THE HATTENDORF PRIZE LECTURE

"The Perils of History," an expanded version of remarks delivered on 20 October 2011 at the Naval War College's twentieth International Seapower Symposium as the Hattendorf Prize Lecture, 2011, by the inaugural laureate of the Hattendorf Prize, N. A. M. Rodger.

ccording to Hegel, we learn from history that we do not learn from history.* ►We also learn that historians are deeply unreliable, and never more so than when they are foolish enough to predict the future. Historians, in fact, would certainly be the worst possible guides to the policy maker, were it not for the alternative. But the alternative is not other people with better information but other people with no information, for it is the past that makes the present and the future. All of us, as individuals, as organizations, and as societies, have personalities that are made up of our experiences. It is memory that makes us what we are, and to lose memory is to lose personality. In this age of dementia, many of us are painfully familiar with what happens when people lose their memories, but though individuals can lose their minds, societies and organizations (like navies) never escape their past. All we know comes from our experience, and all our experience is of the past. The future, which it would be very convenient to know, is regrettably inaccessible; the present constantly slips between our fingers. Only the past makes us who we are, and it shapes our understanding of the world. The question is not whether we should or whether we can learn from the past; we have no choice, if we are to learn at all. Recent or distant, history is all we have to go on, and we cannot escape it.

To read the writings or listen to the speeches of public figures is to encounter a dense tissue of historical references and allusions. Sometimes they are conscious references to historical events that form, or are believed to form, part of the common stock of social memory. Occasionally they are the fruit of serious knowledge of the past, but more often they refer to some of the common myths that bind

^{*&}quot;What experience and history teach is this—that nations and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted upon any lessons they might have drawn from it." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, introduction to *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1832).

nations and societies together. Usually these myths have historical roots, but in the process of shaping national identity they tend to lose any close relation with the truth of what really happened. Where do they come from, these urban myths and long-exploded fallacies that form so much of the discourse of public life? Half-remembered primary-school lessons, anecdotes overheard in the pub, newspapers read over someone's shoulder seem to have more power to form opinion than any scholar could dream of. "Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence," wrote J. M. Keynes, "are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back."* Our problem is not that we know too little history to understand the present but that we know too much, and most of it is wrong.

Even when it is right, moreover, the history that is put to use is often the wrong history. In September 2011 a short article appeared in the Economist that reviewed the situation of the euro, quoting an unnamed ambassador: "I feel like a filing clerk in Berlin in 1945. The work of government goes on, even as the war approaches." Inspired by this remark, the anonymous author indulged in an extended range of military metaphors and allusions to events of the Second World War. Clearly he wanted to show off his knowledge of that war, but it was not obvious that it told the reader anything at all about the financial crisis. There is of course a very relevant history that could and should have been deployed the history of currency unions. The history of the Zollverein (which led to the unified currency of the 1871 German Reich); of the Latin, Scandinavian, and East African currency unions (which all failed); of the West African franc and the Belgium-Luxembourg currency link (still flourishing)—all offer relevant lessons. The eighteenth-century New England monetary union shows that common currencies can circulate without political union, while the history of the United States over its first century shows that a political union does not require a common currency (at least initially). All these would have been highly instructive historical excursions; the Second World War was mere self-indulgence, and even if the journalist had been a real expert in it, it would still have been irrelevant.

What is more, real expertise is no guarantee that history will guide us in the right direction. There could be no better nor more apposite example of the expert historian than Captain Alfred T. Mahan, and yet in reading his great works we can easily see that he was wrong to assume that certain features of the world he had grown up with would last forever. For him the sea was always commanded

^{*} J. M. Keynes, The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money (London: Macmillan / Cambridge Univ. Press, 1936), p. 383.

[†]Charlemagne [pseud.], "In the Brussels Bunker," Economist, 17 September 2011.

by a single, dominant European naval power, and Britain was the only plausible candidate. He looked forward to the day when the U.S. Navy would be capable of joining an alliance with Britain, but he clearly did not expect that there would ever be more than a handful of serious naval powers. Though he lived in the first great age of free trade and liberal economics, he did not foresee that the result would be the creation of many advanced economies and modern navies all over the world. Nor did he realize that the growth of the U.S. Navy, to which he dedicated his career, would inevitably make it impossible for Britain or any other European power to dominate the seas of the world single-handed. Consequently he has relatively little to say to our age of naval coalitions.

Most common and most destructive of all, however, are not appeals to the lessons of real history, nor even conscious references to shared myth, but unconscious assumptions that reveal themselves in turns of phrase and habits of thought. This is history at the deepest and most universal level, the history that lies below the foundations of every intellectual construction and undermines so many of them. This is the history that everybody shares and nobody needs to think about; these are the assumptions that are never challenged. This history is everywhere, but much of it is bad history, and the longer it goes unchallenged, the more dangerous it becomes. This history provides people with ready-made solutions to new problems, and it "proves" that they are the right solutions.

Whatever the locus of action, from national government down to precinct, whether in an executive body or a legislative committee, some participants are almost sure to start with favorite, long-developed schemes. Their inclination will be to ignore whatever seems not to fit and to define the problem as one calling for solutions they have handy. Their arguments will be supported, more than likely, by analogies.*

The analogies will be drawn from experience, that is, from history, and most likely from the history that has the most emotional power.

Traumatic events dig deep foundations in the national psyche. In Britain the appeasement of Hitler has long been such an event. Sir Anthony Eden's response to the Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 was clearly shaped by his determination never again to appease a dictator. But events suggest that the precedent of Hitler was not very helpful in dealing with Colonel Nasser, and one cannot help thinking that if Eden had confronted and analyzed it he would have realized as much. In other crises since, the reflex never to appease a dictator has evidently served British governments rather better. For the United States the equivalent trauma is Pearl Harbor. It was the image that leaped to many minds

^{*} Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers (New York: Free Press, 1986), p. 235.

on that "day of infamy," 11 September 2001, when the terrorists attacked the Twin Towers, and it evidently shaped President Bush's response, which was to declare war on somebody at once and invade somewhere as quickly as possible. Even at the time, many observers doubted if it was wise to raise a criminal gang to the status of a sovereign state or whether invasion of one or two countries, however unpleasant they were, was really the best response to an international terrorist movement.*

Today, Pearl Harbor visibly lurks just below the surface of much discussion of U.S. relations with China. Clearly there are excellent reasons for the United States (and the world) to pay close attention to China, but to me it seems that the case differs in most respects from that of Japan in the 1930s and that the mere fact that China constitutes a potential threat to U.S. interests from approximately the same part of the world is a bad reason for drawing conscious—or, more dangerously, unconscious—parallels with 1941. It is especially dangerous because of one notable difference: in 1941 the Pacific naval powers were (as a consequence of the Washington naval treaties) so far apart that they were largely out of each other's range, but today the United States and China have many opportunities to clash in and around the China seas. A sudden emergency generated by some unexpected incident is the worst possible moment to be guided by unconscious historical parallels. Moreover, the Chinese too have their traumatic moments in history that are likely to shape their responses in any confrontation with an external power. In their case, it is the myth-history of the Opium War that is endlessly invoked to explain how to resist foreign aggression. This history would be well worth study by American policy makers.

Since history is impossible to escape and bad history is difficult to avoid, the historian has at least the essential function of distinguishing the two, of warning against bad history and false analogy. Historians may have no special qualifications to predict the future, but at least they can check the misuse of the past. For strategists and policy makers, however, this may not be enough. I know from experience that people can be very annoyed with historians who insist how much better qualified they are than anyone else to avoid the dangers of predicting the future by false analogy with the past but then refuse to risk their reputations by making any predictions at all. The historian must always be intensely conscious that history never repeats itself exactly; historical parallels are never really

^{*} A recent contribution to the large literature on this theme is John W. Dower, Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, 9-11, Iraq (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

[†]Peter Ward Fay, The Opium War 1840–1842: Barbarians in the Celestial Empire in the Early Part of the Nineteenth Century and the War by Which They Forced Her Gates Ajar, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 299-303.

parallel, and the "lessons of history" are at best general warnings, not specific instructions. It has been well said that "history never repeats itself, but sometimes it rhymes."* Historians cannot help noticing resemblances between the present day and the periods they study, and these may at least suggest pitfalls to avoid and possibilities to exploit.

I myself have recently been studying the nineteenth century, and I believe there are suggestive similarities between that era and our own in two dimensions: diplomacy and strategy, and economics and trade. In diplomacy and strategy we may concentrate on the leading European nations, for in the nineteenth century the great powers were still essentially European. The United States, as the century wore on, increasingly acquired the economic potential to act as a great power, but in practice it remained largely absorbed in its own internal development; it did not choose to involve itself deeply in world affairs, and (except during the Civil War) its armed forces were negligible. For almost forty years after the Congress of Vienna ended the Napoleonic War, the peace of Europe was largely assured by the "Concert of Europe"—meaning the loose, informal grouping of the victors in that war—to preserve stability and restrain French expansionism. This was then disrupted by the Russian war of 1852–55 (rather misleadingly called the Crimean War, since its origins lay in the Levant and its most decisive campaign was fought in the Baltic), followed by the German and Italian wars of unification.

In 1871 the creation of the German Second Reich marked the emergence of a new, powerful, and expansionist military power in Central Europe. For the last thirty years of the century and the early years of the next, Europe (and by extension the world as well) was increasingly destabilized by the rise of two hungry and ambitious powers, Germany and Russia, and by the decline and vulnerability of two extensive empires, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. Comfortable, possessor powers like Britain and France had imperial ambitions and rivalries across the world but hoped to keep the peace within Europe by restraining aggressors and supporting existing frontiers. The British in particular feared that a collapse of the Ottoman Empire would allow Russia to expand to the Mediterranean and threaten the vital imperial sea route to India. Toward the end of the century the British became increasingly worried that Russian expansion in Central Asia would place the Russian army within direct striking distance of India—though the modern eye and modern maps suggest that the very long distances and very high mountains that separated them would have put an invasion far out of practical reach.

Retrospect suggests that Britain's preeminence was under growing threat from the 1870s at latest. British statesmen, however, like the vast majority of world

^{*} The remark is usually attributed to Mark Twain, but there seems to be no good source for it.

leaders in every age, had learned their view of the world as young men and did not substantially change it as they grew older. The leaders of that generation had formed their outlook in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, when it seemed that Britain had nothing to fear from Continental rivals and nothing to lose from what Lord Palmerston (twice prime minister) called "splendid isolation." For them British preeminence was a given, a product of history and economic dominance that no one could doubt or challenge. There was no need to spend much money on the navy, still less the army, because only savages would be ignorant and foolish enough to challenge them. The only superpower dominated the world by political and economic rather than military strength. It has been well said that "superpowers in any age function much on strategic credit. Their writ, that is, runs much more on the basis of their reputation for effective coercion than on the actual exercise of power."* Reputation was cheap and effective, there had been no credible military threat to Britain for half a century, and British political leaders of the generation of Disraeli and Gladstone found it difficult to take seriously the idea that there might be another in the foreseeable future.

This confidence rested on Britain's economic superiority. By 1815 Britain was the world's leading trading nation, with an unsurpassed financial strength that had allowed it to finance the entire allied war effort in the closing stages of the Napoleonic War. In the succeeding years of peace the Industrial Revolution gathered pace, and in the 1840s the repeal of the Corn Laws and the Navigation Acts threw open British shipping and overseas trade to international competition and ushered in the era of free trade. This was the first age of globalization, when the free movement of capital and technology and the progressive removal of barriers to trade led to a very rapid increase in international prosperity. It also led to the rise of new industrial powers abroad. From being in the 1840s the only advanced industrial economy in the world, Britain was by the end of the century only one of several, some of them having much greater populations, land areas, and stores of natural resources than its own.

It was obvious to contemporaries that British economic preeminence was under threat, and it seemed to many that ambitious rivals might easily translate that threat into military terms—or rather, naval terms, for all credible strategic threats to Britain were necessarily naval ones. By the 1880s the old-fashioned and quite unrealistic fears of an unexpected surprise attack across the Channel had been largely abandoned. In their place came a newer and more credible threat to Britain's worldwide trade, to an economy now heavily dependent on imported food and raw materials and exported manufactures. Moreover, this threat no longer

^{*} Colin S. Gray, The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. 142.

came entirely from rival European powers. Advanced economies were rising in other parts of the world, some of them showing signs of spending their wealth and industrial capacity on modern navies. For two centuries the British had been able to dominate the seas of the world indirectly by keeping their main fleet at home, for defense against their neighbors, who were their only serious enemies. By the late 1890s two small but modern navies, those of the United States and Japan, were rising in distant seas that could not be dominated from Europe.

British strategists recognized their country's radical and unique dependence on seaborne trade but were divided in their response. Some feared attack and planned various strategies of defense. Others placed more or most of their trust in the development of international law. The rise of the global economy was paralleled in the second half of the nineteenth century by the rise of a new kind of international law, founded on international treaties signed by most, if not all, of the leading powers. The first of these was the Declaration of Paris of 1857, which professed to outlaw privateering (though the United States refused to sign and still claims the right to issue letters of marque). More important were the Hague and London Conferences of 1908–1909, which set out to write international rules to protect wartime trade, define contraband, and forbid blockade. The Declaration of London proposed to establish an International Prize Court that would have been the first international court with jurisdiction over sovereign states (though only if both parties chose to appeal to it).

The proposed Prize Court never came to fruition, and the force of these international agreements, like all their predecessors, rested on "customary international law," which essentially meant the capacity of neutrals to restrain belligerent navies. Behind this expectation that neutral powers would have real influence over belligerents lay a clear understanding of the complexity and vulnerability of the web of international trade, on which all advanced economies were heavily, and mutually, dependent. Any form of economic warfare at sea, it was presumed, would ruin all the participants and render war impossible to sustain. In the era of globalization, therefore, modern war would have to be short if it were to be possible at all, and the capacity to keep it going would depend largely or entirely on neutrals' freedom to trade. The First World War was to falsify almost all of these expectations, in the process ruining the leading belligerents and wrecking the world trading system. In place of free trade it brought an age of protectionism, financial crisis, economic collapse, and another world war.

What, if any, resemblances may we find between this world and our own? First, we must obviously increase the scale from Europe to the whole world. That done, we may see some suggestive parallels between the postwar settlements of 1815 and of 1945. The Cold War was scarcely a "Concert of Europe," but in both cases the wartime allies continued to dominate the postwar world and prevent

their rivalries from leading to war, except among client states on the strategic periphery. Once again a new age of free trade and surging economic growth lifted nations in some parts of the world from poverty into the status of advanced economies in two generations. Once again this huge advance in world prosperity depended entirely on ships trading across free and open seas. Once again it is very widely assumed that the complexity and interdependence of the modern world trading system makes it unthinkable that any advanced state would contemplate disrupting it by war. Today, however, the new age of free trade seems to be threatened by financial collapse and political instability in ways reminiscent of the 1890s. Ambitious rising powers once more press against the weaknesses of existing empires.

A comparison of Japan then and China now suggests itself—but I have already suggested that I think this is simplistic and dangerous. I think there may be more to be learned by comparing modern China* with Bismarckian Germany. Both are populous states in central positions with historic pretensions to imperial status, and with rapidly growing economic and military strength to back them. In both cases dazzling economic growth tends to conceal the extent to which the economies remain backward and dependent on foreign technology and finance. In both cases political unity and constitutional structures remain fragile, and foreign policy is marked by aggressive insecurity. Growing prosperity and power will no doubt continue to reconcile many tensions, but the Chinese regime would be vulnerable to any serious economic or political check. This is an uncomfortable reflection, for this is the classic situation in which unstable dictatorships attempt to rebuild crumbling support at home by reckless adventures abroad. The world has a heavy investment in China's economic growth and political unity. A China growing smoothly to become a prosperous and advanced economy with a large stake in world security and peace and a huge market open to trade would be very much in the interest of all. A nuclear-armed China sliding backward into poverty and instability presents incalculable risks. A large sector of public opinion in the United States regards China's strength as a threat, but it is China's weakness that ought to worry us.

So ought the fragility of the world economic system. Piracy and protectionism, to name only the two most obvious dangers, are capable of inflicting grave damage on world prosperity. The Somalis have shown how easy and profitable is piracy for ransom, in the tradition of the North African regencies, and there is plenty of scope for others to imitate them. Protectionism in the wake of a world financial crisis did much to bring on the Second World War, and there are populist politicians, in the United States and elsewhere, willing to try again. A

^{*} Some elements of this comparison can also be applied on a smaller scale to Iran.

regional war, in, say, the Middle East, could have destructive effects on essential international trades, notably in oil. In these and other aspects the machinery of international free trade is delicate and easily deranged. Precedent suggests that international law, naval power, and the enlightened self-interest of trading nations are relatively feeble defenses. I do not want to predict that another major war is coming soon, but it is certainly not impossible, and if there is any truth in my comparison with the late nineteenth century, the analogy is not encouraging. Navies have unequaled flexibility as instruments of deterrence and diplomacy, and in the present state of the world it seems to me that their most urgent task is to win the peace.

N. A. M. RODGER

Dr. Rodger, a leading British naval historian and Fellow of the British Academy, is a Senior Research Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. His recent books include The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815 (2004) and The Safeguard of the Sea: A Naval History of Britain, 1660–1649 (1997).