

POLITICS

History's cold comfort

The lessons of history are valuable – but we mustn't assume that studying the past enables us to predict the future

BY ADAM IP SMITH

Recently I made a series for BBC Radio 4 called *Trump: The Presidential Precedents*. It told the stories of six previous American presidents who had won elections by promising to shake up a corrupt establishment and restore government by, or at least for, the little guy. From Andrew Jackson, the first westerner to win, to Ronald Reagan, who spoke of himself as the sheriff rounding up a posse to ride into Washington to rid the town of the bad guys, there was no shortage of examples of candidates posing as the outsider.

As we all know, history doesn't move in a straight line; there are disorientating changes of direction. In the United States, the presidential election cycle encourages the current outsider to metaphorically wear the cap of liberty and pose as the redeemer of the people, even though others inevitably seize the

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liberator's garb once the insurgent wears the crown. I ended the final programme with the thought that Donald Trump's election was simply one of those periodic political lurches, and that, just as every river has its bend, one day – and almost certainly in four or eight years – there would be a lurch back.

But maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was guilty of using historical context to minimise the unprecedented nature of the political moment we were in. When one listener told me that she'd found the series reassuring, I realised that the danger of reading the present through the lens of the past is that, unless carefully framed, it can convey a false sense that we know what's coming next.

In particular, because in the west we've experienced more than half a century of relative stability, the sense that we've been here before can bias us towards an assumption of continuity. The perennial fault of generals is said to be they always want to fight the last war. If so, that's a fairly commonplace psychological bias: most of us presume continuity. Even when culture and technology and deeply held assumptions shift around us, our brains try to fit them into old patterns. And so historians who point out similarities between

the past and the present – as I did in my recent radio documentaries – may therefore be making it harder to determine whether we are in a moment of complete revolution or just a relatively familiar oscillation.

We often hear it said nowadays that the pace of change seems to have sped up. On the one hand, historians know that every generation thought this, but on the other we also know that some generations objectively did deal with more turmoil than others. Maybe we are one of them.

While the Cold War structured international life, most people found it impossible to envisage how it could end. Few people now alive have lived without the institutions built in the aftermath of the Second World War to maintain international order – the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the European

Union and others. Yet a long perspective suggests that, just like every other attempt to maintain global stability in recorded history, they will not last forever. Pillars fall and worlds end.

Just because previous American presidents have been held to account, ultimately, by the rule of law, a free press and an independent Congress, that does not necessarily mean that the current one will be. Most of the times the people who tell you everything will probably revert to the mean are proved right – but sometimes they are spectacularly wrong.

Thinking historically should attune us to be more attentive to change rather than less. Historical context should help us to understand how our assumptions, anxieties and material circumstances are different from last year, last decade and last century – noticing the differences that are both obvious and subtle. The lesson is that history should never be a balm. 🌐

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Trump: The Presidential Precedents, broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in January, is available on demand in the UK on BBC iPlayer Radio at bbc.co.uk/programmes/b083vwp2



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PHILOSOPHY

Conflicting questions

If we are to understand war, we need to choose carefully the questions we ask about past conflicts

BY AC GRAYLING

Why do wars occur? Are they ever justified? Is any act permissible in the struggle to defeat an enemy? What, indeed, is war, and how does it differ from other kinds of violent conflict? What does history teach about the effects that wars have on individuals and societies? Are these effects universally bad? And if they are not, does this consideration enter into the justification for war, as some indeed claim?

These are the main questions we have to ask about the phenomenon of war. If we are ever to rid ourselves of it we have to try to understand it; and we have to understand our own attitudes to it, too.

An important point that must be made about war is that it represents failure – failure of diplomatic efforts, and failure in the ties of trade and cultural exchange that should in general make it difficult for nations to go to war with each other. There is something very crude indeed about war as a solution to serious differences between two or more parties, for it hands the argument over to killing and destruction as a form of settlement. It goes without saying that there is no guarantee such outcomes will represent the better moral case in the dispute. As Bertrand Russell said, “War does not determine who is right – only who is left.”

Leaving aside moral questions about the causes, actions and human costs of war, it's well documented that the world wars of the 20th century had concrete and long-lasting effects on postwar society and technology, for worse or, in

some cases, better. The First World War transformed the British social and labour landscape, with large numbers of women working in nursing and munitions factories, which in turn boosted demands for votes for women. That war saw medical advances – in battlefield treatment and prosthetics, for example – that benefited the civilian world after armistice. It also prompted or hastened technological breakthroughs such as sonar, while the practical implementation of aeronautical jet engines, radar and of course nuclear weapons occurred during the Second World War. Long before those conflicts, the Thirty Years' War had perhaps even more seismic impacts, opening up society and creating freedoms without which the later scientific revolution of the 17th and early 18th century would not have been possible.

The questions posed at the start of this piece are not easy to answer. My new book *War: An Enquiry* explores some of the answers. Writing it has taught me that, as with so much else, knowing the history of something is essential to understanding it – and the history of war teaches about far more than war, but about humanity itself. 🌐

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