

Foreign Policy

Nostalgia Is a National Security Threat

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One of the most prevalent, and pernicious, biases in U.S. foreign-policy circles was best summarized by the political scientist John Mueller. Humans have a “tendency to look backward with misty eyes, to see the past as much more benign, simple, and innocent than it really was,” Mueller wrote in 1995. “That is, no matter how much better the present gets, the past gets better faster in reflection, and we are, accordingly, always notably worse off than we used to be. Golden ages, thus, do happen, but we are never actually *in* them: they are always back there somewhere.”

What Mueller was describing was retrospection bias. Humans have a tendency to actively forget negative events from long ago, and thus we disproportionately judge the past in a more positive light. History is also simplified and chunked into a few key events and big impressions. With the benefit of hindsight, the past seems relatively predictable and sensible, while the present is always chaotic and uncertain. “We are standing at an unprecedented moment in human history,” say respected politicians and generals, as if that is not always the case. Inevitably, what results are mistaken—and sometimes catastrophic—foreign-policy decisions.

Within the U.S. foreign-policy community, the Cold War is particularly notable for being compressed and selectively remembered as global ideological battleground where “we” won over communism. This collective nostalgia—which overlooks the greater number of genocides and mass starvations, mass casualty wars of all types, and the 72 regime changes the United States attempted between 1947 and 1989—makes the Cold War seem stable and the outcomes obvious. By comparison, the international landscape is forever becoming more and more violent, complex, and threatening.

Consider the judgements expressed by civilian and military officials, as well as policymakers, over just the past few years. All of these are cited and placed into their context in a new book I co-authored with Michael A. Cohen, *Clear and Present Safety: The World Has Never Been Better and Why That Matters to Americans*.

“We are living in the most dangerous time in my lifetime, right now.” — Gen. Marin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, February 2012

“I will personally attest to the fact that [the world is] more dangerous than it has ever been.” — Dempsey, February 2013

“The global environment is the most uncertain I have seen in my 36 years of service.” — Gen. Raymond Odierno, February 2013

“The world is literally about to blow up.” — Sen. Lindsey Graham, January 2014

“I have not experienced a time when we’ve been beset by more crises and threats around the globe.” — Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, February 2014

“We are probably in the most serious period of turmoil in our lifetime.” — Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain, January 2015

“We’re already in World War III. The fact is this is a new world war and one that won’t look like the last two.” — New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, December 2015