5 Thinking historically

A guide for policy

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There is a renewed interest in exploring how history and historians might contribute to the policy-making process. Several impressive initiatives have been created, both in the United States and abroad. Recently, Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson have recommended that the next president of the United States create a White House Council of Historical Advisors, staffed by scholars who go beyond simply studying the past 'for its own sake' and instead pursue what they call applied history. 'Applied historians would take a current predicament and try to identify analogues in the past. Their ultimate goal would be to find clues about what is likely to happen, then suggest possible policy interventions and assess probable consequences' (Graham and Ferguson 2016). This builds upon a similar plea, made over 40 years ago, by the historian Ernest May. Worried in the aftermath of the Vietnam War that policy-makers used history poorly, May (1973: 190) claimed 'nothing is more important than that professional historians discover means of addressing directly, succinctly, and promptly the needs of people who govern'.

How should we think about and assess efforts to apply the past to contemporary and future policy? How can policy-makers gain from engaging the past, and what might historians contribute to better governance and decision-making? And what are the prospects for applied history? As this volume highlights, there are important epistemological, political, and ethical dimensions of these questions. From a political perspective, historians have not been key parts of the conversation with policy-makers. At times, this is because policy-makers demand certainty and prediction, whereas historians traffic in uncertainty, unintended consequences, and context. Other times, it is the historians who resist engagement. There are a variety of reasons for this, but ethical ones stand out. First, most academic historians see their role as confronting and challenging power and those that hold it, not providing tools for statecraft. Second, historians have moved with great innovation in recent decades to better reflect and capture the underrepresented voices of those without power. Writing to aid those in policy can be uncomfortable. Yet wrestling with these very dilemmas – how to represent varying perspectives, and challenging the simple use of knowledge to advance power and the powerful – can inject a sensibility into the policy process that can make it not only more effective, but also more just. Social

science, despite its other benefits, rarely tackles the ethical dimensions of power that are the stock-in-trade of historians.

This chapter proceeds as follows. The first section examines the epistemological issues surrounding prevision, highlighting how a historical sensibility links the past to the present and future. The second section suggests five tools a historical sensibility can provide to policy-makers trying to make sense of a complex world and uncertain future. The third provides additional lessons or insights that highlight both the challenges and promise of using history for prevision.

A historical sensibility as a bridge between the past and the future

Using history for policy-making can be complicated and, if not handled judiciously, counterproductive. On the one hand, everyone reasons from historical analogy, and policy-makers invariably search the past for usable lessons to help them navigate complex situations and make difficult choices (for an excellent overview of how policy-makers use history, see Inboden 2014). On the other, the past is often misunderstood, misappropriated, and/or misused, and even in the best hands, history rarely provides point predictions or recommends specific courses of action. Untamed, history is a dangerous and mercurial lover, who will always tell you what you want to hear. Or to paraphrase A. J. P. Taylor (1963), 'men learn from their past mistakes how to make new ones'.

I have written elsewhere about the possibilities and problems with effectively employing a historical approach to policy (Gavin 2007). This is especially true when it comes to the interest of policy-makers in prevision, a concern historians understand and value differently. Part of the issue is that historians and policy-makers have different goals and interests. History cannot tell a decision-maker what policy to choose, and the typical historian's answer to a question – 'well, it is complicated' – is frustrating to a person making decisions under time pressures, and often reinforces the policy-maker's suspicion that scholars are obtuse and irrelevant. It may even paralyze the analyst: 'Understanding the complexity of human affairs, seeing clearly both sides of all issues, knowing that few things work out the way we intend, may breed in us caution and indecisiveness' (Wood 2009: 15). Furthermore, history often eschews the underlying epistemological foundations many social scientists believe necessary for prevision. Historians often fail to be explicit about the conceptual foundations of their work, nor do they acknowledge, let alone specify, what theories of the world drive their questions, how their evidence is selected, how a causal hierarchy is conceived, and how a narrative is constructed. Few believe this vagueness is a problem. Nor does history provide much in the way of generalizable principles or theories to frame policy. There is little effort in academic history to prioritize subjects from the past, and one can easily get the sense that 'anything matters'. While historians, more than most disciplines, recognize the problems of subjectivity and perspective, they make very little effort to get around it. An obsession

with history can blind an observer to new trends, new patterns, and departures from the past.

The historian, for her part, can be skeptical about how the policy-maker is using the past in their policy-making, both for intellectual and ethical reasons. As Margaret MacMillan (2009) points out, ‘History can be helpful; it can also be very dangerous’. The scholar fears that history – and especially historical analogies – will be used less to explain or understand than to justify a position or provide comfort. Historians are painfully aware that the modern state building project and the rise of many of the academic social sciences has gone hand in hand, for both good and ill. Narratives of the past are often misused for the foundation for national myths, to overlook injustice or mistakes. Oftentimes, historians find their carefully undertaken research distorted for political purposes. Consider John Dower, who found his award winning historical work on the occupation of Japan misused by the George W. Bush administration in its defence of its policies in Iraq. ‘They keep on hitting it and hitting it and hitting it and it’s always more and more implausible, strange and in a fantasy world. They’re desperately groping for a historical analogy, and their uses of history are really perverse’ (Zenilman 2007).

Clearly, there are powerful reasons for policy-makers and historians to be wary of one another, and in particular, to be skeptical of the concept of applied history. That said, to misquote Churchill, history may be the worst academic discipline to help decision-makers, save for all the others. Or to put it another way, many of history’s greatest weakness are also its strengths. The most powerful argument for engaging history, I would argue, is less its substantive or methodological advantages than something harder to define: Engaging the past in a serious and sustained way helps a decision-maker to develop a historical temperament or sensibility.What do I mean by a ‘historical sensibility’? It goes beyond our notions as to *what* historians do: Collecting evidence, largely from archives, to tell stories about the past. I define it as a familiarity with the past and its powerful and often unpredictable rhythms. A historical sensibility is less a method than a practice, a mental awareness, discernment, responsiveness to the past and how it unfolded into our present world. Developing this sensibility can provide many benefits and insights to the decision-maker facing complex issues and radical uncertainty about the future, not the least of which is humility and prudence. Scholar and policy-maker Eliot Cohen has termed it the ‘historical mind’, which he aptly describes as a ‘way of thinking shaped by one’s reading of history and by using history as a mode of inquiry and a framework for thinking about problems’ (Cohen 2005: 575). The combination of history with concerns about present and future policy is not as unusual as may first seem. All history is to some extent contemporary history, while all policy choices emerge from decisions made in the past.

What are the qualities to this orientation, and how can one obtain it? A historical sensibility includes several characteristics. First, this sensibility demonstrates a toleration and even appreciation of uncertainty, surprise, and unintended consequences in human affairs, and a comfort with indeterminacy

and multi-causal explanations. It makes the unfamiliar familiar, while revealing the unfamiliar in what was believed was well understood. Furthermore, the historical sensibility provides an empathy (though not necessarily a sympathy) for the past, a willingness to understand historical subjects on their own terms and as products of a particular time and place. This also means developing a consciousness of the powerful hold that history exerts on other cultures, leaders, and nations. It also acknowledges the fundamental importance of the perspective of the observer. Though the historian strives for an elusive objectivity, she admits that the who, what, and when of the historian matter quite a bit when reconstructing the past. Finally, a historical sensibility recognizes and appreciates complexity, and though willing to be proven wrong, casts a skeptical eye on claims of parsimonious models that claim to explain, generalize, and predict complex social, cultural, and political behaviour. As Gordon Wood (2009: 11) eloquently stated:

> To possess a historical sense does not mean simply to possess information about the past. It means to have a different consciousness, a historical consciousness, to have incorporated into our minds a mode of understanding that profoundly influences the way we look at the world.

It is important to note that the historian does not develop his or her sensibility solely (or even primarily) to aid policy. In fact, the term ‘policy relevance’, which suggests that scholarship should be tethered to the aims of the state and government, is potentially off-putting. Furthermore, historians have different views of what we mean by expertise and who does and should exercise authority. The better term, to my mind, is ‘public minded’ (for a helpful essay that breaks down the elements of policy-oriented scholarship, see Horowitz 2015). While this is fodder for a whole different essay, there is little doubt that academic history as a discipline has, unfortunately, over the past four or five decades become increasingly obsessed with issues and subjects of little interest to a larger public (and often, it must be said, of little interest to other historians either). Engaging the concerns of audiences outside the ivory tower, to develop a public mindedness, can generate enormous civic benefits without a scholar feeling as if they have lost their objectivity or become corrupted by connections to politics and power. In other words, a historical sensibility can provide insight and value without necessarily becoming applied or involve hiring professional historians to work in the government. It would be a ‘declaration of bankruptcy on the part of historical scholarship if the work of the historian stopped short of the most burning issues of the day’ (Gilbert 1970: xi).

There are at least two possible objections to my suggestion that policymakers develop a historical sensibility. First – and understandably – few nonhistorians want to hear about such intangible traits or a quality as elusive as a ‘sensibility’, which come, if at all, after years of historical study. To the more scientifically oriented, this sounds like mystic nonsense, and to the harried, time pressured decision-maker, unusable gobblydegook. Few have the time,

inclination, or luxury to develop a 'sensibility' overnight. Part of the blame, it should be pointed out, stems from an identity crisis within history itself. Consensus on method, mission, and purpose has long eluded the academic historical undertaking. Within universities, historians are as likely to be found within a humanities school as a division of social science. Outsiders might be surprised to learn that one of history's most esteemed practitioners, Jacques Barzun (1974: 24), believed 'History has no need of mathematical precision because it deals with activity and not process.' To Barzun (1974: 24), 'History owns affinity with art, poetry, philosophy, and religion, to which few would deny the possibility of precision and truth though they are untestable by rule.' It is hard to imagine an applied version of what Barzun practised.

A second critique is whether this sense for the past has any use for understanding the present or the future. In other words, can one 'think historically' in the present tense, and undertake contemporary historical analysis? Some historians believe that doing history in 'real-time' is impossible for two reasons: First, good historical work demands perspective, which only comes with the passage of time, and second, historical materials, especially sensitive documents, are often classified and left closed in archives for years if not decades. According to Bruce Kuklick (2006: 159), 'Historical knowledge depends on a temporal perspective. Events take on their historical meaning with the passage of time.' Any effort to do history in real time will be burdened by contemporary prejudices and perspectives, and lack the kind of first-hand evidence historians crave.

There is merit to this critique. It would be unfortunate, however, to deny policy-makers the benefits of a historical approach simply because circumstances are not ideal. The first point to make is that all historical work reveals the bias and assumptions of the time it was written. It is hard to read Christopher Clark's description of the Black Hand of Serbia in *The Sleepwalkers* and not think of Pakistan or Islamic terror groups. As Simon Schama (1989: xiii) explained in his masterwork on the French Revolution, *Citizens*, 'Historians have been overconfident about the wisdom to be gained by distance, believing it somehow confers objectivity, one of those unattainable values in which they have placed so much faith.' A historically oriented analyst might actually be more aware of their own biases and work harder to overcome them. The second point involves evidence. While documents may be classified, the contemporary observer may have access to far more (open source) evidence, including their own experiences, which are perishable over time. There is a reason that detectives try to solve capital crimes within the first 48 hours they are committed, because evidence quickly disappears after too long.[1] The absence of evidence can also provide a false unanimity. Historical consensus on a distant event in the Middle Ages might be easier to achieve, because the evidence is so rare.

Contemporary historical analysis, therefore, can provide powerful insights. E. H Carr (1961: 22), quoting Croce, reminds us that 'all history is "contemporary history"'. Whether looking at the past or current events, Carr (this time quoting Lord Acton) tells us that 'history must be our deliverer not only

from the undue influence of other times, but from the undue influence of our own, from the tyranny of environment and the pressure of the air we breathe' (1961: 44). Certainly, this way of thinking, this lens for understanding the world around us, can provide insight for a decision-maker.

Five uses of the historian's microscope

Understandably, the practice of history is expected to provide more than a sensibility. Are there tools and methods historians offer that go beyond temperament or sensibility? For many historians, the term 'applied' may be too brusque and clinical. Historians argue over what happened in the past and why, and embrace a wide range of methods and tools to construct their narratives. Even if you could get them to agree these histories and practices could be applied profitably to the present – a difficult task – it would be impossible to achieve consensus on the best way to do so.

Perhaps a better model is one developed by historian and policy-maker Philip Zelikow, comparing how one understands and assesses the past to how certain biological sciences work. According to Zelikow, the analyst possesses two ways to assess and understand the past. The first is through a macro view comparable to 'gross anatomy', where simplification and generalizations are the rule. Social scientists, like macroeconomists and international relation theorists pursue this path, as do, if to a far lesser extent, historians. The historian, however, also assesses the past through the micro level, where the 'historian's microscope' must be used to understand the confounding complexity and unusualness of the past:

> The path of complexity is difficult, but the rewards include more lifelike fitness training for the intellect. And seen through a microscope, including a historian's microscope, the world can be far stranger and more fascinating than anything that can be seen by the unaided eye.
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> (Zelikow 2015: 282–3)

The best historical work, and the adept historical sensibility, combines and integrates the best insights from both of these methods, to develop both a better understanding of the past and what it can tell us – and not tell us – about the choices and circumstances we face today. Sympathetic to the concerns of both the social scientist and the decision-maker, I identified five tools, lessons, and advantages a historical approach might provide to a policy-maker.

First, history allows us to understand the vertical origins of an event, and to identify and better understand the differences and interactions between long-, medium-, and short-term causes, or what John Lewis Gaddis (2002: 95) terms the immediate, the intermediate, and the distant. This is an obvious lesson – to understand where you are, you have to understand where you came from. But even constructing that narrative involves making important choices about causality and what matters in the world, choices that should be examined rigorously.

First, history sensitizes us to what may appear important in real time but has few long-term consequences, and vice versa. Once the important issues are identified, one can explore various temporal perspectives. A study of the origins of the First World War might, if it focused on shorter factors, concentrate on the failed diplomacy and provocative military plans that dominated events in July of 1914. Concentrating on medium-term causes would bring factors like shifting alliances or arms races into play. Long-term factors, including the dramatic demographic, socio-cultural, and economic forces reshaping Europe in the decades must have played an important role in the story. Which forces mattered more, and how did they interact? History can rarely answer those questions decisively, but undergoing such an exercise allows a decision-maker to challenge their assumptions about causality in ways that might lead to better policy. History can also illuminate the relationship between structure and contingency, which can be of enormous use to policy-makers wrestling with what factors they can change through policy and what they must accept.

Second, history helps the policy-maker recognize that historical understanding works over space, or horizontally, as well as over time, or vertically. In other words, few policy decisions can be isolated and cut off from other important, contemporaneous issues or concerns. A US decision on how to treat Iran's nuclear programme, for example, has second-order consequences on American policy towards a range of other countries and questions. Policy-makers understand this instinctively: A decision or a non-decision about a policy can have policy consequences for a range of related issues, with all sorts of second-order effects. Social science often tries to isolate a phenomenon, to study it in isolation from the complex connections it may have with the world around it.

Third, an understanding of the past sensitizes us to unintended consequences of actions. When Eisenhower approved financing for a massive damn in Afghanistan in the 1950s, he hoped to improve agricultural productivity in a developing nation, not make possible the creation of one of the world's largest opium fields. Nor did American leaders seek to lose a war in Southeast Asia to fully expose and take advantage of the Sino-Soviet spit. History reveals the wide gaps between intentions, actions, and consequences.

Fourth, history teaches decision-makers about something I call 'chronological proportionality', or the weight of historical events. The issues that most grab our attention today – and dominate the headlines of newspapers – are not likely to be the questions that have the most important long-term consequences. In 1967–68, American newspapers had far more print on the war in Vietnam than on the nuclear nonproliferation treaty, the Six-Day War in the Middle East, or the political changes in China and Eastern Europe, but what event mattered most to long-term US and global interests from our current perspective? Or consider historian Erez Manela's path-breaking working on US policy towards global efforts to eradicate smallpox during the same period. During the first seven decades of the twentieth century, 300 million people died of smallpox, twice the number killed by wars during the same period. In 1967, two million

people fell to smallpox; less than a decade later, the disease was eradicated. Manela (2010)[2] demonstrates how a combination of factors and actors came together, far below the level of high policy but still the result of discrete decisions, to generate policy outcomes that had profound global consequences that few recognized at the time or since. It is not always clear in real-time what matters most, though a historical sensibility can sensitize us to look for real-world consequences in unusual places.

Fifth, history conditions decision-makers to understand that policy decisions made in world capitals are often far less important in shaping what matters in the world than other, often less visible historical forces. Culture, technology, demographics, and geography, for example – all are critical forces that are less pliable to policy than we often think. These powerful but often unrecognized historical forces are the focus of my current book project – *California Dreaming: The 1970s and the Rebirth of American Power*. From the vantage point of Washington DC, there appeared to be little policy-makers could do to arrest the relative economic, military, political, and cultural malaise of the United States during that critical decade. Three events took place within a very short period of time: first, the sale of the early Apple personal computer; second, the release of Star Wars, the highest grossing motion picture of all time; third, the famous 1976 'judgement of Paris' where previously unknown wines from Napa Valley bested established French wines in a blind taste test. In other words, policy-makers in Washington in the mid-1970s, pouring over economic data, looking at crime statistics and urban crisis, witnessing political chaos abroad, and fearing a Soviet military behemoth that appeared to be winning the arms race, had little reason to be optimistic about the future. But the future was being made elsewhere and in different ways than policy-makers understood, in places like California, where deep and often obscure historical forces were working to transform the United States economy, society, technological base, and culture in ways that would have profound effects on American power and world history.

History and complexity: warnings, cautions, and insights

While these five historical concepts are useful, they are not especially profound or original – which is part of their appeal and power. Most decision-makers understand that there are short-, medium-, and long-term causes, or that their decisions have unintended consequences and that the world is shaped by many factors beyond the influence of simple policy interventions. Can a historical sensibility provide even more insight for policy-makers? Can the lessons of the past go beyond the obvious, to provide even sharper lenses for Zelikow's microscope? I believe it can. The final four 'tricks of the trade' might be thought of less as 'tools' or lessons than warnings, cautions, and guides to navigate the complex landscapes of the past, which are often full of shadows and false routes, while offering ways to apply these lessons to the present and future. Understanding these cautions and insights may allow for historical work to

be used more effectively to engage large public questions. They may also soften some of the ethical and political concerns that often prevent historians and policy-makers from deeper engagement.

The sixth insight historical sensibility should allow for is a rigorous 'stress-testing' of historical analogies. Every policy-maker uses analogies from the past, although they often do it in overly simplistic or misguided ways. May and Neustadt convincingly argued that teaching policy-makers to vigorously examine these analogies was a lot like teaching sex education to teenagers. Since, regardless of what you say or do, teenagers are going to have sex and policy-makers are going to borrow analogies from the past, at least they should do so safely and with some enjoyment. Or as John Gaddis (2002: 9), inspired by Machiavelli, states, 'we're bound to learn from the past whether or not we make the effort, since it's the only data base we have', so 'we might as well try to do it systematically'.

When interrogating analogies, it is important to remember that events from the past often produce distinct and contradictory lessons and analogies, which can be used in more than one way. James Steinberg (2016: 237–52) – looking at the policy process towards the Balkan crisis in the 1990s – demonstrates how the same historical event meant different things to different people and governments, and provided contrasting historical lessons. This does not surprise historians – we are comfortable that the study of the past provides little consensus and is full of contradictions – but this insight should force consumers of historical analogies to test their own assumptions and avoid seeking self-confirming evidence from the past. As Eliot Cohen (2005: 579) wisely suggests, a historical sensibility should view analogies 'with grave suspicion because it is exceptionally sensitive to context; it looks for uniqueness much more than commonality'. Steinberg argues there are three steps to developing and testing a historical analogy: collecting evidence and facts, developing a historical interpretation, and comparing and contrasting competing analogies and interpretations. Steinberg correctly suggests that decision-makers do not focus as much as they should on the third task. The careful use of historical counterfactuals can be useful in such an exercise (Gavin 2015).

Seventh, a deep historical perspective should allow the decision-maker to avoid outcome or retrospective bias, or fall into the trap of what I call 'understanding the Third Balkan War'. We study, argue, and even obsess over the July 1914 crisis largely (and understandably) because of the horrors that followed: a catastrophic and largely senseless world war that killed countless millions and unleashed years of radical revolution, pandemics, genocide, economic disaster, and a second, even more bloody world war. We look at the folly of July 1914 through the horrific aftermath that we still live with. But that is not how policy-makers living at the time thought about it – they had no idea what the future held. We often forget that they had gone through numerous political crises in the decade before and had escaped without danger or global conflagration. When crises did lead to conflict, the wars were localized – the first and second Balkan Wars. While some policy-makers dreaded and feared the worst, many in

July 1914 thought a war would be short or even localized – a Third Balkan War. That they were tragically wrong does not remove our responsibility as historians and decision-makers to better understand how they viewed the world, and to not interpret their actions and policies through the lens of the horrors that were to follow (horrors which surely would have given them pause).

As former National Security Advisor Sandy Berger pointed out, 'History is written through a rear-view mirror but it unfolds through a foggy windshield' (Wall Street Journal 2004). The past should be used in a way that avoids 'the curse of knowledge', or the cognitive bias that emerges when, in hindsight, we wrongly believe that a historical outcome was more predictable than was likely the case. Since we know how past events have turned out, we can easily assume that the causal path that led to the event was inevitable. But most complex and difficult policy choices involve what former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has called '51/49' decisions: In other words, it is very difficult to know, a priori, whether a difficult policy choice will turn out correctly, even if in retrospect it seemed obvious. This is true for good policies as well as bad. Few observers or even participants would argue that the process the Obama administration undertook to rid Syria of chemical weapons in the summer of 2014 was anything close to ideal, even if the outcome may have been a good one. By the same token, an ideal process can easily lead to undesirable outcomes. Factors such as luck or bad weather can derail the best-laid plans, as Phillip II of Spain could have attested.

This point relates to why we should be careful not to cherry-pick events from the past or be unaware of horizontal connections, as mentioned above. During what Fred Logevall has called the 'long 1964', the Johnson administration made what was, in retrospect, a tragic and unwise decision to escalate the United States role in the war in Southeast Asia. Looked at both in hindsight – we know the outcome – and in isolation – just focusing on American policy in Southeast Asia – President Johnson and his advisors look inept. At the same time, however, the same administration carried out an impressive debate and discussion of how to respond to what was seen as a far greater long-term danger – the Peoples' Republic of China's detonation of an atomic device in October 1964. This process led to a sophisticated and successful nuclear nonproliferation policy that resulted in the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and established the principles that guide US policy to this day. Did the same people who crafted these complex strategies simply lose 20 IQ points when the discussion turned to Vietnam? In fact, making policy in real time is extraordinarily difficult, and history should avoid simplistic judgements based solely on future outcomes that could not be anticipated.

By the same token, historical thinking can help the analyst avoid what I call the fallacy of the last out. We've all seen a baseball game where the outcome is decided by a hit with two outs in the ninth, or a football game that is decided by a missed field goal in the last seconds of the game. The natural temptation is to engage in a counterfactual exercise that changes the last, most visible variable or event – striking out or making the field goal – to produce a different outcome.

This is similar to scholars who obsess over a missed telegram in the last days of the July 1914 crisis. These events matter, of course, but focusing too much on them may obscure the larger causal story driving events. A run scored in the fourth inning or a field goal missed in the first half matters as much to the final score, but we are less likely to study what generated those outcomes.

The eighth insight that emerges from a deep historical awareness is an understanding that while time unfolds in a linear manner, history, the causal changes from the past that we care about, often do not. The biologist Stephen J. Gould originated the hypothesis that evolutionary development does not unfold in a linear, arithmetic manner, but is instead marked by isolated episodes of rapid speciation between long periods of little or no change. While much of history unfolds in a gradual manner, some phenomena explode onto the scene in a manner that 'accelerates' history. In other words, for some of the causal phenomena we care about, there might what might be thought of as a 'velocity' of history, where under certain conditions things move exponential faster than in more stable times. After the start of the First World War in 1914, for example, politics, both domestic and international, changed faster and in more dramatic ways than ever before. Important aspects of European history may have been in the biological equivalent of *stasis*, with slow and linear changes in the century after the Congress of Vienna, but what might be seen as *speciation*, or new forms of revolutionary politics, war, and culture, exploded onto the scene in the years after 1914. The political revolutions in Europe in 1989 might be thought of in a similar way. C. Vann Woodward, explaining why James McPherson's monumental history of the US Civil War was both the longest volume in the Oxford History of America series while chronicling the shortest period, makes this point clearly:

> Precious little correlation exists between the importance, complexity, and abundance of historical events and the length of the time it takes for them to occur. Some history of momentous consequence requires centuries to unfold, while history of comparable importance can take place with staggering speed.
>
> (Van Woodward 1989: 1)

History helps policy-makers recognize that not all periods and events unfold at the same velocity or with the same complexity and consequence.

This awareness that history is not linear can provide two further insights to understand the contemporary world. First, an engagement with the past can actually help one better 'escape' the past, or recognize when an event or phenomena is actually new, with little historical precedent. There is very little the Crimean or War of Jenkin's Ear can tell us about thermonuclear weapons and how they transform issues of war and peace and world politics. There are times that history does not repeat itself and the world does produce something new. Consider the role that oral contraceptives had in transforming the standing of women; arguably, this safe, modern technology to control their reproductive

cycles allowed women to escape long-standing political, socio-cultural, and economic burdens and utterly transform their role in the world. Or consider the rise of political and even cultural tolerance for people of different experiences and backgrounds more generally, regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation. While there are certainly antecedents, one might argue that the acceptance of human diversity (and the recent national and global backlashes against it) is relatively unprecedented in human history. Transformative technologies, profound normative changes, economic and political revolutions – a historical sensibility better prepares the policy-maker to recognize what is 'old wine in new bottles' and what is truly unprecedented.

Recognizing history is not always linear provides another insight – awareness of the history of things that did not happen or that may be hard to measure or assess. Political scientists call this 'selection effects'. Consider the almost complete disappearance of the horror of mass mobilized, great power wars of conquest in the eight decades after the Second World War. Many analysts attribute this to the power of nuclear deterrence. Few if any political goals are worth the risk of receiving a nuclear response in response to invading a foe with atomic weapons. To understand the history of the post-war years, we are largely interested in the history that *did not* happen – great power war. In other words, to understand post-war peace, we have to understand nuclear deterrence, which means we have to understand the history of things that did not happen that might have otherwise occurred in a non-nuclear world. This is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible to do. Furthermore, the characteristics we believe shaped and helped nuclear deterrence succeed – fear, uncertainty, resolve, and credibility – are hard to measure in an individual, to say nothing of a state or an international system.

Finally, a historical sensibility conditions the observer to recognize perspective. We know that it is important to understand how others view and understand the past. But there is also a temporal aspect to perspective. Imagine a country that possessed the world's eighth or ninth largest economy, which was politically dominated by its aggressive military and surrounded by seemingly insurmountable security challenges. Let's say you told the leaders of that country – follow the grand strategy I suggest, and in a very short period of time, from a historical perspective, you will possess the world's second largest economy, built on a thriving technological base, be relatively secure, and develop a healthy democracy and a civic culture that was largely pacifistic. A country would have to be crazy to pass up that deal, but it effectively describes a nation – Japan in 1940 compared to 1970 – that pursued a disastrous war that left its country in ruin. Or imagine this exercise – a publisher provides a scholar with 300 pages to write the history of the world between 1945 and 1990. Even though the subject and end date would remain the same, we can easily imagine the book chapters might look much different when revised in 2000, 2020, or 2045, than it would when originally published in 1990. History reveals that how you assess the past does not only involve who is involved, but when the question is asked.

Perspective also encourages the policy-maker to challenge their assumptions and constantly revise their understanding of the past. Many things we believe to be true are not. Consider the story of Ty Cobb. Baseball fans recognize Cobb as the greatest hitter who ever lived, but they also grew up with stories of his mean-spiritedness, cheating, violence, and racism, hated by his fellow baseball players. This image was repeated in various forums over the years and accepted as gospel truth, until Charles Leerhsen started researching a biography and soon recognized that the received wisdom was completely wrong (see Leerhsen 2016a, 2016b).[3] It turns out Cobb was an avid student of history descended from a long line of abolitionists who enjoyed acting on the stage. While he was a passionate and aggressive ball-player, Cobb was well respected and liked by his contemporaries, and demonstrated a racial sensitivity unusual for the age. Leehrsen highlights why the myth of the terrible Cobb emerged – an unscrupulous biographer Al Stump simply made up sensational stories to sell books – and why it persisted for decades. ‘It is easy to understand why this is the prevailing view. People have been told that Cobb was a bad man over and over, all of their lives. The repetition felt like evidence’ (Leerhsen 2016b).

Conclusion

The renewed interest in using history as a guide to policy is welcome. It should be pursued, however, with caution. It sits awkwardly but proudly between the humanities and the social sciences. History provides few ‘off the shelf’ lessons, makes no predictions, and resists easily generalization. It is better at demonstrating what an event or phenomena *is not* than identifying what it is. History is as likely to be misused than provide lessons, and it often resists efforts to become ‘applied’. Compared to its other, more muscular cousins in the social sciences, history can look anemic. ‘Unlike sociology, political science, psychology, and the other social sciences, which tend to breed confidence in managing the future, history tends to inculcate skepticism about our ability to manipulate and control purposefully our destiny’ (Wood 2009: 14).

Historians are also strange people, very different from policy-makers, at times intellectually chaste and at others times wildly promiscuous. Chaste in their obsession to uncover ever last shred of evidence, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant; promiscuous in their ability to create whole worlds and civilizations on the written page largely from their imaginations. What other avocation could obsessively fight over the precise timing of a telegram sent between two political leaders on the eve of war in 1914 but boldly and out of thin air name and define whole historical periods? It is easy to forget that categories such as the Middle Ages or the Renaissance or the Modern World do not exist in nature but are instead the creative result of the historian’s imagination, or that the very concept of a ‘French Revolution’ was not solidified until established by historians almost a half-century after the event (Schama 1989: 7). Bringing this world of history together with policy is not easy or natural.

I would never suggest, however, that the effort is not worth it. History's gift of perspective, insight, empathy, and humility are powerful tools for statecraft. History allows you to see, if not understand, the broader and more complex world in which events take place. As former Secretary of State and historian Henry Kissinger told an audience at Harvard, the 'knowledge of history was essential for grasping the broader political context in which decisions must be made' (Walt 2012). Kissinger is absolutely right that 'a grounding in history as essential for understanding how different people see the world, and also for knowing something about the limits of the possible' (Walt 2012). It was crucial that 'one should study history in order to see why nations and men succeeded and why they failed' (Allison 2015). The complexity of world politics, according to the former Secretary of State, demands that the United States and its leaders 'operate within the attainable and to be prepared to pursue ultimate ends by the accumulation of nuance' (Kissinger 2009) . The accumulation of nuance is one thing historians do especially well. If nothing else, policy-makers learning the history of other nation's may be an inexpensive way of avoiding future mistakes. As John Jay observed in Federalist Number 5, 'the history of Great Britain is the one with which we are in general the best acquainted, and it gives us many useful lessons. We may profit by their experience without paying the price which it cost them.'[4]

Like all things worthwhile, however, this blend of history and policy is not easily achieved nor will it be a magic elixir. Knowledge is no guarantee of success; the double firsts Sir Anthony Eden earned in Persian and Arabic while at Oxford did not prevent him from pursuing disastrous policies towards Iran and Egypt when he was the prime minister of Great Britain. History can offer lessons, insights, and even methods, though they are often meager and must be used cautiously and with care. The most important quality of a historical sensibility, the most valuable gift provided by an immersion in the past, is humility. From the world of social science, where bold predictions and generalizations are the realm of the coin, and from the universe of policy-makers, where difficult choices demand clear answers and decision can have enormous consequences, this may not seem like much. Perhaps that is the point – making difficult decisions facing complexity and the radical uncertainty of the future is very hard (Gavin and Steinberg 2012). Even the best ideas will only help so much, though given the stakes, even those marginal improvements are well worth seeking. Perhaps it is helpful to remember the words of Sir Michael Howard (1981: 14), paraphrasing Jacob Burckhardt: 'The true use of history, whether civil or military, is not to make man clever for the next time, it is to make him wise forever.'

Notes

1 I am grateful to Erik Sand and Jim Steinberg for these insights.

2 A key element was the Johnson administration's decision, as part of an effort to improve its global standing during the Vietnam War, to accept the Soviet Union's offer to cooperate on the World Health Organization's smallpox eradication programme (SEP). But far more was involved than simply high policy:

> But the history of the SEP is more than just a story of interstate relations, and writing it into Cold War history requires us to adopt a broader conception of international society, one that combines attention to state actors with recognition of the role played by international organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), multinational corporations, and transnational 'epistemic communities' that produce, circulate, and deploy expert knowledge.
>
> (Manela 2014)

3 For a more recent version of how one must read even accomplished biographers very carefully, see Inboden (2016).

4 I am grateful to Will Inboden for this insight.

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