



An Education in History

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Preble sat down with Jesse Curtis, the Thomas J. Davis Fellow in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy at the Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy, to discuss the role of historians in society, the future of history education and pursuing history as a career.

For the full interview with Christopher Preble, including his thoughts on Donald Trump and the future of American foreign policy, read the spring 2016 edition of Strategic Visions.

What should be the role of the historian in trying to influence popular discourse and political debate?

My opinions on this point come mostly from a book that I read a few years before entering graduate school: *Thinking in Time* by Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May. There are many terrific insights in there, but the best for historians come from May's earlier work on the misapplication of historical analogies to policy. Non-historians tend to see superficial similarities between a contemporary case and one from the recent or distant past, and predict that the future will play out the same way if we do not act. The Munich analogy is merely the most famous, and most frequently misused, of these—and that seems to have a unique hold on Americans, despite the fact that few know what actually happened in 1938. Every tin-pot tyrant becomes a Hitler. Every reprehensible ideology becomes Nazism. But there are many other examples.

Historians can play a huge role merely in fleshing out the facts, and revealing that the superficial similarities are often just that: superficial.

It is often said that history does not repeat itself, but it rhymes. Fair enough, but I would not sleep on my head, or wear a hat on my bed. Details matter. And if the historical case du jour suggests that a given action will solve a problem, it is helpful to remind people that what worked before might not work again. That is not history. That is just common sense.

Historians can also provide context. So many times we hear that something in the present-day is “unprecedented.” But there is (almost) nothing new under the sun. A good historian will always be ready with a useful “Not necessarily” or, a “Well, actually...” when they hear someone say “It’s never been this way before.”

How can historians do better at bringing our insights to bear in the public sphere?

My first piece of advice is to write well. You might think that what you are studying is the most interesting and important thing in the world, but if you cannot communicate clearly and creatively, you are missing out. There is so much competition out there for people's attention: from sports, to politics to Dancing with the Stars. What historians do needs to be just a little bit entertaining.

And it *should* be entertaining. So, my second piece of advice is to own it. Love what you study. If you, as a historian, cannot get excited about a story, then you are in the wrong business. And if you cannot get other people excited, you need to work harder at it. Get passionate about what you are studying, find the hidden nuggets that make the story pop – from a previously obscure document to an interview with someone who saw it first hand – and then *write*.

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Writing is a skill, and, like shooting a basketball or playing piano (neither of which I can do well, by the way), you get better with practice and some good coaching. So, when you write, seek out feedback. When you write a lot, you might get a lot of feedback, and that should make you a better writer.

Technology provides us with so many different ways to tell stories. We should use all of them. Books and journal articles will always be important, but we cannot ignore the power of other mediums to reach a very wide audience. Oh, what Plutarch and Gibbon could have done with the internet.

Do you have any advice for graduate students pursuing a career in the history of diplomacy, war, and foreign relations?

My main pieces of advice would be to do it for the right reasons, to study what interests you, and (I repeat myself) to write well.

I still believe that the primary purpose of graduate school is to train future college professors, and I especially believe that for those in a PhD program. If you do not want to teach, even a little bit, ask what that extra three or four years writing a dissertation will get you that you could not obtain through some out-of-the-academy experience.

But if you finish the dissertation, and you get the PhD, and then you do not land that dreamed-about tenure-track job, there are many other career tracks for diplomatic historians. And one of them is work at think tanks. It seems to have worked out pretty well for me. And my predecessor also happened to be a diplomatic historian, and was a wonderful mentor. I would be very pleased if I could help a few others along their way.