anything else, a healthy history-policy relationship requires a sustained dialogue between these two fields. Experiences that promote such a dialogue, and make historians better able to comment intelligently on the policy world, should be cultivated by leaders in government and on college campuses.

Special meetings where historians include a token policymaker, or where policymakers call in an ad hoc group of historians, are only a start. Too often the token policymaker happens to affirm the bias of historians, just as the handpicked group of historians shares the prejudice of the policymaker. Even when there is intellectual diversity in the room, it is very difficult for a “guest” policymaker or historian to challenge the deeply held assumptions and preferences of a powerful set of hosts. We must work more diligently and systematically to overcome the entrenched professional divisions, even as we preserve intellectual integrity.

Where Do We Go from Here?

The conference that preceded this volume, and the essays that it produced, are designed to model a new approach to collaboration between historians and policymakers. Scholars and practitioners must make a concerted effort to recognize and transcend their biases by forming enduring intellectual relationships—not just one-off meetings—with major thinkers who

approach the world in different ways. They must listen to each other, acknowledge differences, and make an effort to find points of agreement, as well as continued disagreement. Each chapter in this book reflects these kinds of difficult discussions.

Accuracy is the bedrock of a fruitful relationship between history and policy, and it is based on close attention to evidence. Each of the chapters in this book grapples with a big historical and policy topic by closely assessing a body of evidence. This requires a rigorous effort to understand and to explain; it also involves a serious investigation into how others, often with different views, have analyzed the same evidence. This is the only method of ensuring accuracy: close attention to evidence and broad assessment of different points of view. Accuracy does not require agreement on all things, but it does presuppose that conscientious analysis will allow agreement on many parameters.

A diverse group of practitioners and historians, like those assembled for this book, must work together to examine biases and test accuracy. This is a collaborative effort, and as such, historians should allow their community to expand beyond its disciplinary gatherings. Similarly, policymakers must make space in their offices for historians. The collaboration that we advocate is not about personality as much as it is about the structures of dialogue and the networks of association that drive professionalism. This book is a call for rigorous and intentional professional ecumenism.

Of course, the ecumenism we advocate goes beyond the communities of historians and foreign policy specialists to include other disciplines and professional endeavors. As historians and policymakers increase their level of collaboration, they must also bring in more social scientists, businesspeople, and technology experts, among many others. Our point in this volume is not to privilege historians above other disciplines, but to focus on the foundational importance of historical knowledge and dialogue in international policymaking. The chapters in this book look to open avenues for productive and rigorous cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural collaborations that build on what a more sustained dialogue between historians and practitioners can offer for each of these fields, and many others.

Wisdom comes from an ever-evolving mix of specialized research and generalized understanding. Historians and policymakers need more of both, and they can help each other in their joint pursuits. We have more confidence in a new generation of leaders who search beyond their comfort

zones for wisdom, rather than familiar and predictable answers. This book is an effort in that direction.

Notes

1. George Packer, "What Obama and the Generals Are Reading," *New Yorker*, October 8, 2009 (www.newyorker.com/news/george-packer/what-obama-and-the-generals-are-reading).

2. See Peter Spiegel and Jonathan Weisman, "Behind Afghan War Debate, a Battle of Two Books Rages," *Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 2009.

3. Margaret MacMillan, *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Modern Library, 2009), 8. For representative examples of history's influence on policy and policy debates, see Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton University Press, 1992); Roland Paris, "Kosovo and the Metaphor War," *Political Science Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (Fall 2002), 423–50; David Hoagland Noon, "Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 7, no. 3 (2004), 339–64; and Eliot Cohen, "The Historical Mind and Military Strategy," *Orbis* 49, no. 4 (2005), 575–88.

4. Jeffrey Record, *The Specter of Munich: Reconsidering the Lessons of Appeasing Hitler* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006).

5. As Scot MacDonald notes, in many cases "historical information is only retrieved because it supports current beliefs and is used solely to justify policy chosen by other means." See Scot MacDonald, *Rolling the Iron Dice: Historical Analogies and Decisions to Use Military Force in Regional Contingencies* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000), 11.

6. For some of the scholarly literature, see Ernest May, *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (Oxford University Press, 1973); and Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986). Other important contributions include Khong, *Analogies at War*; John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford University Press, 2004); MacMillan, *Dangerous Games*; Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (Yale University Press, 1991); Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton University Press, 1991); Marc Trachtenberg, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory, and the Logic of International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2012); Gordon Wood, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (New York: Penguin, 2008); William Bain, "Are There Any Lessons of History? The English School and the Activity of Being an Historian," *International Politics* 44 (2007), 513–30; Christopher Hemmer, *Which Lessons Matter? American Foreign Policy Decision Making in the Middle East, 1979–1987* (State University of New York Press, 2000); Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge University Press, 2014);

David Patrick Houghton, "The Role of Analogical Reasoning in Novel Foreign-Policy Situations," *British Journal of Political Science* 26 (1996), 523–52, and other works cited in this chapter and volume. Recent books and articles that engage the history-policy relationship head on include Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Cornell University Press, 2012); Jeremi Suri, *Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama* (New York: Free Press, 2011); John David Lewis, *Nothing Less than Victory: Decisive Wars and the Lessons of History* (Princeton University Press, 2010); Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Cornell University Press, 2014); Williamson Murray, James Lacey, and Richard Sinnreich, eds., *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); William Inboden, "Statecraft, Decision-Making, and the Varieties of Historical Experience: A Taxonomy," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 2 (2014), 291–318; Jeffrey Engel, "Bush, Germany, and the Power of Time: How History Makes History," *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 4 (2013), 639–63; and Jakub Grygiel, "The Primacy of Premodern History," *Security Studies* 22, no. 1 (2013), 1–32.

7. For one recent study that does just this, see Engel, "Bush, Germany, and the Power of Time."

8. Jill Lepore, quoted in Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft*, 2.

9. Howard, *Lessons of History*, 10.

10. Jeffrey Record, *The Perils of Reasoning by Historical Analogy: Munich, Vietnam and American Use of Force since 1945*, Occasional Paper 4 (Center for Strategy and Technology, Air War College: 1998), 23.

11. See Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 367–68. For Bush's comments, see Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "A War on a Small Scale, Possibly Long and Risky," *New York Times*, September 29, 2001; Noon, "Operation Enduring Analogy"; George W. Bush, "Address to a Joint Session of Congress," September 20, 2001, American Presidency Project, University of California–Santa Barbara; and Jacob Weisberg, *The Bush Tragedy* (New York: Random House, 2008), 235–36.

12. Michael Hirsh, "Iraq and Libya Haunt Obama's Syria Policy," *National Journal*, May 2, 2013; Dominic Tierney, "The Obama Doctrine and the Lessons of Iraq," *Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Notes*, May 2012 (www.fpri.org/enotes/05/201205.tierney.obama-doctrine-iraq.html); Spiegel and Weisman, "Behind Afghan War Debate, a Battle of Two Books Rages."

13. For a recent work that employs this approach to good effect, see Niall Ferguson, Charles Maier, Erez Manela, and Daniel Sargent, eds., *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

14. For an article that makes a closely related point, see Francis J. Gavin, "Politics, History and the Ivory Tower–Policy Gap in the Nuclear Proliferation Debate," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 4 (2012), 573–600.

15. See Thomas Mahnken, this volume, chapter 6.

16. On these issues, see Mark Atwood Lawrence, chapter 3, and James Steinberg, chapter 10, this volume. On contrasting lessons from Vietnam, see Mark Moyar, "Grand Strategy after the Vietnam War," *Orbis* 53, no. 4 (2009), 591–610.

17. Record, *Perils of Reasoning by Historical Analogy*, 23. See also MacDonald, *Rolling the Iron Dice*, 116–17; Renee Jeffery, "Evaluating the 'China Threat': Power Transition Theory, the Successor-State Image and the Dangers of Historical Analogies," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 63, no. 2 (2006), 310–11; and Khong, *Analogies at War*, 2–3, 12–13.

18. For a similar point, see Andrew Taylor and John Rourke, "Historical Analogies in the Congressional Foreign Policy Process," *Journal of Politics* 57 (1995), 460–68.

19. Khong, *Analogies at War*, 252.

20. Record, *Perils of Reasoning by Historical Analogy*, 23.

21. On this point, see William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 215–16; and Robert J. Donovan, *Tumultuous Years: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman, 1949–1953* (University of Missouri Press, 1996), 201.

22. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton University Press, 1984), 100–12.

23. See Suri, *Liberty's Surest Guardian*, 124–64; and Neustadt and May, *Thinking in Time*, 247–59.

24. "The 'Marshall Plan' speech at Harvard University, 5 June 1947" (www.oecd.org/general/themarshallplanspeechatharvarduniversity5june1947.htm).

25. On this point, see Suri, *Liberty's Surest Guardian*, esp. 165–265.

26. For a succinct statement of Braudel's historical philosophy, see Fernand Braudel, *On History*, translated by Sarah Matthews (University of Chicago Press, 1982).

27. This is a point that Gaddis makes very well in *The Landscape of History*.

28. Clausewitz, *On War*.

29. To our knowledge, there is only one historical journal—the *Journal of Policy History*—that explicitly lists informing policymakers as part of its mission. Unfortunately, this journal is generally not considered to have a great deal of prestige or influence within the historical profession, nor is it generally thought of as a forum in which leading diplomatic historians place their work.

30. In 1999, for instance, one historian attacked Melvyn Leffler and John Gaddis for having "access to the pages of the establishment's in-house organ *Foreign Affairs*." It might also be noted that this critique was made as part of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations' Stuart L. Bernath Memorial Lecture. See Robert Buzzanco, "What Happened to the New Left? Toward a Radical Reading of American Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 4 (1999), 597.

31. For critiques of this tendency in scholars, and arguments that academics must be more sensitive to these dynamics, see Francis Bator, “No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,” *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 3 (2008), 309–40. See also Francis J. Gavin and James B. Steinberg, “Mind the Gap: Why Policymakers and Scholars Ignore Each Other, and What Should Be Done about It,” *Carnegie Reporter* 6, no. 4 (2012; <http://carnegie.org/publications/carnegie-reporter/single/view/article/item/308/>). For a book that is emblematic of these tendencies, see Shane Maddock, *Nuclear Apartheid: The Quest for American Atomic Supremacy from World War II to the Present* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010). For a book that admirably mixes criticism with empathy, see Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford University Press, 1992).

32. During the 2012–13 and 2013–14 academic years, for instance, not a single historian served as a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow, while numerous political science and international relations scholars took part in the program. This outcome was not particularly exceptional; similar trends have been at work for some time. In 2015, however, two historians were awarded the fellowships. See Council on Foreign Relations, “International Affairs Fellowship: The Program,” www.cfr.org/thinktank/fellowships/iaf.html; and “International Affairs Fellows: 1967–2013” (http://i.cfr.org/content/thinktank/2013_IAF_Historical_List.pdf).

33. A good model in this regard is Leffler, who has written in *A Preponderance of Power*, xii, that the year he spent working in the Pentagon in 1980–81 gave him “a much better grasp of how the government functions,” insights he put to good use in writing the book. Or one might look to the example of Richard Immerman, who spent two years working in high-level positions at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence from 2005 to 2007.