The Wittrock Lecture Book Series
No. v

FREDRIK LOGEVALL

SWEDISH
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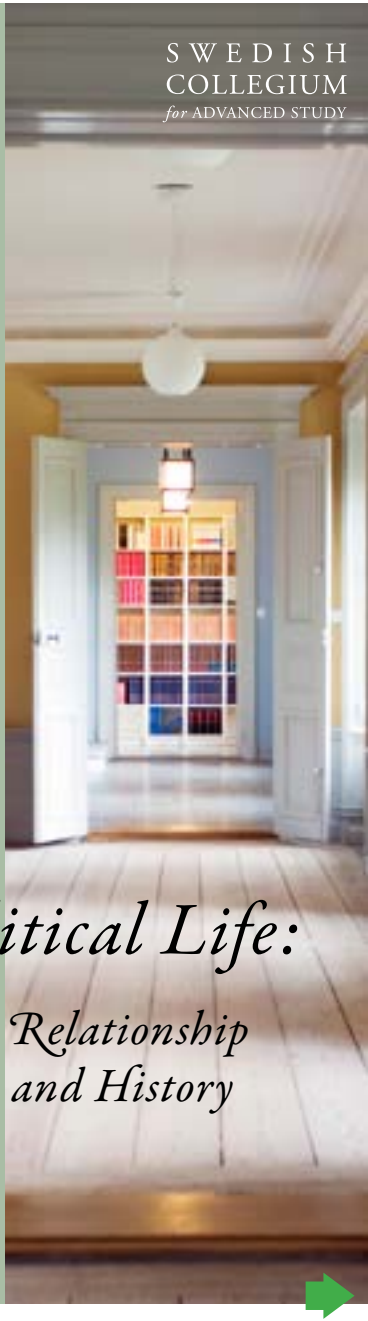
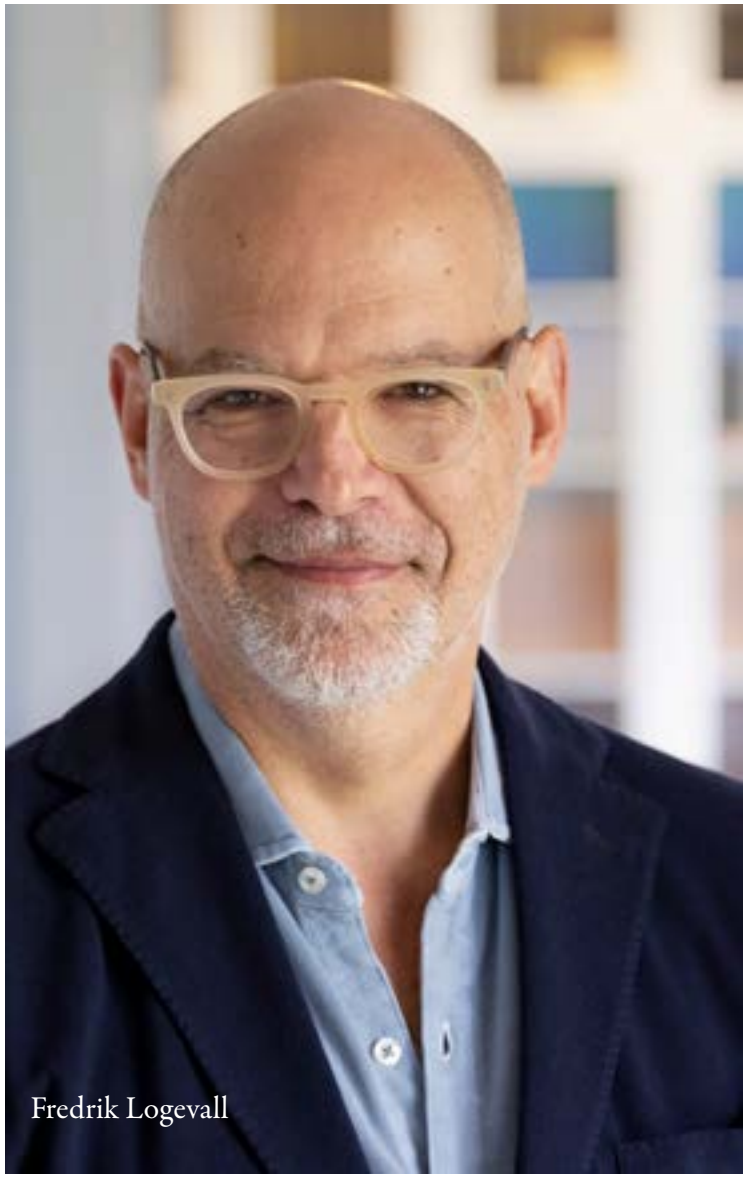


Writing a Political Life:

On the Challenging Relationship Between Biography and History



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On the Challenging Relationship Between Biography and History

FREDRIK LOGEVALL

The Fifth Wittrock Lecture,
held in Uppsala on 16 February 2023

SWEDISH COLLEGIUM FOR ADVANCED STUDY (SCAS)

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Foreword

The Wittrock Lecture Series was instigated in 2019, in honour of the contributions of Professor Björn Wittrock. As Principal of the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study (SCAS) in the years 1996-2018, and the driving force ever since its creation in 1985, Björn Wittrock has contributed significantly to the institute's strong position as an internationally renowned institute for advanced study, in addition to the social sciences and the humanities in Sweden, Europe, and beyond. His research has advanced several intellectual fields that include the sociology of ancient, medieval and modern societies, global history, intellectual history, and civilizational analysis.

The Wittrock Lecture Series is arranged annually by the Collegium. At these events, internationally renowned and state-of-the-art scholars are invited to give a public lecture on a theme that resonates with the scholarly profile of SCAS. Topics may range across the humanities and social sciences, and cover a broad spectrum of issues related to global history and modernity, globalization processes and social change, intellectual history, and the plurality of knowledge cultures. The lecture series also aims to address complex challenges facing contemporary society – from the shifting nature of globalization, to crises in democracy, or the future of governance and human civilization.

Christina Garsten
Principal, SCAS

Writing a Political Life: On the Challenging Relationship Between Biography and History

I take as my starting point Virginia Woolf's incisive essay, "The Art of Biography," from 1939. In it, Woolf informs us that as an art form, biography emerges from the author's imagination, much as a work of fiction emerges from the novelist's imagination. But, she goes on, there's a critical difference: "The novelist is free; the biographer is tied." For the historical imagination is something quite different from the imagination of the fiction writer, in that biographers and historians depend on evidence in constructing their stories. In other words, Woolf says, "biography resides in facts and is bound by them," making it "the most restricted of all the arts." But far from being a drawback, in her mind it is a virtue, and one of the reasons biography has such staying power as a genre.

A key passage reads: "By telling us the true facts, by sifting the little from the big, and shaping the whole so that we perceive the outline, the biographer does more to stimulate the imagination than any poet or novelist save the very greatest. For few poets and novelists are capable of that high degree of tension which gives us reality."[1]

It is true, Woolf understood, that the novelist has a key advantage over the biographer. While working assiduously on a biography of the English painter and critic Roger Fry, she wondered in evident frustration, "How can one cut loose from facts, when they are contradicting my theories?" Fiction, she concluded, "is created without any restrictions save those that the artist … chooses to obey," whereas a biography's authenticity "lies in the truth of the author's vision."[2]

I've been thinking about Virginia Woolf's ruminations as I work on a large-scale study of the life and times of John F. Kennedy. Her words are a kind of protection for me whenever the doubts creep in, doubts formed early in graduate school because of the way we historians are trained, and because of the trends in the discipline over the past several decades. I want to talk about that in this essay, and also about the prospects, perils and challenges of writing biography, and in particular political biography. I'll conclude with some observations about why I believe in the enterprise, on its own terms—especially because of the explanatory power it provides, the contribution it makes to knowledge.

There's a disconnect here that we should acknowledge up front: the gap between how general readers think about the genre and how it is viewed within the academy. Among the reading public, more and more biographies command an ever-larger readership, as can be seen when perusing the shelves of any decent-size bookstore. Biographer Nigel Hamilton goes so far as to say that "We live—at least in the Western world—in a golden age for biography. The depiction of real lives in every medium from print to film, radio to television and the Internet, is more popular than ever. More people are undertaking biographies (and autobiographical works, such as blogs, digital newsletters, and memoirs) than ever before." This popularity would not have surprised Samuel Johnson, an early enthusiast and expert practitioner of the genre, who wrote in 1750, "No species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition."[3]

Among scholars, or at least academic historians, the view is different. As graduate students in history, we were taught that biography is a lesser form of history. It's ostensibly limited because, as Lois Banner concisely summarizes the criticism, "it involves only one life, it derives from a belles-lettres tradition rather than a scientific or sociological one, and is often written by non-academic historians who attract a lot of readers but lack the rigor of Ph.D.-trained scholars." To put it slightly differently, according to this view, biography too often exaggerates the role of individual human beings in determining events, too often ignores or understates the social and political context in which these events took place. It's no surprise, then, that for the past several decades graduate students in history have been warned against writing biographies as our dissertations. That remains true today. And it's not just doctoral students: junior faculty members—assistant professors, lecturers—are told to get tenure and promotion before taking on a biography.[4]

One of my undergraduate instructors dismissed biography writing as "undertheorized," as methodologically outmoded. He called biography a fool's errand, by which I think he meant he doubted that even a prominent person's existence could accurately be reconstructed—and even if it could, it would show little more than an endless succession of fragmentary details succeeding one another to no purpose. He would have nodded appreciatively, I suspect, at Stanley Fish's famous dismissal of biography as "minutiae without meaning."[5]

• • •

My professor was far from alone. Indeed, it's clear that scholarly developments in the second half of the twentieth century have helped to define biography as an unworthy endeavor for the serious historian. If we look at the scholarship produced in the last, say, thirty years, especially in the field of U.S. and European international history, we could make the following

generalization about it: that for much, if not all, of this period, structural, impersonal determinants have been ascendant, relegating individual agency to a state of comparative neglect. Why this is so is not altogether easy to determine, but one reason for the primacy of deep, systemic, structural explanations is surely that they offer historians broad scope for the exercise of advanced learning and interdisciplinarity, and also allow them to foreground determinants that appear larger and stronger than the mere actions of individuals, which by contrast seem inconsequential, ephemeral, and weak. It can be more intellectually gratifying to pursue subterranean causal factors whose antecedents can be extensively explored and elaborated.[6]

As David Bell reminds us, many academic disciplines, including history, have taken seriously their status as *sciences*—as social sciences, perhaps, but as sciences nonetheless. "That is, they have taken seriously the idea that scholars can discover regular, predictable patterns of change at work beneath the apparent flux and confusion of history. These regular, predictable patterns might not have the absolute, scientifically verifiable quality of natural laws, but they are nonetheless held to matter more than the character and actions of particular individuals, no matter how prominent."[7]

In some countries, history itself spurred the shift away from political biography. In the 1960 and 1970s in Germany, for example, there was a sharp swing away from personality-driven accounts of that nation's past. In part this was a reaction against an earlier tradition in German historiography that had emphasized the role of powerful leaders in shaping the course of German development. Mostly, however, it resulted from the tyrannical rule of Adolf Hitler. "The leadership cult in the Third Reich which attributed all 'achievements' to the 'greatness' of the Leader," Ian Kershaw has written, "then the reversal of this after 1945 in the readiness to blame Hitler personally for the entire disaster that had befallen Germany, had by the 1960s resulted in an almost complete denigration of the role of personality in history."[8]

This turn toward structural approaches among historians is also a response to the understandable—though unfounded—expectation that profound developments must always be the result of profound causes. So World War I, that colossal catastrophe of the last century, *must* have had grander causes than just the inadequacy of individual leaders who "sleepwalked" into the abyss—or, for that matter, did so with full consciousness and self-awareness. We feel a need to look for the explanation at a deeper level, in the working out of some complex historical dialectic, rather than in the myopia and lack of imagination of the European rulers and their advisors.

Furthermore, the rise of social history, from the 1970s onward, with its emphasis on history from below, along with cultural history and gender history, displaced individual leaders from their formerly dominant role as the drivers of history. The simultaneous ascendancy of the *Annales* school of history—first in France and then spreading outward—contributed even more to the downgrading of biography. Fernand Braudel, a leader of the school, emphasized the *longue durée* and material civilization rather than politics and leaders. What mattered, he and his acolytes insisted, were centuries-long patterns of societal change, and the slow, deep, geological currents that determine the shape of the continents as well as of human societies. To read Braudel and other *Annales* historians is to experience the quintessence of structural history, in which few individuals ever leave a mark.[9]

Add to this the rise of Marxist historiography after World War II, with its emphasis on class conflict and economic in-

terests, and one can see why there was a marginalization of biography within the academy, and in particular political biography, with its emphasis on male elites. For gender historians, and others besides, the male-defined categories of much life writing made it impossible for biography to describe and explain the nature of most women's lives in the past.

Few have been the historians over the past three or four decades who have publicly associated themselves with Thomas Carlyle's classic dictum, from a series of lectures he delivered in 1840: "The history of the world is but the biography of Great Men." (Women did not figure.) Elsewhere, he said, "The history of what man has accomplished in the world, is at bottom the history of the Great Men who have worked there. All that we see accomplished in the world, is the realization of the thoughts that dwell in great men. The soul of the world's history it may justly be considered, were the history of these." A spirit of romanticism suffused the lectures, as the title he gave to them suggests—he called them *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Among the people he singled out for praise were the religious leaders Martin Luther and Mohammed, the literary giants Shakespeare and Dante, and the political leaders Napoleon and Cromwell. Carlyle, it's hardly surprising to note, is not much read anymore.[10]

But maybe he should be. His writing was more nuanced than the above snippets might suggest. Elsewhere, he stressed that he did not believe history was made *only* by Great Men. Systems mattered; impersonal forces mattered. Moreover, other thinkers who were not under the same spell of Romanticism have offered similar views. Hegel, in his philosophy of history, emphasized the role played by what he called "world-historical individuals," who alone directed the tides of history, mobilizing the masses at crucial points—standout examples for him were Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon. Isaiah Berlin, the great philosopher of the last century, argued against inevitability in history and the notion that human beings were marionettes, mere playthings of impersonal forces. Their own actions mattered, and those of leaders mattered greatly. Even when "identifiable individuals" could not be deemed responsible for change, Berlin went on, large groups of "unspecified persons" shaped the course of events in ways not predetermined by factors such as the climate, the economy, or demography, or larger units such as culture, class, or race.[11]

• • •

So the question remains: to what extent does historical change result from the actions of a few select individuals—the Great Men and Women of the past—as opposed to long-term, impersonal, subterranean forces? Let's consider this. And as an entry point, let's reflect on another timeless remark, this one by Karl Marx, from in his 1848 essay, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon": "Men make their own History, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."[12]

In this sentence, remarkable not only for its content but also its phrasing and rhythm, Marx not only captures the agency of human action; he also reminds us that even the most powerful individuals are constrained by time and space, by history and conditions. In *The German Ideology*, coauthored with Engels, Marx put it more concisely: "Circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances."

Herbert Spencer, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, made the same point in a different way, insisting that even powerful leaders were products of the societies from which

they emerged: "You must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown.... Before he can remake his society, his society must make him."[13]

Examples abound. Of Winston Churchill it can be said that his leadership in the Second World War mattered greatly. Upon taking power in 1940, during the darkest hours of Britain's history, when the German military was overrunning much of Western Europe, Churchill united and galvanized the British nation, bringing out in his people qualities they had forgotten they possessed: resilience, determination, steadfastness. He claimed broad executive powers and forged an effective working relationship with his Grand Alliance partners Franklin Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin. Yet for all the powers he assumed and for all his pugnacious charisma, Churchill could not prevent the Nazi juggernaut from rolling across the continent or, later, keep the Red Army from conquering Eastern Europe. He could not stop Japan from seizing much of the British Empire in the Far East but needed the Americans to take charge of the struggle there. And try as he might, he could not forestall the end of the Empire as a whole, or halt the relative decline of his nation's global geopolitical power. In other words, Churchill could not change the course of history, and he had to fashion his policies within the constraints he inherited, just as Marx understood.[14]

Structural analysis, in other words, is essential to understanding the human past. It's an approach that helps us comprehend the limitations imposed on individual agency by institutions, social and economic conditions, popular views, demographic patterns, and other circumstantial factors that operate beyond personality. Human agency is qualified by the conditions under which individuals make decisions. Churchill saw this, as did countless other powerful people, even at the very top, who found themselves outmatched by greater forces.

Consider, as another example, the origins of the Cold War. Any satisfactory explanation of the superpower confrontation must consider the structural forces in play.[15] To begin with, the Second World War had a deeply unsettling effect on the international system. When it ended, Germany was in ruins, and Great Britain was badly overstrained and exhausted. France, having endured five years of Nazi occupation, was wracked by internal division. Italy also came out drastically weakened, while in Asia, Japan was decimated and under occupation, and China was headed toward a renewed civil war. Throughout Europe and Asia, factories, transportation, and communications links had been reduced to rubble. Agricultural production plummeted. How would the shattered global economy be pieced back together? The United States and the Soviet Union, though allies in the war, offered very different answers and models. The collapse of Germany and Japan, moreover, had created power vacuums that drew the two leading powers into collision as they sought influence in countries where the Axis aggressors had once held sway. And the political turmoil that many nations experienced after the war also spurred Soviet-American competition.

The gradual disintegration of empires also caused instability in the global system. Financial challenges and nationalist rebellions forced the imperial states to set their colonies free. Britain left India in 1947 and Burma and Sri Lanka (Ceylon) in 1948. The Philippines won its independence from the United States in 1946. After four years of battling nationalists in the East Indies (Indonesia), the Dutch departed in 1949. In the Middle East, Lebanon (1943), Syria (1946), and Jordan (1946) achieved independence, while in Palestine British officials faced growing

pressure from Zionists to create a Jewish homeland and from Arab leaders opposed to the prospect. In Iraq, too, nationalist ferment against the British-installed government was growing. Washington and Moscow paid close attention to this anticolonial agitation, seeing these new or emerging states as potential allies that might provide resources, markets, and military bases. Not all new nations were willing to play along; some opted for nonalignment in the Cold War. "We do not intend to be the playthings of others," declared Indian leader Jawaharlal Nehru.[16]

Driven by different economic and strategic needs and different ideologies in this volatile international climate, the Soviet Union and the United States assessed their most pressing tasks in starkly different terms. The Soviets, though committed to seeking ultimate victory over the capitalist world, were most concerned with preventing another invasion of their homeland. As a territory, it was far less secure than the United States, for both geographical as well as historical reasons. The landmass of the USSR was huge—three times that of the United States—but it had only ten thousand miles of coastline, much of it iced over for a large part of the year. Russian leaders, both before and after the revolution, had made increased maritime access a principal foreign policy objective.

Worse, the frontiers of the USSR were difficult to defend. Siberia, vital for its mineral resources, lay six thousand miles east of Moscow and was vulnerable to encroachment by Japan and China. In the west, the border with Poland had sparked violent clashes ever since World War I, and Eastern Europe had been the launching pad for Hitler's invasion in 1941. Soviet deaths in the subsequent war topped 25 million, and the physical destruction was immense. Henceforth, Kremlin leaders decided, they could tolerate no dangers along their western borders.

The United States, by contrast, came out of the war secure in its borders and economically robust. Separated from the other world powers by two oceans that served as vast moats, the American home base had been virtually immune to attack during the fighting—only an occasional shell from a submarine or enemy balloon reached the shores of the continental United States. American casualties were fewer than those of any other major combatant—overwhelmingly so in comparison with the Soviet Union. With its fixed capital intact, its resources more plentiful than ever, and in sole possession of the atomic bomb, the United States was far and away the strongest world power at war's end. It produced 60% of the world's industrial goods, held 59% of its oil reserves and 80% of its gold, and had troops in roughly sixty foreign countries. The tentacles of American power extended to all four corners of the globe.

Yet this was no time for resting easy, Washington planners told themselves and each other. Some other power—almost certainly the Soviet Union—could take advantage of the political and economic instability in war-torn Europe and Asia and eventually seize control of those areas, with dire implications for the nation's security. To prevent this outcome, U.S. officials sought forward bases overseas, which they deemed essential to keeping an airborne enemy at bay. To further enhance the nation's security, these strategists, in direct contrast to their Soviet counterparts, sought the rapid reconstruction of nations—including the former enemies Germany and Japan—and a world economy based on free trade. Such a system, they reasoned, was essential to preserving America's economic prosperity.

The Soviets, for their part, refused to join the new World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), created by forty-four nations at the July 1944 Bretton Woods Conference and designed to stabilize finance and trade. Moscow's leaders

held that the United States dominated both institutions and used them to promote private investment and open international commerce, which the Kremlin saw as capitalist tools of exploitation. With the United States as its largest donor, the World Bank opened its doors in 1945 and began issuing loans to help members finance reconstruction projects. The IMF, also heavily backed by Washington, helped members alleviate their balance-of-payments difficulties through currency loans.

My point here is that there were systemic reasons to expect that the Grand Alliance of World War II would rapidly wither and that some form of Soviet-American friction would ensue. Even before the defeat of the Axis powers, perceptive observers anticipated that Washington and Moscow would seek to fill the postwar power vacuum in the heart of Europe, and that discord would result. The two countries had a history of hostility and tension, and both were militarily powerful. Most important, they were divided by sharply differing political economies, widely divergent needs, and a deep ideological chasm. Some kind of confrontation was bound to occur.

But did it have to be a Cold War? I'm not so sure, and we certainly can't answer the question by looking only at impersonal forces. Individual leaders mattered. Joseph Stalin, though hostile to the Western powers and capable of utter ruthlessness toward his own people (his periodic purges since the 1930s had taken the lives of millions), did not want war. The huge Soviet losses on the eastern front in World War II made him all too aware of his country's weakness vis-à-vis the United States. For a time at least, he appears to have believed he could achieve his aspirations peacefully, through continued cooperation with Washington and London.[17] Over the long term, however, he envisaged more conflict. Stalin believed that Germany and Japan would rise again to threaten the USSR, probably by the 1960s,

and his suspicion of the other capitalist powers was boundless. Many analysts have concluded that Stalin was indeed clinically paranoid; the first to do so, a leading Russian neuropathologist in 1927, died just a few days later! Historian David Reynolds has argued that Stalin's paranoia, coupled with his xenophobia and Marxist-Leninist ideology, created in the Soviet leader a mental map of "them" versus "us" that decisively shaped his approach to world affairs.[18]

Harry Truman had none of Stalin's capacity for deception or ruthlessness, but to a lesser degree he too was prone to an "us" versus "them" worldview. Truman often glossed over nuances, ambiguities, and counterevidence; he preferred simple assertions stated in either/or terms. As Winston Churchill, who admired Truman's decisiveness, once observed, the president "takes no notice of delicate ground, he just plants his foot firmly on it." Truman constantly exaggerated, as when he declared in his undelivered farewell address that he had "knocked the socks off the communists" in Korea. Shortly after Roosevelt's death in the spring of 1945, Truman met at the White House with the Soviet commissar of foreign affairs, V. M. Molotov. When the president sharply protested that the Soviets were not living up to the Yalta agreement on Poland, Molotov stormed out. Truman, having self-consciously developed what he called his "tough method," bragged after the encounter: "I gave it to him straight one-two to the jaw."[19]

The ensuing East-West struggle would rage for more than four decades, and in the end, the West triumphed—as anyone who experienced life in both a NATO country and a Warsaw Pact nation quickly realized. Next to the glitz and bustle and well-stocked store shelves of the former were the drab housing projects, polluted skies, and scarce consumer goods of the latter. Over time, the Soviet socialist economy proved increas-

ingly unable to compete with the American free-market one, and increasingly incapable of coping with the demands of the Soviet and Eastern European citizenry. By 1961, only the construction of a heavily patrolled wall could stem the flow of East Germans fleeing to the West. By then, millions of people behind the Iron Curtain had lost faith in the Soviet system. The ranks of unbelievers would continue to grow until, in the end, there were precious few defenders left, a point trenchantly made by the historian and Hungarian native John Lukacs:

> In 1945 many thousands of Germans committed suicide. Many of those who killed themselves were not National Socialist party leaders, some of them not even party members, but all of them believers. But I know not of a single instance, in or around 1989, when a believing Communist committed suicide because of the collapse of Communism, in Russia or elsewhere. Dogmatic believers in Communism had ceased to exist long before, even as dogmatic anti-Communists continued to flourish.[20]

Yet the Soviet empire might have hobbled along for many more years had it not been for Mikhail Gorbachev, one of the most influential figures of the twentieth century. His rise to the top of the Kremlin leadership was the single most important event in the final phase of the Cold War, and it is hard to imagine the sweeping changes of the mid- to late-1980s without his influence. Through a series of unexpected overtures and decisions, Gorbachev transformed the nature of the superpower relationship in a way that could scarcely have been anticipated even a few years earlier. U.S. president Ronald Reagan's role was less central but still important, less because of the hardline policies of his first term than because of his later willingness to enter into serious negotiations and treat Gorbachev more as a partner than an adversary. George H. W. Bush also followed this general approach, as did British prime minister Margaret Thatcher. In this way, just as personalities were important in starting the Cold War, so they were important in ending it.

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Yet it won't do to stop there. Even a cursory examination of the 20th century shows how much individual leaders, including those I've just mentioned, mattered, and mattered greatly. And it's hard to avoid the conclusion that as the destructive power of states increased dramatically in the 20th century, and as the scope of their activities expanded around the globe and reached into space, the leaders of those states became even more important, especially in authoritarian states, but also in democratic ones. The Annales school and Marxist historians can insist on the importance of forces and classes, but events do shape history and individuals shape events.

For a singularly harrowing example, consider again the Second World War in Europe, which killed tens of millions and set the stage for the Cold War that followed. That conflagration happened because one man wanted it to happen. To be sure, one could point to deeper, structural causes that set the conditions for conflict, but fundamentally, war broke out on September 1, 1939, because Adolf Hitler wanted it, desired it, and brooked no opposition, inside or outside Germany, to his launching it. At first, he wanted to limit it to a local conflict between Germany and Poland. But even when it became clear that he would probably have to fight Britain and France as well, he sent his soldiers across the Polish frontier anyway. Would another German leader have done the same? Maybe, maybe not.

Hence the problem with structural explanations: they too often tend toward a view of historical development as

preordained, giving the impression that whatever happened had to happen. "The illusions of retrospective determinism," the French philosopher Henri Bergson called it, in a splendid turn of phrase. In Nassim Taleb's words, it is the fallacy of "retrospective distortion."[21] The result is to conceal the fluidity of past situations, to wipe away the effects of contingencies, and to absolve individual human beings of personal responsibility—they are, after all, mere captives of forces they cannot control. (In the present day, it can foster a reluctance to challenge the status quo—what's the point of struggling to create change in society if everything significant that occurs is bound to happen anyway?)

Historian Geoffrey Parker and social psychologist Philip Tetlock have productively examined this retrospective determinism and the problems that flow from it. "Few predicted World War I, the rise of the East Asian tigers, or the collapse of the Soviet Union," they write, "but virtually everyone today who claims professional competence in such matters stands ready to trot out half a dozen 'fundamental' or 'structural' causes why these outcomes had to happen roughly at the time and in the manner they did. Indeed, given the overwhelming array of causal forces often invoked, it is difficult for some contemporary observers to resist the inference that the original historical players were a tad dense not to appreciate where events were heading. Creeping determinism emerges as a key obstacle to the time-honored objective of historians to see the world as it appeared to the decision-makers of the day, not as it appears now with the benefits and curses of hindsight."[22]

In recent decades, social psychologists have done much to illuminate this hindsight bias and to demonstrate its pervasiveness. Their studies show that people have an amply documented tendency to exaggerate in retrospect the likelihood of an observed outcome, to see the present situation as preordained even when it seemed highly improbable beforehand—in other words, to see the future as more contingent than the past. "I knew it all along," becomes the refrain. I knew all along that Donald Trump would defeat Hillary Clinton for the American presidency in 2016. I knew all along that the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 would bog down in short order. I knew all along that the center-right coalition would prevail in the Swedish election of 2022.

The authors of the *9/11 Commission Report* in the United States experienced this problem firsthand and summed it up clearly and powerfully:

> In composing this narrative, we have tried to remember that we write with the benefit and the handicap of hindsight. Hindsight can sometimes see the past clearly—with 20/20 vision. But the path of what happened is so brightly lit that it places everything else more deeply into shadow. . . . As time passes, more documents become available, and the bare facts of what happened become still clearer. Yet the picture of *how* those things happened becomes harder to reimagine, as that past world, with its preoccupations and uncertainty, recedes and the remaining memories of it become colored by what happened and what was written about it later.[23]

What's the answer to this tendency toward hindsight bias and historical determinism? One antidote is counterfactual analysis, which, by exploring plausible but unrealized alternatives to what happened, can convey the fluid elements of past situations and the presence of contingency. Many professional historians object to this kind of work, dismissing it as antithetical to real scholarship and the equivalent of parlor

games, or as being ideologically driven by authors who wish to rewrite the past according to their political biases. It's difficult enough to determine what actually happened in the past, these skeptics say; why spend precious time on "imaginary universes"? For Richard Evans, former Regius Professor at the University of Cambridge, the entire exercise is a waste of time: "In the effort to understand," he proclaims, "counterfactuals aren't any real use at all."[24]

This strikes me as precisely wrong. I submit that the careful examination of alternatives, of paths not taken, is an indispensable part of the historian's task—we can evaluate the forces and actors that won only by comparing them with those that lost. The exploration of unrealized alternatives, in other words, provides vital insight into why things turned out as they did. Moreover, all historians, whenever they make causal judgments, are engaging in speculation, are contemplating different developments, different trajectories, even when these alternatives are not explicitly stated. Deciding to say nothing counterfactual can therefore mean deciding to say nothing at all. Some historians might respond that they are in the business of "explaining" rather than investigating causality. But this is often just semantic obfuscation. As H. Stuart Hughes put it in the *American Historical Review* more than six decades ago, "The very employment of the word 'because' immediately gives warning that causal explanation is at hand."[25]

With respect to the long and bloody struggle for Vietnam, which lasted some three decades and which I've now studied for just as long, careful counterfactual thought experiments can help us better grasp just how vital the contributions of certain individuals were. There can be no doubt, for example, that Ho Chi Minh's role in driving the Vietnamese revolution was immense from an early stage, while on the French side Georges Bidault's unyielding stance from start to (almost) finish looms large, as does the central role of Pierre Mendès France in getting France out of the war, come what may, in 1954.

On the American side, there's a reason why Vietnam is sometimes called "Johnson's War." My book *Embers of War* examined the long-term causes of U.S. intervention, going back to World War II and the Franco-Viet Minh War that followed. It also argued for the importance of perceived Cold War imperatives that drove successive American administrations' policies in Indochina, and for the way World War II and the end of European empires contributed to the Indochina struggle.[26] But there can be no doubt that Lyndon Johnson's imprint mattered enormously in the end. From early in his presidency, he was a skeptic on Vietnam, skeptical that the war could be won and skeptical that it was even necessary to try. Yet he was always a hawk on the conflict, from day one to the end. If his aides intimidated him with their academic pedigrees and their accomplishments, he intimidated them in return, with his powerful physical presence and his frequent resort to bullying tactics. Though quite capable of asking probing questions in high-level meetings, LBJ had little patience for those who sought to give probing answers. His demand for loyalty extended to his inner circle of advisors, which, when combined with his towering personality, had a chilling effect on anyone who tried to build support for a contrary policy view. (Undersecretary of State George Ball did put forth such a perspective, one which we now can see was strikingly prescient, but his influence was greatly diminished by the fact that he was a kind of designated in-house dove.)

Moreover, Johnson took the plunge in 1964–65 because for him, "retreat" from Vietnam was impossible. It was the equivalent of "tucking tail and running." His tendency to

personalize all issues pertaining to the struggle, so evident in 1966, 1967 and 1968, was there from the start, from his initial vow, in the late fall of 1963, that he would not be the first American president to lose a war. He always saw attacks on the policy as attacks on himself, viewing U.S. credibility and his own personal credibility to be essentially synonymous. In so doing, he diminished his ability to render objective judgment, and failed to see that the international and domestic context in late 1964 (and especially after his landslide election victory over Republican Barry Goldwater in November) gave him considerable freedom of maneuver on the war.[27]

In both of these areas, Johnson differed markedly from his predecessor, John F. Kennedy, who used his advisory system very differently (especially after the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961). Kennedy was much more open to hearing different points of view from his subordinates; moreover, he seldom if ever personalized foreign policy issues, but viewed them with uncommon detachment. Partly for these reasons, I maintain that a surviving Kennedy would most likely have avoided the kind of large-scale escalation in Vietnam that Johnson pursued in 1965.[28]

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What I'm suggesting is that human beings have the capacity for moral choice. They are not entirely at the mercy of impersonal forces, even if those forces limit the options available to individuals—both ordinary individuals and leaders—in any given situation. Consequently, it is the historian's task to work out precisely the range within which historical actors enjoyed freedom of maneuver, to identify possible alternative courses of action available to them *at the time*, and to judge their actions accordingly. Biography is not the only genre in which the historian can undertake this work, but it is a necessary one.

This includes, with respect to decision-making among leaders, political biography. The study of a political life has value because it possesses considerable explanatory power. As Stephen Kotkin's multivolume biography of Stalin, Henrik Berggren's biography of Olof Palme, and Charles Moore's biography of Margaret Thatcher all show, the life of a political leader can tell us a great deal about the acquisition and exercise of power. Precisely because the role of a political leader is so often crucial, it needs to be investigated, whatever we may think of that leader or of political leadership in general.

In this way, the greatest shortcoming of political biography can also be its greatest contribution. As Lucy Riall has observed: "It may privilege the idea of a Great Man, but it also forces us to confront questions that, as (mostly) liberal historians in (nominally) democratic societies, we find difficult to stomach: How important is an individual to the making of history, and are some individuals more exceptional than others in this respect?" In other words, she goes on to say, studies of the lives of political leaders that are sensitive not only to their use of power, but also to how they presented and justified its exercise, have much to recommend them.

> We need not only to understand the general conditions under which charismatic authority can develop but also to analyze the historical, and cultural, context in which an individual can become a charismatic leader. By interrogating the concept of greatness, a political biographer can uncover the process by which greatness is acquired, manipulated, and employed and perhaps offer some explanation of our need for heroes, or at least study how this need has appeared, altered, or attenuated over time. Even if Great Men and their deeds can no longer take center stage in history as they once did, the lives and reputations of extraordinary people can still express something of the ideas and meanings of a previous age.[29]

Note Riall's emphasis on "general conditions" and on context. Given the constraints under which any leader operates, it is imperative for the biographer to contextualize, to place the man or woman under study within the broader environment in which they lived and worked. You can't write the life without the times. Even then, there are limits, as Oscar Handlin, a historian and biographer at Harvard University for many decades, remarked more than forty years ago. "The proper subject of biography," he wrote, "is not the complete person or the complete society, but the point at which the two interact. There the situation and the individual illuminate one another."[30] I like that formulation. It's not about completeness; it's about locating the intersection of the person and the society. And maybe, just maybe, through a rigorous examination of this intersection, there can be a *double payoff*: we can better understand not only the individual life under study, but also the society in which the person lived.

The conceit of my project on Kennedy is precisely this: by situating JFK within the wider setting of the era and the world, we can better understand not only his rise, but also America's rise, first to a place of coequal status with other world powers, then to a perch of unrivaled primacy, even vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. In fact, a major theme of my project is the degree to which John F. Kennedy's life story tracks with major facets of America's political and geopolitical story. Consider, with respect to the first volume, the charged debate between "isolationists" and "interventionists" in the years before Pearl Harbor; the turmoil of the Second World War, from which the United States emerged as a global colossus; the outbreak and spread of the Cold War; the domestic politics of anti-Communism and the attendant scourge of McCarthyism; and the growing influence of television on politics. Each of these seminal events and developments can be grasped more clearly through the lens of John F. Kennedy's life and career. The same holds true for the era to be studied in the volume still to come, when additional topics took pride of place: civil rights; the arms race and the prospect of nuclear Armageddon, made vivid during the tense days of the Cuban Missile Crisis; the revival of affirmative government as a precursor to the Great Society; the descent into Vietnam (for which Kennedy, despite his early and prescient misgivings about seeking a military solution there, would bear considerable responsibility); and the space program.

The more we comprehend JFK and his coming of age, in other words, the more we understand the United States in the middle decades of the 20th century. In this regard, I am struck by what historian and Kennedy advisor Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. wrote in his memoir, *A Life in the 20th Century*: "For my generation, four dates remain indelibly scarred on memory, four occasions when none of us can forget where or how we heard the staggering news: Pearl Harbor, the death of Franklin Roosevelt, the death of John Kennedy, the landing of men on the moon."[31] All four moments are, in their own way, crucial to the story I'm telling in my project. Although JFK didn't live to see the 1969 moon landing, his early commitment to the lunar program made it happen.

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In writing about John F. Kennedy, the scion of one of America's wealthiest men, I'm aware of a danger that all political biographers must guard against: in writing about high political leaders, we may distort history by falsely insinuating that history is made mostly or exclusively by the rich and powerful. This is a real concern. But the answer is not to avoid this kind of work. We need history from below, the history of ordi-

nary people, showing their agency, and the limits to their agency. But we also need to study those who hold power, who have the capacity to influence our lives, sometimes in profound ways. And here's the thing: they too had limits to their agency, as the example of Churchill above shows, and as my research on Kennedy amply demonstrates. In many ways, we're talking about the *limits* of leaders' powers. Despite the reach of their influence, they did not make history by themselves or succeed in imposing their visions of the future on everyone around them. At key moments, they were constrained, restricted, hemmed in, and sometimes defeated by the structures and peoples they tried to control.

It is vital that we, through our biographies of the powerful, demystify and deconstruct their capacity to make and remake the world in line with their vision. Robert Caro, the great biographer of Lyndon Johnson and Robert Moses, famously asserted in his multi-volume biography of LBJ that "power always reveals." I don't think that's right, or at least it's misleading. More than being revelatory, power conceals. In my view, Johnson is *less* knowable in the later volumes of Caro's biography, and especially as he ascends to the presidency in Volume 4.[32] There's an opaque quality to Johnson when he's at the apex of power, and I think the same is true of other world leaders in history. The young JFK, for example, wrote letters, kept a diary of his travels, and generally revealed a lot about himself at various times. As he gets closer to the White House, however, he becomes more guarded, not to mention more busy—the letters are far fewer, and he's surrounded by aides. He's more careful about the image he's projecting. He becomes harder for the biographer to penetrate.

None of this lessens Kennedy's vital importance to the American and, to a lesser extent, global story in the mid-20th century. Here I will consider just one example: the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, which brought the world as close as it has ever come to catastrophic nuclear war. I have been going through the tapes and transcripts of the deliberations of the so-called ExComm (Executive Committee of the National Security Council), and as a result have revised my thinking in certain ways that are relevant to the topic at hand. There's a paradox here, as I see it, because on the one hand, there can be no doubt that the United States under the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations must take a significant share of the blame for the crisis occurring in the first place. JFK admitted as much when he said during the crisis that Cuba was "a fixation of the United States and not a serious military threat" and that the NATO allies "think that we are slightly demented on this subject."[33] By the fall of 1962, this fixation had already led to the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion and to Operation Mongoose (a covert program to undermine and overthrow the Cuban government of Fidel Castro), and ironically had contributed to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's move to deploy missiles on the island in hopes of deterring further U.S. (or U.S.-backed) military action against Castro.

On the other hand, listening closely to the ExComm tapes and re-reading the transcripts and other materials has further convinced me of President Kennedy's crucial role in guiding his advisors and the world away from a cataclysmic nuclear conflict. What comes across clearly is JFK's understated but consistent management of the internal deliberations, and his calm and self-possessed demeanor even in the face of tough questioning from senior military and civilian aides. From day one to the end, Kennedy allows people to have their say, whether or not he agrees with them, and he never resorts to the harsh put-down. Rarely does he raise his voice in the meet-

ings, even when he's obviously perturbed or irritated, and he nudges the discussion forward whenever it threatens to get bogged down.

Historian Sheldon Stern, who is no Kennedy hagiographer, has rightly noted that the paper records alone do not give us the full picture of these attributes: "So much that cannot be captured, even in the most accurate transcript or narrative, is there on the tapes for the listener with a discerning ear: the nuances of [Kennedy's] voice and temperament, his impatience, his Cold War blinders and convictions, his apprehension and anxiety, his doubts, his political instincts, his self-control, his persistence, his caution, his skepticism about the gap between military plans and performance, his ironic sense of humor, and above all, his conviction that war was an impossible choice in the nuclear era."[34]

In substantive terms, there can be no doubt that the ExComm discussions helped Kennedy make up his mind, if not in the way his senior subordinates wanted. We hear him on the tapes consistently disavowing doctrinaire judgments and confrontational recommendations, and hear his unshakable determination to find an answer short of nuclear confrontation. Most impressively, he shows himself willing to go against the accumulated wisdom of the ExComm in favor of a negotiated solution that virtually all of its members oppose. Already on October 18, the third day of the crisis, JFK wonders aloud why Khrushchev has placed the missiles in Cuba, speculating that they must be part of a bargaining gambit, and that to get them out he might have to give the Kremlin leader "some out," some way to back down without losing face. One way, he muses, would be to say, "If you pull them out, we'll take ours out of Turkey."[35]

The remark goes unanswered by the advisors. Later, on October 27, the next to last day, when Khrushchev proposes just such a trade, Kennedy lets these top lieutenants—Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy—rail against the notion for a while, after which he calmly says: "Let's not kid ourselves. Most people think that if you're allowed an even trade, you ought to take advantage of it." If the United States goes to war, mounting air strikes and then invading Cuba, and the Soviets respond by grabbing Berlin, he adds, "everybody's going to say, 'Well, this Khrushchev offer was a pretty good proposition.'"[36] The advisors warn that such an agreement would destroy NATO, weaken America's standing in the world, and have other unforeseen and negative consequences. Only Undersecretary of State George Ball offers support for the president's position. JFK holds his ground, instructing his brother the attorney general to inform the Soviet ambassador that the administration will accept the deal—provided it is kept secret. Khrushchev agrees, and the crisis is over.

We're left with the inescapable conclusion that, at a critical moment in modern world history, one leader made an enormous difference to the fate of humankind—with the help of his Soviet counterpart, to be sure, and with some genuine luck. Admittedly, this same leader had helped precipitate the crisis in the first place, and it also bears noting that even after the Missile Crisis, Kennedy continued to try to thwart the Cuban revolution and get rid of Castro, a policy that in retrospect looks counterproductive, futile, and shortsighted. Still, during those thirteen fateful days in October 1962, a year before his assassination, John F. Kennedy was at his best, and

for that we can all be grateful. A Cold Warrior in public, he distrusted the military, was doubtful about the political utility of military action, and was repelled by the prospect of nuclear war, and he had the courage and the will to act accordingly. At a critical moment, he showed a capacity for empathetic understanding (evident in his personality from a young age, and to my mind always one of his most appealing qualities), and an ability and willingness in this case to place himself in his Soviet counterpart's position and try to see things from his perspective.

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In summation, I believe in biography. I believe in it in part because of the intellectual and aesthetic fulfillment I find in the disciplined attempt to reconstruct, interpret, and contextualize an individual life, and in part because of the marvelous opportunity biography offers to consider humanity's capacity for heroism and folly. In this essay, I have further suggested that historical biography, when done right, can help us better understand not only the life of an individual leader, but also the larger society in which he or she operated. And I have argued that good biography represents something more than an individual life, and that the biographer can use that life to elucidate change over time, to enhance our understanding of larger issues.[37]

David Nasaw's formulation is powerful: "Biography is not just another sub-genre of storytelling. It is, I would argue, the summa of historical studies. Why? Because in writing biographies we address the central questions that drive all historical research and interpretation. How does change over time occur? What is the role of the individual? To what extent do we make the world we hand on to our children and to what extent are we made by it, subjected to larger economic, geopolitical, geographic, ecological structures."[38]

Which brings us back to Marx's dictum. The great German thinker was right: human beings make their own history, but not as they please. The biographer's task, the historian's task, is to take account of this reality, to balance the elements of human agency on the one hand with the structural forces on the other, and to produce a work that convincingly weaves together all the causal factors and explores their interaction. For while impersonal elements may make events in human affairs possible, it is individuals who make those events happen.

Endnotes

1 Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays* (New York, 1967), 221.

2 Leonard Woolf, ed., *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf* (New York, 1973), 281; Woolf, *Collected Essays*, 221, 225, 221; as quoted in Alice Kessler-Harris, "Why Biography?" *American Historical Review*, Vol. 114, No. 3, June 2009, 625–630.

3 Nigel Hamilton, *How to Do Biography: A Primer* (Cambridge MA, 2008), 1. The Johnson quote is on p. 6. Johnson was the subject of one of the most celebrated biographies of all time, James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, first published in 1791. For an analysis, see Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2009), 39–45.

4 Lois Banner, "Biography as History," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 114, No.3 (June 2009), 579–86.

5 Stanley Fish, "Just Published: Minutiae without Meaning," *New York Times*, Sept. 7, 1999. On the undertheorizing claim, see Lee, *Biography*, 94.

6 Henry Ashby Turner Jr., "Human Agency and Impersonal Determinants in Historical Causation: A Response to David Lindenfeld," *History and Theory*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Oct. 1999), 300-306.

7 David A. Bell, "Donald Trump is Making the Great Man Theory of History Great Again," *Foreign Policy*, January 12, 2017.

8 Ian Kershaw, *Personality and Power: Builders and Destroyers of Modern Europe* (New York, 2022), 2. Kershaw is summarizing the analysis of German historian Imanuel Geiss.

9 Lucy Riall does find a certain convergence between biographers and the *Annalistes*: "However insufficient biography seemed to social historians of the 1970s, the focus on males—great or laboring, individual or collective—was common to both approaches. The two formats also shared a totalizing grasp, a faith in the capacity of historical inquiry to explain, analyze, or otherwise convey what had happened in the past, and both retained a confidence in the cumulative progress of historical knowledge." Lucy Riall, "The Shallow End of History? The Substance and Future of Political Biography," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History,* xl:3 (Winter, 2010), 375–397.

10 Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London, 1841); Kershaw, *Personality and Power*, 3–4.

11 Hegel, *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (New York, 1953); Isaiah Berlin, *Historical Inevitability* (London, 1955).

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13 Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (Appleton, WI, 1898), 34. See also Heather Cox Richardson, "Contingency," *The Historical Society*, June 11, 2010. http://histsociety.blogspot.com/2010/06/contingency.html.

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15 Portions of the following section are drawn from two of my chapters in Jane Kamensky et al., *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States,* 11th ed. (Boston, 2019).

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17 Norman M. Naimark, *Stalin and the Fate of Europe: The Postwar Struggle for Sovereignty* (Cambridge, Mass., 2019).

18 David Reynolds, *One World Divisible: A Global History Since 1945* (New York, 2000), 16.

19 Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York, 1995), 315–318.

20 John Lukacs, "The Poverty of Anti-Communism," *The National Interest* 55 (Spring 1999).

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22 Philip E. Tetlock and Geoffrey Parker, "Counterfactual Thought Experiments," in Philip E. Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow, and Geoffrey Parker, eds, *Unmaking the West: "What-if?" Scenarios that Rewrite World History* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2006), 25–26.

23 *The 9/11 Commission Report. Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York, 2004), 339.

24 Richard J. Evans, "'What If' is a Waste of Time," *The Guardian*, March 13, 2014. See also Evans, *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History* (London, 2014). For the canonical objection to counterfactual history, see E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London, 1961), ch. 4. Carr, it should be noted, didn't always do as he prescribed. In his own writing he often resorted to counterfactual speculation, especially when investigating causality. He could hardly do otherwise. See Tetlock and Parker, "Counterfactual Thought Experiments," 28–33.

25 H. Stuart Hughes, "The Historian and the Social Scientist," *American Historical Review* vol. 66, No. 1 (October, 1960): 28. For useful studies on the utility and limitations of counterfactual analysis, see e.g., in addition to Tetlock, et al., Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 1991); Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London, 1997); John Elster, *Logic and Society: Contradictions and Possible Worlds* (Toronto, 1978), esp. chap. 6.

26 Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York, 2012).

27 Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, Cal., 1999).

28 For a full list of reasons, see Fredrik Logevall, "Vietnam and the Question of What Might Have Been," in Mark Jonathan White, *Kennedy: The New Frontier Revisited* (New York, 1998), 40–48. A more recent version is Logevall, "Kennedy and What Might Have Been," in Geoffrey Ward, *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (New York, 2017), 90–96.

29 Riall, "The Shallow End of History?"

30 Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge MA, 1976), 276.

31 Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Life in the 20th Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917–1950* (New York, 2000), 261.

32 Robert A. Caro, *The Passage of Power: The Years of Lyndon Johnson, vol. IV* (New York, 2013).

33 Sheldon M. Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still: Inside the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis* (Stanford, Cal., 2005), 56.

34 Sheldon M. Stern, *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory* (Stanford, Cal., 2012), 156.

35 Quoted in Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass, 1997), 137.

36 Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 167.

37 Though I don't discuss it in this essay, biography can also have tremendous utility in the classroom. Lois Banner makes the point powerfully: "Empathizing with others through biography quickens for my students the process of 'transference' that is a key to successful learning. By 'transference' I mean that, as in the therapeutic situation, students emotionally identify with the texts they are reading and with the professors teaching them, thus engaging in a personally transformative process as they reflect, through biography, on their own lives and pasts and the present in which they are living. Besides, reading biographies is fun, and writing them challenges academic historians to reach out to a public that seems to have a never-ending taste for reading about the lives of others." Banner, "Biography as History."

38 David Nasaw, "Leon Levy Lecture: My Three Moguls," September 2019, unpublished manuscript in author's possession.

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A specialist on U.S. foreign relations history and 20th century international history, Logevall is the author or editor of ten books, most recently *JFK: Coming of Age in the American Century, 1917–1956* (Random House, 2020), which won the Elizabeth Longford Prize for Historical Biography and was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. His book *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (Random House, 2012), won the Pulitzer Prize for History and the Francis Parkman Prize, as well as the American Library in Paris Book Award and the Arthur Ross Book Award from the Council on Foreign Relations. His other recent works include *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (with Campbell Craig; Belknap/Harvard, 2020), and *A People and A Nation: A History of the United States* (with Jane Kamensky et al.; 11th ed., Cengage, 2018).

Logevall's essays and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times, The Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, The Times* (UK), *The New Republic, Politico, Daily Beast, the London Review of Books*, and *Foreign Affairs*, among other publications. A native of Stockholm, Sweden, he is a past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Society of American Historians. He is currently working on the second volume of his JFK biography.

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