

## Introduction

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As this year's edition of Clio goes to press, it is hard for those of us working on the journal to escape a widespread sense of crisis. At seemingly every turn, uncertainty or disorder threatens to unmoor us.

For history as a discipline or as a profession, we face significant budgetary challenges. Proposed cuts in federal appropriations for the National Endowment for the Humanities, if passed, will severely limit what historians do. Numerous scholars have pointed out that the \$148 million of support for the NEH is a miniscule part of the \$3.9 trillion federal budget; the National Endowment for the Arts and the NEH together make up .006 percent of federal spending. For both the arts and the humanities, however, federal support has been essential in education, preservation, and ongoing research. Here in Connecticut, NEH funds have helped to protect the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, to preserve records held by the Litchfield Historical Society, and to collect residents' oral histories of World War I, among many other projects. Through its fifty-two year history, the NEH has played an unparalleled role in the lives of historians and history students, even when they have unaware of how programs have been funded or how resources have been preserved. Eliminating the NEH will have virtually no impact on Americans' taxes, but it will be a tragic loss for those protecting, preserving, or learning about our nation's past.

In the Connecticut State University system, we confront a similar kind of uncertainty, as Connecticut legislators struggle to balance state budgets. Governor Malloy has proposed reducing funding to the Connecticut State University system by 6.8 percent.<sup>1</sup> Ever-dwindling state support means increases in tuition and fewer resources. Overall tuition costs for CSU students have doubled in the past fourteen years.<sup>2</sup> A college education which is affordable for all

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<sup>1</sup> "Budget Tracker 2017," *Connecticut Mirror* (Accessed March 14, 2017) at <https://ctmirror.org/budget-tracker-2017-see-the-proposed-cuts-taxes-and-new-spending/>

<sup>2</sup> Jaquelyne Rabe Thomas, "Tuition Hike Pitched for Public College System," *Connecticut Mirror*, March 23, 2016 (Accessed March 17, 2017) at <https://ctmirror.org/2016/03/23/tuition-hike-pitched-for-public-college-system/>

families, a key to lifelong mobility and opportunity, is increasingly endangered for the state's middle and working classes.

The turmoil which surrounds funding for disciplines or for public higher education represents only one element in this year's apparent disorder. The national political mood has been far more troubling for most citizens. With the heated presidential campaign of 2016 and the election of Donald Trump, Americans find themselves divided over the nation's goals and values. Should the country put "America First," as the President claims, or is that phrase too reminiscent of the isolationism and embrace of authoritarianism that it symbolized when first used by American aviator Charles Lindbergh in the 1930s? Should spending on social programs such as Meals on Wheels or for addressing climate change be reduced in order to build a wall between the United States and Mexico? Which is more beneficial to most Americans, a health care system which provides a choice among private insurance options, some which may be inadequate in the case of catastrophic illness, or federal subsidies for mandated coverage? Underpinning these debates rests a persistent disagreement among Americans about the nature of government and our civic compact. Is the government which "governs least" truly effective in the modern world for modern challenges, and the best guarantor of liberty, or do we require what our forbearers called "commonwealth," a shared responsibility for the nation and each other? Strong feelings and a considerable anger exist on each side of this growing political divide, and the uncertainty of our future has become a source of anxiety and stress.

Internationally, we see similar tensions. The vote for "Brexit" in Great Britain in the spring of 2016 placed the British on the path of uncertainty. Pending national elections in France may lead to the rise of the right and Marine LePen's National Front, while the surprising showing of right-wing populist Geert Wilders in The Netherlands during their March elections led Wilders to assert that "the genie will not go back into the bottle."<sup>3</sup> Scholars write worriedly that what Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis termed the "long peace" of post-World War II alliances have unraveled, and the stability of that world has ended.

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Chapel, "Geert Wilders, 'Dutch Donald Trump,' Takes Second Place In Closely Watched Election," *NPR*, March 16, 2017 (Accessed March 17, 2017) at <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/03/16/520376715/geert-wilders-dutch-donald-trump-takes-second-place-in-closely-watched-election>.

In the face of such concerns, history – as study, as knowledge, as discipline – has never been more vital. Our ability to see issues clearly depends on our understanding of actors and institutions. European historian Timothy Synder wrote recently of the events leading to the Reichstag Fire in 1933 which led to Hitler's assertion of power, reminding his readers of "how quickly a modern republic can be transformed into an authoritarian regime."<sup>4</sup> Do we face similar dangers now? History, of course, seems full of warnings. How do we know that this time is different from the last? Despite philosopher George Santayana's well-worn (and worn out) statement about those who ignore the past, history is no sure guide. It remains, however, our best means of piloting toward a reasonable and less contentious future.

The articles in this issue examine, and in some cases try to resolve, critical issues in historiography or in the contemporary representation of history. Kyle Coughlin examines the complex topic of the contemporary representation of historical events in television and film. He concludes that Hollywood's interest in historical events presents a double-edged sword. On the one hand, this interest emphasizes to the general public the importance of commemorating and understanding the past, and may encourage people to embark on their own studies of history. On the other, these versions of history often reflect the particular desires of a director and are edited to conform to contemporary perceptions of the historical period in question, thus confirming in the minds of audience members potentially inaccurate impressions that they have of the past.

Lynn Schoenbeck grapples with a difficulty that is similar to Coughlin's: how to analyze gender formation in Viking society when ideas about Vikings are so cemented in popular culture. Through a thorough consideration and novel interpretation of Viking epics, Schoenbeck shows the reasons why Viking society offered avenues for women to take on "male-like" characteristics while never actually overcoming their gender designation as women.

Shawn Maher's MA thesis at WCSU, a substantial portion of which is excerpted here, analyzes the response to two related outbreaks of bubonic plague in China that were both part of the third plague pandemic (1855-1959). The first outbreak Maher considers was in Hong Kong in 1894, and the second was in

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy Synder, "The Reichstag Warning," *New York Review of Books*, February 26, 2017. (Accessed March 17, 2017) at <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/02/26/reichstag-fire-manipulating-terror-to-end-democracy/>

Manchuria in 1910-1911. Using a wide variety of European and Chinese sources, Maher analyzes different responses to the plague offered by European and Chinese doctors, and argues that in many cases the Chinese methods for containing the plague proved superior.

In the premodern past, the country we know today as Indonesia was a series of small city-states or sultanates. The notion of a united Indonesia is in part a construction of the Dutch colonization of the archipelago and the Dutch administration of this place as the Dutch East Indies. And yet the notion of Indonesia as a single polity survived the colonial era, and today the boundaries of modern Indonesia remain close to the boundary lines originally drawn by the Dutch. One reason for this is the important role played by Islamic schools and institutions in fostering Indonesian nationalism. John Rosano's paper considers the intersection between Islam, colonialism, and modernity in Indonesia and asks whether Islam or colonialism were more important in bringing a modernist sense of consciousness to the archipelago.

This is a moment of historical, political, and cultural crisis in the United States. In this atmosphere, historians play a crucial role in framing and narrating past events in such a way as to light a path out of the obscurity of our current situation.