

180 Op-Eds: Or How to Make the Present Historical

Joanne Meyerowitz

Almost fifty years ago, in 1971, the historian David Hackett Fischer published *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*. The book cataloged what Fischer described as “explicit historical errors” made by professional historians. And the list of errors was long. The book ended with an actual index of more than a hundred fallacies: anachronism, circular proof, false extrapolation, insidious generalization, quibbling, and much more. One of those fallacies was presentism. For Fischer, presentism was a fallacy of narration. It was “a complex anachronism, in which the antecedent in a narrative series is falsified by being defined or interpreted in terms of the consequent.” It endorsed “the mistaken idea that the proper way to do history is to prune away the dead branches of the past” and focus only on what has “grown into the dark forest of our contemporary world.”¹

Fischer, though, did not object to historians addressing current events. He hoped for a usable past. History could “clarify contexts in which contemporary problems exist,” he wrote. It could show us how current issues “developed through time.” More dubiously, it could, in his eyes, even forecast the future through the “temporal sophistication” that historians have and other scholars, he claimed, “conspicuously lack.” “Professional historians,” he warned, “must hold something more than a private conversation with themselves.”²

Forty-nine years later, we still ask how we might bring historical thinking to bear on current events and how we might share our scholarship with a wider public. But for at least the last decade or so, we have mostly backed away from posing presentism as a fallacy. Certainly, in the history of sexuality (which is one of my areas of research), and in other subfields as well, we have a persistent and healthy resistance to imposing our present categories and terms onto a past when they were not in use. But if we refrain from hauling

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¹ David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (London, 1971), xvii, 337–38, 135.

² *Ibid.*, 315–16.

the present into the past, we no longer refrain from the converse. In our ongoing national and global crises, we now doggedly drag the past into the present with the hope, however dim, that our history lessons might help us map the dark forest of our day.³

Let me remind you of a recent minor flap, a moment when historians sparred in public. In the fall of 2018, in an interview with the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jill Lepore, the distinguished Harvard University historian who also writes for the *New Yorker*, complained about “the retreat of humanists from public life.” “Serious academic historians,” she said, “have to a large degree retreated.” In the era of social media, the response came in a flash. From New York University, Tom Sugrue said it just wasn’t so. “It’s a veritable golden age,” he tweeted, “for historians engaging the wide public.” In a thread of nineteen tweets, he pointed to op-eds in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, articles in the *New Yorker*, and posts on social media, and he rattled off a long list of historians engaged in public debate.⁴

On the *Society for U.S. Intellectual History Blog*, Holly Genovese, a graduate student, jumped into the fray to note the range of historians “doing good work, in public, everyday,” the “curators and historic preservationists” as well as the writers of books, blogs, and tweets. And John Fea, a historian at Messiah College in south-central Pennsylvania, called for more “public witness”—not just public intellectuals confirming the opinions of a rarefied elite, but historians plying their trade in the down-to-earth settings of small museums, lecture halls, and classrooms outside the metropolis.⁵

What interests me here are not the dribs of dispute but the vast sea of consensus. Everyone, it seems, agrees that we need to speak to a broader public and address contemporary life. The same could be said about a more recent example: the public debate over the *New York Times Magazine’s* 1619 Project on the history of slavery. Historians disagreed (with the *New York Times* and with one other) about the facts and interpretations that the magazine promoted, but they did not dispute that “raising profound, unsettling questions about slavery and the nation’s past and present . . . is a praiseworthy and urgent public service.” That was an area of agreement.⁶

³ For an 18-year-old critique of presentism, see Lynn Hunt, “Against Presentism,” *AHA Perspectives on History*, May 1, 2002, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2002/against-presentism>. Lynn Hunt’s version of presentism is broader than David Hackett Fischer’s. It includes not only “the tendency to interpret the past in presentist terms,” but also a more common recent refrain, “the shift of general historical interest toward the contemporary period and away from the more distant past.” For recent advocacy for presentism, see, for example, James Grossman, “History, Historians, and ‘The Current Moment,’” *AHA Perspectives*, Nov. 1, 2017, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2017/history-historians-and-the-current-moment>; Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge, Eng., 2014). Jo Guldi and David Armitage hope to bring historical thought to bear on contemporary public policy. I don’t agree with their critique of “short-termism.” Short-term history can do just as much (and sometimes more) to illuminate and explain contemporary events as does the *longue durée*.

⁴ Evan Goldstein, “The Academy Is Largely Itself Responsible for Its Own Peril,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Nov. 23, 2018; Tom Sugrue tweets, Nov. 14, 2018, <https://twitter.com/TomSugrue/status/1062792450056601600>. (Apparently the Jill Lepore interview came out online before its version in print.)

⁵ Holly Genovese, “Jill Lepore and False Notions of ‘The Public,’” Nov. 15, 2018, *Society for U.S. Intellectual History Blog*, <https://s-usih.org/2018/11/jill-lepore-and-false-notions-of-the-public/>; John Fea, “On Historians, Public Debate, and Journalists,” Nov. 21, 2018, *The Way of Improvement Leads Home*, <https://thewayofimprovement.com/2018/11/21/on-historians-public-debate-and-journalists/>.

⁶ Victoria Bynum, James M. McPherson, James Oakes, Sean Wilentz, and Gordon S. Wood, “The 1619 Project,” *New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 29, 2019. See also Adam Serwer, “The Fight over the 1619 Project Is Not about the Facts,” *Atlantic*, Dec. 23, 2019; Sean Wilentz, “A Matter of Facts,” *ibid.*, Jan. 22, 2020; David Waldstreicher, “The Hidden Stakes of the 1619 Controversy,” *Boston Review*, Jan. 24, 2020.

So my question for us now is not whether historians should engage with the public or address the nation's present as well as its past. To those questions, I join the chorus and answer yes. My question is, "how do we engage?" This talk is an attempt to give a partial answer through a first foray—through historical research—into one variant of presentism, one sliver of historians' public voice: the op-ed newspaper column.

Why, you might ask, the op-ed? I see the historians' op-ed as a genre of historical writing. The op-ed is an older form, some might say archaic in its ties to the age of print, but it adapts easily to the digital platform. It's a more extended form than the one- or two-sentence tweet, and it reaches a public beyond the circles of friends and fans who usually click on our blogs. The op-ed tends to have a broad nonhistorian readership. Unlike books, museum exhibitions, and classroom sessions, it invites an audience that might not even know that it's heading into history (unless the headline announces it). And for my purposes, I confess, the op-ed is easy to study in bulk.

The historians' op-ed is short-form history. It generally has a current hook, a history lesson, and at least some evidence to back it. Because of its word limits, it can't have the same standards of evidence as longer histories. It tends to rely instead on carefully chosen shards of evidence, on the art of persuasion, and on the reader's trust in the author's expertise. It offers a way to draw on, condense, and reframe historical scholarship—the stories we tell one other—and offer them to a broader audience. The op-ed is a hybrid form. To reach the public eye, it has to appeal to the editorial gatekeepers who get to decide what they choose to publish as news. The final product, the published op-ed, combines the words of historians with the interventions of editors, who sometimes slash and burn. (Anyone who has written op-eds knows that the editing can be shockingly intense.)

I started thinking about op-eds almost ten years ago, in 2011, when I was invited to speak at a conference in Munich to mark the tenth anniversary of September 11. I was asked to comment on how historians had viewed the events over the course of a decade. At that point, historians had published only a handful of books and articles on September 11, but op-eds, it turned out, were plentiful. And so I consulted a now-defunct Web site, the *History News Service*, founded by James Banner Jr. and the late Joyce Appleby. The *History News Service* helped historians place their op-eds in newspapers and then posted the published op-eds on its site, where I found around one hundred that addressed September 11. I used that collection to concoct a variant of historiography that depended in large part on the news.

What I found then was a gradual change over time that followed the unfolding events from September 11 to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to domestic surveillance by the U.S. government. The earliest historian commentators tended to address the histories of surprise attacks, such as Pearl Harbor; terrorist bombings, including those perpetrated by earlier extremists; and the purposeful targeting of civilians, as in the bombs dropped during World War II. Historians soon moved on, though, to warnings about unnecessary and prolonged wars, such as the "quagmire" in Vietnam, and then turned their attention to the security state, with the violations of civil liberties found, for example, in the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II and the anticommunist red scares of the 1920s and 1950s. In this way, historians repeatedly stressed a common theme—that the events of September 11 did not represent a clean break with the past—but the particular past (the particular context) they deemed most relevant shifted along with the

The Long History of Political Idiocy

By Joanne B. Freeman

W E are currently enjoying a master class in the art of political stupidity. Donald J. Trump has been schooling us for some time, but the Iran nuclear deal has touched off a new race to the bottom. Mike Huckabee said the agreement with Iran would “take the Israelis and march them to the door of the oven.” Ted Cruz called the Obama administration “the world’s leading financier of radical Islamic terrorism.” Let’s not even get started on the Affordable Care Act, which Ben Carson once called “the worst thing that has happened in this nation since slavery.”

It’s tempting to rail against the media’s ability to elicit and amplify such stupidity. But none of this is new. Politicians have always resorted to dumb claims, blatant insults, bold exaggerations and baldfaced lies to gain press coverage and win votes. Indeed, Americans of the 19th century invented a name for it. The word “bunkum” — the origin of the word “bunk” — dates from the 1820s, a product of the over-the-top speechifying of Representative Felix Walker, who forewarned his congressional colleagues to ignore a blustery grandstand speech because it was intended only for the folks back home in Buncombe County, N.C. Then as now, raising hackles before the eyes of the press was a play for power; politicians who displayed their fighting-man spunk were strutting their suitability as leaders.

Such grandstanding was particularly blatant in the mid-19th century, an era with a political climate much like our own. The nation was becoming increasingly polarized because of the debate over the spread of slavery in new states born of Western expansion. At a time of enormous change, a sense of do-or-die extremism was in the air. New technologies, like the steam-powered printing press and the

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telegraph, were dramatically reshaping the power of the press.

Congress was particularly newsworthy in the 1840s, '50s and '60s. A typical newspaper had an extended account of debates in both houses, commentary on those debates and a “letter” from a Washington reporter (thus the term “correspondent”) filled with gossip about congressional doings. Legislators who went to extremes were virtually guaranteed press coverage. As Senator Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire griped in 1838, the visitors’ galleries were empty during debates on “great measures of policy,” but became

Outrageous remarks by politicians were common in the 19th century.

“crowded almost to suffocation” when personal insults were expected.

Some men were known for such performances. Take Representative Henry A. Wise, a congressman from Virginia from 1833 to 1844. Like many purveyors of bunk, Wise was by no means a stupid man, however problematic his politics. (After his congressional career, he went on to become governor of Virginia, and signed the abolitionist John Brown’s death warrant.)

Wise loved grandstanding of all kinds: the swaggering threat, the mocking taunt, the over-the-top insult. He even took an occasional swing at an opponent. In 1842, he demonstrated his pro-slavery credentials by threatening to assault John Quincy Adams, an opponent of slavery, who had returned to the House after serving as president. “If the Member from Massachusetts had not been an old man, protected by the imbecility of age,” Wise warned, “he would not have enjoyed, as long as he has, the mercy of my mere words.” A horrified Adams wrote in his diary that night that Wise made “a threat of murdering me in my seat.”

In 1838, Wise’s baldfaced claim that a Democratic congressman was corrupted to a deadly duel. Speakers of the House had to be alert when Wise was on a roll. In 1834, a particularly alert speaker managed to stop Wise mid-insult (halfway through the word “malignant”). “Sir, I leave the blank to be filled by the House,” Wise said.

Over the top, yes. But Wise benefited from such behavior many times over. He was a star attraction. Crowds filled the galleries when he seemed likely to erupt; he sometimes advertised his flare-ups in advance. In an age when most congressmen served only one or two terms, Wise was elected to the House a remarkable six times.

Matters grew worse in the ever-more polarized 1850s, when grabbing attention and scoring points often rewarded new heights of hyperbole. During the fraught debate over new slave states in 1850, Southerners threatened bloody murder, earning national attention in the process. A threat by Representative Thomas Clingman of North Carolina to shed Northern blood in the House — he promised a “collision” as electric as the Battle of Lexington — received widespread press coverage.

Perhaps polarized times require such grandstanding. They certainly invite it. But, as now, some politicians in the 1850s recognized the risks and voiced their concerns. They understood that extreme claims and violent words have escalating consequences. The tossing of verbal “missiles” in Congress could cause bloodshed, one congressman presciently warned in July 1856.

In recent weeks, by contrast, we haven’t heard much talk of the consequences of political flame-throwing, save some hand-wringing by President Obama.

And so our crop of presidential contenders continues to spout stupidities with a swagger. Given the pack of candidates vying for attention (and basic name recognition), stupidity seems smart. It gets attention — but not without a price. In reaching for new heights of bunkum, these candidates are stoking the flames of extremism at a time when dialogue is desperately needed. □

This op-ed, written by Joanne Freeman, was published in the *New York Times* on August 4, 2015. From *The New York Times*. ©2015 *The New York Times Company*. All rights reserved. Used under license.

times. Instead of one path, there were multiple trails to blaze into different corners of the same dark forest.

For this talk, I took a different approach. Instead of examining a single event, I sampled the variety of op-eds written by American historians over a five-year stretch, 2014 through 2018. To do so, I constructed a digital archive of op-eds written by a group of Organization of American Historians (OAH) members. I began my research with the OAH’s Distinguished Lectureship Program. According to the OAH site, the lectureship program is a “speakers bureau” of “scholars and storytellers, uniquely qualified to bring historical context to some of today’s most provocative issues.” (I don’t know who on the OAH staff wrote that line, but I love the cheesy marketing. It sold me. It seemed like a good list to

use for my op-ed experiment.) At the time I started, roughly a year ago, there were 583 such distinguished lecturers. (It's a surprisingly large group.) Proceeding in batches of five or six, late at night when I was too tired to do other work, I entered the 583 lecturers as authors into the advanced search engine of the ProQuest newspaper database. I eliminated book reviews and any op-ed articles that failed to mention history, and I ended up, as my title suggests, with 180 columns. They were written by seventy-three distinguished lecturers and published in nineteen different newspapers.⁷

For the rest of my talk, I'll tell you what I learned. I'll start first with a brief description of my sample: the who, where, and what. Second, I'll dig a bit more deeply into the how—the narrative strategies that historians adopt, along with some specific examples to give you a sense of the range of approaches, issues, and politics. Third, I'll focus on one topical case study: the current U.S. president, Donald J. Trump. And finally I'll come back at the end with a few thoughts on presentism in our political moment.

Most generally, I'm arguing that we should consider our mission as historians as not only to study the past and not only to make the past somehow relevant (which we often do) but also to study the present, to make the present historical, to give historical depth and complexity to the world in which we currently live. Historians usually let twenty or thirty years elapse before we write scholarly books and articles on the recent past. It's an arbitrary stretch that embraces the kind of distance or hindsight that we tend to admire. But at some junctures, it seems, we're called on to weigh the benefits of hindsight against the exigencies of our moment. As a genre, the op-ed is intended for those moments. It's crafted to give the public a "history of the present." Michel Foucault used that phrase—history of the present—in his book *Discipline and Punish* (and it's now the title of a scholarly journal). It pushes us to remember that the forces and contingencies of the past gave birth to our current era, that the present grew out of the past. It also reminds us that the present is, in the blink of an eye, the past and therefore, arguably, an object of historical study.⁸

So here's the quantitative breakdown of my sample. (And I will keep this relatively brief because I don't want to bludgeon you with numbers.) First, the sample skewed toward men. It seems that forty-six of the op-ed authors were men and twenty-seven were women, which is much more male-dominated than the Distinguished Lectureship list. Six

⁷ Organization of American Historians, "OAH Distinguished Lectureship Program," at <https://www.oah.org/lectures/>.

⁸ On some occasions, we already teach, write, and exhibit histories of current events. Think, for example, of James Kloppenberg's book that placed President Barack Obama's thought in the context of intellectual history, or think of the *JAH* special issues on Hurricane Katrina (December 2007) or on the carceral state (June 2015). James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton, 2010). On the growing interest in "recent history," see Claire Bond Potter and Renee C. Romano, eds., *Doing Recent History: On Privacy, Copyright, Video Games, Institutional Review Boards, Activist Scholarship, and History That Talks Back* (Athens, Ga., 2012). In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault famously described his work as "the history of the present," but as is sometimes the case with Foucault, his meaning was fairly obscure. He seems to refer to the genealogies of power relations, techniques, and knowledge that shape the present. As David Garland puts it, Foucault's genealogy "aims to trace the forces that gave birth to our present-day practices and to identify the historical conditions upon which they still depend. Its point is not to think historically about the past but rather to use historical materials to rethink the present." Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1977), 31; David Garland, "What Is a 'History of the Present'? On Foucault's Genealogies and Their Critical Preconditions," *Punishment and Society*, 16 (no. 4, 2014), 373.

<i>New York Times</i>	65
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	28
<i>Washington Post</i>	27
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	19
<i>Philadelphia Tribune</i>	14
<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	8
Other	19

Table 1. Within the sample used for this essay, this table shows the number of op-eds published in various newspapers.

especially prolific authors (all men) wrote sixty-one, or a tad more than one third, of the op-eds.⁹

The sample also skewed heavily toward large metropolitan newspapers. The ProQuest database that I used held 160 different U.S. newspapers covering the years I studied. But the vast majority, almost 90 percent of the op-eds in my sample, appeared in only six of them, with two-thirds of the entire sample in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post*. Beyond the mainstream urban newspapers, most of the other op-eds appeared in African American newspapers, such as the *Mississippi Link*, *Miami Times*, and *Boston Banner*, and other ethnic papers, including *El Mundo*, the *Jewish Exponent*, and *New India-Times*.

The op-eds I found addressed a broad range of historical topics from the history of the microwave to the history of populism. They marked anniversaries: the fiftieth anniversary of the War on Poverty, the one hundredth anniversary of World War I, and the 150th anniversary of Reconstruction. They advertised books, with historians writing to showcase the relevance of their recently published books by tying them to current events. They included curious facts. On the trivial and entertaining side, I learned from David Greenberg that, at the 1976 Republican nominating convention, Gerald R. Ford's communications team gave him the code name Tarzan, first lady Betty Ford was Jane, and White House chief of staff Dick Cheney was Chimpanzee. On the serious and horrific side, I learned from Heather Ann Thompson that a doctor conducted experiments on leprosy using prisoners at Attica Prison in the 1960s or early 1970s. This was an episode that did not make it into her prizewinning book on the Attica uprising.¹⁰

Still, the wide variety of history covered in my op-ed sample could not hide that the op-eds clustered into a just a handful of fields. Most of the op-eds, slightly more than half, concerned politics in the most conventional sense; that is, they addressed elections, presidents, and other politicians. Slightly more than a third of the op-eds addressed issues of race, racism, or slavery. The preponderance of political history hardly represents the diversity of historical scholarship (and seems to counter the perennial gripe that U.S. his-

⁹ The op-ed authors were 63% men, 37% women. By comparison, the Distinguished Lectureship list came closer to gender parity: 53% men, 47% women. I based my gender count on first names, photos, and my own familiarity with many of the distinguished lecturers. I could not tell whether any of the op-ed authors identify as non-binary. The 6 most prolific authors were Jonathan Zimmerman (18 op-eds), Peniel Joseph (10), David Greenberg (9), Stephen Mihm (9), Julian Zelizer (8), and Allen Guelzo (7).

¹⁰ David Greenberg, "The Last Great Republican Rupture," *Wall Street Journal*, April 30, 2016; Heather Ann Thompson, "Attica's Alarming Secrets," *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 2017.

Politics	92
Race, Racism, Slavery	62
Social Movements, Activism	31
Economics, Business, Labor	27
Gender, Women, Sexuality	18
War	17
Religion	12
Science, Technology, Medicine	12

Table 2. This table shows the number of op-eds in various subfields of history, with each op-ed coded in up to three fields.

torians have abandoned that field).¹¹ But it shows us what Distinguished Lecturers submitted for publication and, within that set, what editors chose to print. More generally the kind of history covered in the op-eds also had some relation to the current events that dominated the news. The years I sampled—2014 to 2018—were the years surrounding the 2016 election of Donald Trump, and they were also years of protests over Confederate monuments, the emergence of Black Lives Matter, and the Charlottesville white supremacist rally. Politics and race were foremost in the news.

Taken together, the op-eds give us a sampler of how historians illuminate the present by looking to the past. The op-eds I read tended to follow a predictable underlying logic, adopting one or more of a handful of signature moves or narrative strategies to tie past to present. Most commonly, they took a genealogical approach that outlined a trend, showing how we got to where we are today by noting continuities, recurrent episodes, or gradual change over time. They might show the deep roots of current problems or the traces of the past that continue to haunt the present. Allyson Hobbs, for example, wrote about the enduring dangers to black motorists—in the Jim Crow South of her parents' youth and in the more recent "deaths of Sandra Bland, Laquan McDonald and Philando Castile." Or they might analyze a trend to highlight contingencies and show that the way things are is not how they have to be. Louis Hyman tracked the post-1970s rise of temporary labor in the gig economy. "Work forces became expendable and jobs more precarious," he wrote, not because of technology, but because of new forms of corporate organization that severed "obligations between businesses and employees." "Insecurity," he concluded, "is not the inevitable cost of technological progress."¹² (Andrew Yang should have listened.)

In another frequent formula, historians dispelled a myth, corrected an error, or addressed a commonplace misunderstanding. In 2014 Michael Klarman predicted correctly that the Supreme Court would vote for same-sex marriage. But he argued against "the romantic myth of the court as heroic defender of minority rights." The court had failed to take the lead in ending slavery and racial segregation, in halting Japanese American incar-

¹¹ See, for example, Fredrik Logevall and Kenneth Osgood, "The End of Political History?," *New York Times*, Aug. 29, 2016.

¹² Allyson Hobbs, "Summer Road-Tripping while Black," *ibid.*, Sept. 2, 2018; Louis Hyman, "The Gig Economy Isn't the iPhone's Fault," *ibid.*, Aug. 19, 2018.

ceration during World War II, and in supporting gender equality. Justices, he explained, followed public opinion more than they shaped it. Social change and social justice, he suggested, cannot rely on the judicial system.¹³

In two separate op-eds, Thomas Sugrue and Tiya Miles pointed to a different myth: that racism existed and exists only in the South. In 2015, when the news feeds focused on Dylann Roof's white supremacist murders in Charleston, and in 2017, when the press reported on the defense of Confederate monuments, Sugrue and Miles reminded their readers that "crude regional stereotypes" belie the long history of nationwide inequity, from slavery in the antebellum North to racial violence, housing discrimination, and unequal education through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The lesson for northern readers, which Sugrue conveyed explicitly, was "change begins at home."¹⁴

The op-ed writers were pessimists, optimists, and sometimes both at once. Many of them told cautionary tales of misguided actions and unintended consequences. Mae Ngai explained that immigration restriction had created undocumented migration. The nineteenth-century Chinese exclusion laws "spawned an immigration bureaucracy based on extreme vetting, detention and deportations, all tactics," she said, "that were largely unsuccessful." She warned against repeating past mistakes with "heartless policing and deportation to discipline an underclass of nonwhite people that [nativists'] policies created." In a different vein, Margaret O'Mara told a cautionary tale about the regulation of privacy. In the 1960s and 1970s, she found, protests of data collection focused on government surveillance and on transparency, the "individuals' right to know about the information" collected. A case in point: the Freedom of Information Act, passed in 1967. What Congress failed to address was private industry and "the data that companies are allowed to collect in the first place." That omission, O'Mara noted, has come back to haunt us today.¹⁵

Other op-eds replaced caution with celebration. They looked for something in the past that might inspire, often a person, but sometimes a movement, event, or principle worth remembering, applauding, or emulating. Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. each showed up in more than one of the celebratory op-eds I read. Other activists who opposed racism also made an appearance. Crystal Feimster wrote of Ida B. Wells's campaign against the rape of black women and the lynching of black women and men. Historians' op-eds also featured Rosa Parks, protesting athletes, and pioneers of school desegregation. Other social movements were celebrated as well: the Chicano moratorium, the sanctuary movement, the gun control movement. And Gar Alperovitz coauthored a paean to American socialism, not the movement but actual socialism, seen in the widespread public ownership of land and mineral rights, electric utilities, and hospitals, and at the same time he challenged the myth that private ownership is necessarily more efficient.¹⁶

¹³ Michael J. Klarman, "Judging Marriage: When the High Court Finds a Constitutional Right to Gay Marriage, It Will Be Reflecting Public Opinion, Not Leading It," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 21, 2014.

¹⁴ Thomas J. Sugrue, "The North Is Just as Racist as the South," *Washington Post*, July 19, 2015; Tiya Miles, "The South Doesn't Own Slavery," *New York Times*, Sept. 11, 2017.

¹⁵ Mae Ngai, "The Border-Enforcement Myth," *New York Times*, Jan. 29, 2018; Margaret O'Mara, "The End of Privacy Began in the 1960s," *ibid.*, Dec. 6, 2018.

¹⁶ Crystal N. Feimster, "Lynching's Hidden Victims," *ibid.*, April 29, 2018; Gar Alperovitz and Thomas M. Hanna, "Socialism, American-Style," *ibid.*, July 23, 2015.

Finally, the op-ed authors drew analogies. Stephen Mihm placed the current opioid epidemic alongside “a remarkably similar epidemic,” addiction to opium and morphine, 150 years earlier. That earlier epidemic, he found, tapered off when doctors stopped prescribing morphine, and he expected, or at least hoped, that medical professionals might play a similar role today. And two op-eds, one by Tera Hunter and one coauthored by Serena Mayeri and two other law professors, both drew analogies between the family separations at the Mexican border and the earlier history of “enslaved families torn apart and Native American children taken from their parents.” They placed the present within a longer history of cruelty that we should already know to reject.¹⁷

The different strategies overlapped, came conjoined, and blended together more than my rough categories suggest, and the various permutations offered disparate lessons. The tracking of trends and dispelling of myths generally took more analytic, explanatory, and didactic approaches. Cautionary tales and celebrations tended to lean more heavily on affect, using caution and warning to elicit humility, irony, or foreboding, or using celebration and praise to inspire hope and possibility. Historical analogies, imperfect as they always are, worked to sharpen the focus of the current landscape through the lens of past recognition.

It’s hard to measure political views, but op-eds tend to be more overtly political than many other forms of historical writing, at least in the sense of taking an open stand on current issues of debate. My sample seems to confirm the general impression that historians (or at least OAH Distinguished Lecturers) tilt liberal and left. History, of course, can be (and has been) used or abused to justify virtually anything. One could imagine an op-ed that celebrated the symbolism of the Confederate flag. I’m sure someone’s written it, but our Distinguished Lecturers didn’t.

If you’re looking for something that might register as more conservative, you could find it in the *Wall Street Journal*, in, for example, Peter Coclanis’s defense of agribusiness, “large, super-efficient enterprises” that, he said, are “far more productive than small . . . organic farms.” Or in Allen Guelzo’s shoulder shrug—it-doesn’t-bother-me—approach to the Robert E. Lee statue at the heart of the battles in Charlottesville. Guelzo wasn’t convinced that the statue of Lee was “designed to reinforce white supremacy,” although he acknowledged that some other Confederate monuments undoubtedly were.¹⁸

It’s possible to tease out some political differences by comparing op-eds that call on the same historical figures and events. We could, for instance, contrast Guelzo’s cool detachment to the more heated approaches to Lee and Confederate monuments found in other historians’ op-eds. Karen Cox, for example, noted that the monuments were “part of a campaign to paint the Southern cause in the Civil War as just and slavery as a benevolent institution, and their installation came against a backdrop of Jim Crow violence and oppression of African Americans.” As she put it, “Confederate monuments have always been symbols of white supremacy.” Communities, she said, “have a moral obligation to take up the cause of removing them.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Stephen Mihm, “This Isn’t the First U.S. Opiate-Addiction Crisis,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 18, 2017; Tera W. Hunter, “The Long History of Child-Snatching,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2018; Kristin Collins, Serena Mayeri, and Hiroshi Motomura, “Trump’s Family Cruelty Policy,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 20, 2018.

¹⁸ Peter Coclanis, “Trying to Teach Big Agra in a Hotbed of Locavores,” *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 29, 2015; Allen C. Guelzo, “A Yankee Visits Charlottesville, Where Gen. Lee Is under Cover,” *ibid.*, Sept. 29, 2017.

¹⁹ Karen L. Cox, “White Supremacy Is the Whole Point of Confederate Statues,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 20, 2017; Karen L. Cox, “Confederate Monuments Must Fall,” *New York Times*, Aug. 16, 2017. See also Steven Lubet and Alfred Brophy, “Why Trump Is Wrong to Equate George Washington with Robert E. Lee,” *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 21, 2017; James W. Loewen, “How Confederate Lore Survives,” *Washington Post*, July 5, 2015.

Or take two op-eds that gave opposing advice to Democrats. In late 2016, after the presidential election, David Greenberg warned Democrats against drifting to the left. In the 1970s and 1980s, he found, Democrats had abandoned the political center, and especially white working-class voters, and lost four out of five presidential elections. Two years later, Lily Geismer and Matthew Lassiter co-authored an op-ed that used much the same history to draw the opposite conclusion. They said that it was the centrist Democrats of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s—Michael Dukakis, Bill Clinton, the Democratic Leadership Council—who had abandoned the working class. Geismer and Lassiter warned that a centrist Democratic agenda “fixated . . . on affluent suburbs” would fail to build either “a stable long-term majority” or “a policy blueprint worthy of the progressive mantle.”²⁰

But it wasn't Confederate monuments or Democrats that attracted the most attention. The elephant in the op-ed was definitively Donald Trump. Even though he barely registered until midway through the years I sampled, he came up directly in thirty-eight op-eds and indirectly in others. Trump is the historian's Rorschach test. What do you see in the inkblot? Our op-ed writers saw “autocratic instincts,” “political stupidity,” “unfiltered populism,” and “appeals to racial intolerance, bullying, misogyny, anger and fear.”²¹

The op-eds placed Trump's election in historical context, attempting to explain the shock of his political rise through the longer trend of voter realignments of the late twentieth century. Historians pointed to class. From Dwight D. Eisenhower on, Julian Zelizer explained, Republicans had attracted working-class voters with promises of national security and law and order and through divisive culture wars. Historians pointed to race. Joseph Crespino placed Trump within the longer history of the southern strategy. Republicans had melded, he said, “an overtly conservative, socially moderate economic appeal aimed at the middle class with a politics of rage geared toward disaffected white voters.” Historians pointed to culture. Michael Kazin looked to the battles fought in 1968, with their “harsh divisions. . . . rooted in profound disagreements based on culture and creeds” and found them enduring fifty years on.²²

Even more, historians looked to the intersections, where culture, race, class, and gender collided and combusted, in the allegedly “‘forgotten’ white working-class man.” In the 1960s and 1970s, Beverly Gage wrote, “the Republican Party reclaimed and redefined Roosevelt's ‘forgotten man’ for a more conservative age.” She traced a line from Richard M. Nixon to Trump that moved from a politics of resentment to “nationalist populist revolt,” and like some others, she placed some blame for the Democrats' loss on their own failures.²³

²⁰ David Greenberg, “Hold Off on That Overhaul,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 11, 2016; Lily Geismer and Matthew D. Lassiter, “Turning Rich Suburbs Blue Isn't Worth the Cost,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2018.

²¹ Beverly Gage, “Did Trump Unleash the Next Deep Throat?,” *New York Times*, May 11, 2017; Joanne B. Freeman, “The Long History of Political Idiocy,” *ibid.*, Aug. 4, 2015; David Greenberg, “Why Authenticity Is the Greatest Spin of All,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 24, 2016; Peniel Joseph, “Why Young People Are ‘Focus of Hate,’” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Nov. 22, 2016.

²² Julian Zelizer, “Bannon's Exit Would Rip the Mask Off ‘Blue-Collar Trump,’” *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 18, 2017; Joseph Crespino, “Clinton's Own Southern Strategy,” *New York Times*, Aug. 22, 2016; Michael Kazin, “America's Never-Ending Culture War,” *ibid.*, Aug. 24, 2018. Joseph Crespino wrote his op-ed before the election and imagined that Donald J. Trump was “alienating moderate Republicans in places like the Atlanta exurbs.”

²³ Beverly Gage, “Just Who Is the ‘Forgotten Man?,’” *New York Times*, Nov. 10, 2016. See also Michael Kazin, “The Origins of the Trump Revolution—Labor's Long Fall,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 12, 2016; Greenberg, “Hold Off on That Overhaul”; Geismer and Lassiter, “Turning Rich Suburbs Blue Isn't Worth the Cost.”

The op-eds on Trump also worked to correct at least a handful of the twisted perceptions, conspiracy theories, “alternative facts,” errors, and lies that spewed from the White House after Trump’s election. Alfred Brophy and another law professor, for example, told their readers that statues of Robert E. Lee were not similar to statues of George Washington. Lee, they explained, “had virtually no achievements other than the military defense of slavery.” The op-eds told cautionary tales. Peniel Joseph saw a dangerous reversal. From the 1960s on, he said, U.S. presidents had “offered at least robust rhetorical support to racial justice in law and policy.” Trump’s repudiation, his refusal to disavow his “white nationalist bedfellows,” represented “a devolution of the ideal that racial justice is a moral and political good.”²⁴

The op-ed authors celebrated dissenters in the past, reminding us of the long history of denouncing racists and demagogues. David Blight described how Frederick Douglass protested the racism of Andrew Johnson. Douglass wrote a speech, “Sources of Danger to the Republic,” took it on tour, and “skewed Johnson as an ‘unmitigated calamity’ of a president.” And Kevin Kruse remembered Senator Margaret Chase Smith, a Republican, for her bravery in condemning Joseph McCarthy in 1950. She was “a freshman senator and the only woman in the room,” when she gave her “Declaration of Conscience” speech. Kruse’s celebration of Smith was at the same time a cautionary tale. Her speech failed to stop McCarthy, who “had free rein for the next four years.” Her speech, Kruse concluded, was “a stark reminder that words . . . ultimately mean little if there are no actions to match them.” Just in case the parallels with present-day politics could possibly be missed, both Blight and Kruse made them explicit.²⁵

And our historian op-ed writers drew analogies. In the silhouette of Trump, they saw the shadows of earlier presidents. They positioned Trump as akin to Andrew Johnson, who was conservative, racist, and impeached. They cast Trump in the mold of Nixon, who tried to undermine the independent Federal Bureau of Investigation, faced a bureaucratic backlash, and surrounded himself with yes-men. They also heard echoes of Ronald Reagan, who made damaging token appointments of unqualified men, supported criminal foreign policy, and had more control in the White House than many had imagined.²⁶

The op-eds on Trump provide a record of visceral recoil and a collective *cri de coeur*. They offer case studies of how historians can—in just a few hundred words—explain the present and look to the future through recourse to the past. That is, they show readers how to think historically about our current day. The op-eds also provide a hint of scholarship to come. Maybe it’s not just journalists who write those proverbial first drafts of history. Historians who write op-eds are providing a rough outline of how future historians might approach the events of our day in the decades ahead. We are now twenty years into the twenty-first century, and we have only begun to write its history. It’s time perhaps to

²⁴ Lubet and Brophy, “Why Trump Is Wrong to Equate George Washington with Robert E. Lee”; Joseph, “Why Young People Are ‘Focus of Hate.’”

²⁵ David Blight, “Our Debt to Frederick Douglass,” *New York Times*, Nov. 6, 2018; Kevin Kruse, “A Senate Speech Didn’t Stop McCarthy. It Won’t Stop Trump,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 29, 2017.

²⁶ Blight, “Our Debt to Frederick Douglass”; Allen C. Guelzo, “Impeach Trump? History Counsels against It,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2018; Gage, “Did Trump Unleash the Next Deep Throat?”; Julian Zelizer, “Trump Is Creating a Dangerous Echo Chamber around Himself,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 27, 2018; Thomas J. Sugrue, “Trump Says He Wants to Fix Cities, He Might Break Them,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 11, 2016; Julian Zelizer, “After Indictments, Will Trump End Up Like Nixon or Reagan?,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Nov. 3, 2017; Julian Zelizer, “With Trump, It’s All an Act in Pushing the Right Buttons,” *ibid.*, July 31, 2018. For this paragraph, I used only those analogies that appeared more than once in my op-ed sample. For a comment on the limits of such analogies, see Moshik Temkin, “Historians Should Not Be Pundits,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2017.

outline a nascent history of the century's start, and op-ed writers give us clues to how we might approach it.

I am not suggesting that op-eds are a substitute for scholarship. The op-ed draws and depends on scholarship, and possibly foreshadows it, but it's not the thing itself. As short essays intended for a general public, op-eds rarely engage in or with historiographic debates, complex theoretical issues, or the chaotic messiness of the past. Plus, they tend to make the strangeness of the past chattily relatable and thereby reverse the denaturalizing move that makes the familiar strange. Op-eds offer a first foray into the history of today, and they can bring our work in knowledge production to a wider audience. But they don't enter the slow and deliberative realm—the teasing out of contradictions—that we recognize as substantive scholarship.

I am also not suggesting that my admittedly quirky sample is representative of historians' approaches to the public or the present day. (My analysis, I suspect, falls into one or more of the fallacies that David Hackett Fischer described at such great length.) There are other ways to study op-eds. One could analyze a sample of the one thousand-plus op-eds on the *Washington Post's* *Made by History* site, which is curated by historians not newspaper editors, or one could use the historians' articles in *Politico's* History Dept., or something else entirely. And op-eds are only one of the many ways that historians engage the public and contemporary events. If others want to pursue this variant of historiography, there are multiple avenues to follow.²⁷

But my aim here is not to push for more historiographic studies of op-eds or other forms of public-facing history. I dwell on op-eds because I want us to think more about our public engagement and how we might write histories of the present, especially in the weeks and months to come. In her op-ed on the microwave oven, Susan Strasser wrote, "These days, when politics looms large, it's easy to disparage all else as trivial. But everything has a history." She reminds us that we shouldn't forget the everyday, the social, the cultural, and the domestic. She is, of course, correct.²⁸ Yet here we are in an election year that feels more critical than most, and for the next few months at least we might consider it our civic (as well as professional) duty to attend to electoral politics. In that endeavor, we could adopt Strasser's wide-angle lens that brings the everyday, the social, the cultural, and the domestic into our vision of politics.

More than a hundred years ago, Van Wyck Brooks wrote his now-classic essay "On Creating a Usable Past," and since that time, historians have called perennially for histories that address the present. When David Hackett Fischer placed himself within this lineage, he rejected the teleological blinders that erased the pieces of the past that didn't lead directly to the current day, but he still called on his fellow historians to engage with contemporary events through "the most effective media of mass communication," which he listed as "television, radio, motion pictures, newspapers, etc."²⁹ Today we have more entry points into Fischer's dark forest and more vehicles to carry us into it. We have a broader

²⁷ *Made by History*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/>; *Politico* History Dept, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/tag/history-dept>.

²⁸ Susan Strasser, "What's in Your Microwave Oven?," *New York Times*, April 15, 2017.

²⁹ Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," *Dial*, April 11, 1918, 337–41; Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 316.

vision of what counts as historically significant, we have a wider array of media more readily at our disposal, and we have a more diverse historical profession.

Yes, we need to study the past for its own sake without compulsory reference to the present, and, yes, we need to engage with the distant as well as the recent past. Not all of us need to comment on current events or speak to a broader public. But historical thinking and historical methods—the ways we gather, question, and interpret evidence, the ways we construct arguments—do not just apply to the past. We cannot understand persisting inequalities, social hierarchy, climate change, public health, white nationalism, anti-immigrant sentiment, sexual harassment, transphobia, the war in Afghanistan, or the presidency of Donald Trump unless we look to the past.

As historians, we offer analyses that can explain the present by making it historical. In op-eds—and in public lectures, in exhibitions and installations, in documentary films, on the Internet, radio, and television, and also in the classroom—we can narrate the present as well as the past. In our public pedagogy, we can cross the artificial conceptual boundary that divides past and present, and address the critical questions of our day. In so doing, we might, I hope, open the space to imagine a different future.

Let me conclude with some wisdom from two of the op-ed authors in my sample. First, a cautionary tale. In an op-ed on faculty activism, Tiya Miles reminds us that words are not enough. She writes of the protests of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and the kneeling football players. They put their bodies on the line in “blatant acts of refusal.” Miles makes her case through words but also acknowledges their limits. An op-ed (or a faculty statement, which is what inspired her op-ed) may have impact, but clearly it’s not enough. “I am certain of this,” she writes, “The change we seek to make won’t be accomplished by words alone.” And, second, a celebratory op-ed, intended to inspire. Marcus Rediker uses the story of the radically egalitarian, militant, and audacious eighteenth-century abolitionist Benjamin Lay to push us to think bigger. Lay “helps us,” Rediker writes, “understand what was politically and morally possible in the first half of the 18th century—and what may be possible now. It is more than we think.”³⁰

³⁰ Tiya Miles, “This Is Not Just a War of Words,” *New York Times*, Oct. 22, 2017; Marcus Rediker, “History’s Forgotten Ultraradical,” *ibid.*, Aug. 13, 2017.