The danger of reading the present through the lens of the past is that it can convey a false sense that we know what’s coming next. We often hear it said nowadays that, unless culture and material circumstances are different from last year, last decade or last century of relative stability, the 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 has biased 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 arouse 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.

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

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