O'ER THE RAMPARTS

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"We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition," Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney told those assembled at Davos some weeks ago. "The old order is not coming back." It is probably too soon to know what Carney's sobering verdict means for the course international politics will now take, or what reactions it might prompt. As a clear-eyed, nimble diagnosis of the moment, though, it has much to recommend it. It carries within it echoes of US historian Gary Gerstle's contention that over the past decades the "tectonic plates structuring American politics and life" fundamentally shifted.

There is now abundant evidence that Trump's election in 2024 ushered in an administration intent on remaking the fabric of US society. But, one year on, we can also begin to see that victory as representing a tear in the fabric of time, a shift to the era we now inhabit, away from a previous one. Today it is the Biden Administration's single term in office that seems like an interruption in a much longer, increasingly vocal far-right ascendancy.

One place where all of this seismic activity has registered is within the American Democratic Party, arguably the oldest political organization in the US, and the focus of the issue's Keywords feature, written by Patrick Andelic. The piece, which will be of interest to anyone teaching modern US History or Politics, helpfully names and describes the main factions and tendencies that have vied to shape the Democratic Party over the past half century. It is a struggle that continues within the Party, with profound results for the present and future. In the 250th anniversary year of America's founding, Inderjeet Parmar's 'Perspective on Politics' considers another interaction between political history and present-day political action in the rise of the "No Kings" protests, which have selectively reclaimed the memory of 1776 to re-kindle a movement against Trump's present-day authoritarianism.

The nation's founders, and the limits of their vision, is a theme that also runs through teacher Michael Saunders' report on the week he spent at the Monticello Teaching Institute in Virginia as the 2025 recipient of the BAAS Barringer Monticello Teaching Award. The historian Bevan Sewell offers some reflections on the challenges of organizing teacher-scholar collaborations, and an exciting new project he is running with colleagues across sectors about what it means to be "doing history" in any teaching setting.

We start though, by launching a new feature, 'Ten Questions On,' in which we invite teachers to submit questions about an Americanist subject or text they regularly teach. In this issue, Christopher Bigsby considers the work of US playwright Arthur Miller, a staple of A-Level English specifications.

BAAS BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR AMERICAN STUDIES

TEN QUESTIONS
ON ARTHUR MILLER

In this feature, internationally renowned Arthur Miller scholar Professor Christopher Bigsby (University of East Anglia) answers questions from secondary English and Drama teachers. Bigsby is the author and editor of dozens of books and articles, including *Arthur Miller* (2009) and the *Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller* (2010). Indeed, Simon Callow once referred to Bigsby in the *Guardian* as follows: 'If not quite Boswell to Arthur Miller's Johnson, Christopher Bigsby knows more about his subject than anyone alive'. So, who better to begin this new feature in the BAAS Schools Newsletter?

1. How would you approach the challenge of preserving Miller's original intent while making his work resonate with contemporary audiences?

Trust the audience. It is interesting that *The Crucible* was promoted by the House Un-American Activities Committee but few people who see the play today know, or perhaps care, about that, especially when they see it in countries outside the US. What they do is to interpret it in terms of their own experience, private and public. *All My Sons* is one of the most successful plays in Israel. *Death of a Salesman* has been successful in China. *A View from the Bridge* is set in Brooklyn, but staged around the world.

2. In The Crucible, is Miller guilty of exploring historic trauma for artistic gain?

I'm not sure what to make of a word like "guilty". For Miller, past and present are organically connected. Not only does the past have lessons for the present, but he believes, as he was fond of saying, that 'the birds come home to roost,' in other words, past actions have present consequences, true for societies as well as individuals. Shakespeare drew on the past.

For artistic gain? That sounds as if the implication was that writers setting their work in the past are exploiting it. Consider the novelist Hilary Mantel. Miller once said that he didn't write plays, he wrote metaphors. Perhaps it is that which makes it possible to interpret what we see in different ways. A man who stands up against those in power, at a cost to himself and even those he loves, resonates across different cultures. Who is it that has the power to define reality? Who, in his plays, is guilty, and of what?

3. What staging or directorial choices have proven most effective in conveying Miller's use of realism and symbolism?

Directors, working with designers and even lighting engineers, choose different ways to interpret texts. *Death of a Salesman* took its original form thanks to the work of Jo Mielziner. Miller's original script called for black outs between scenes as the action moved, almost immediately, from past to present. Characters at one moment seen on the ground floor had, a moment later, to be seen in bed on the floor above. Mielziner created an elevator which brought Happy and Biff upstairs where they appeared in bed. Later directors have found different ways of conveying shifts in time and the move between Willy's memories and present actions. It seems a realistic play but not only is some of the dialogue not entirely realistic but in some sense we are inside Willy Loman's head. Indeed, Miller toyed with the idea of calling it *The Inside of His Head. A View from the Bridge* seems realistic but in the hands of the director Ivo van Hove became something else, culminating in a final scene in which blood streams down from shower heads.

4. Which of Miller's plays most effectively unpacks the idea of the American Dream?

Most obviously, of course, it is *Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman, like Miller's own father, was a believer even in face of evidence to the contrary. His father lost his money in the Depression but still believed in the capitalist system which to many seemed to have run into the buffers. But Joe Keller, in *All My Sons*, has another dream, the desire to leave something to his sons. He is a successful businessman but one who decides that profit, the profit he can pass onto his sons, matters more than public morality. It was banned in American occupied Europe after the war for suggesting that an American businessman could be corrupt. But Chris Keller also has a dream. He is one of Ibsen's flawed idealists (and Ibsen was a major influence on that play), whose need to see himself as innocent, presenting what Ibsen called 'the demand of the ideal,' above human necessities, prompted his father's suicide.

5. To what extent can the influence of Greek tragedy be seen in Miller's "Big Four" tragedies?

The two influences Miller derived from his studies at the University of Michigan were Ibsen and Greek drama. He did, very consciously, try to find a way of staging tragedies in the modern world. Indeed, he wrote a famous essay called 'Tragedy and the Common Man'. I once pointed out to him that all four of his best-known plays of the 1940s and 50s ended in the death of the protagonist, as if that raised the stakes, as if he wanted to echo both Greek and Shakespearian tragedies.

Do we live in a tragic age? Hemingway thought that tragedy died in World War I in which someone could be killed by a shell as he ate macaroni. Today, in war, people die from missiles, drones, with no time for thought. Tragedy involves a subjective victory over an objective defeat. For Miller, Greek drama involved the whole community. It was a place where the audience (the whole community) watched an enactment of their myths. When Miller began writing, he believed he could have a dialogue with America and that the tragic sensibility survived.

6. In the 21st century, how would we expect a contemporary audience to view Eddie Carbone and John Proctor, considering their inappropriate feelings towards 17-year-old girls? Can we still weep at their deaths… and were we ever supposed to?

Interesting. Both plays involve misplaced love. That is the point. Miller is not endorsing it. Eddie, of course, can't allow his feelings for his niece to enter his language or, indeed, his mind. Proctor has crossed a line. The actual figures on which Proctor and Abigail were based were even further apart in age. In Puritan New England, sexuality was a taboo subject. Even dancing was suspect. They called dancing 'promiscuous; or 'gynocandrical,' so you can see what they meant. Perhaps they weren't entirely incorrect.

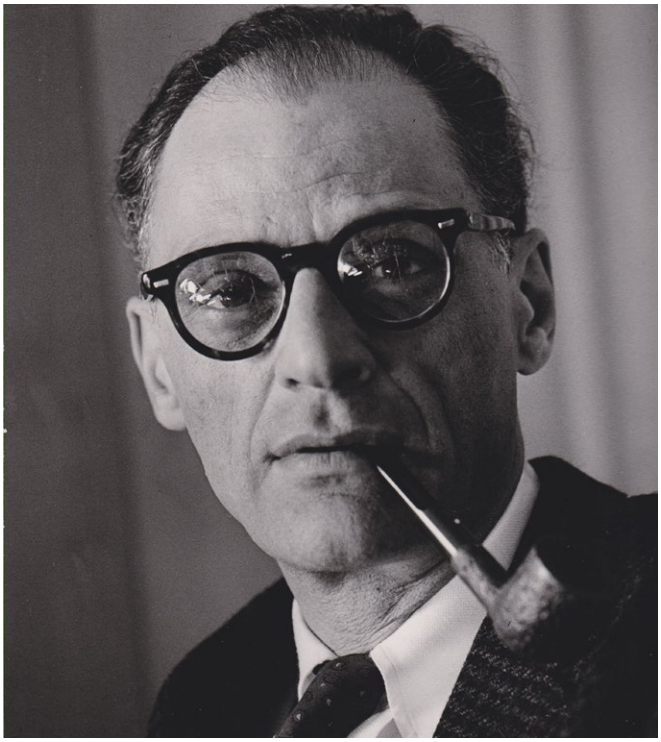
For Miller, Proctor was a tragic hero because in the end he refused to sign a document which would have saved him. To do so would have denied his essence, his name and, indeed, in each of these first four plays there comes a moment when the characters shout out their names. Eddie dies to maintain his innocence, to deny to the end feelings he senses without being able to acknowledge them and in so doing maintaining his niece's innocence which might have been compromised had he spoken aloud what he cannot speak. He sacrifices himself for an idea of himself.

7. How far does Miller's personal life shine through in his drama?

Miller has said that his plays are his autobiography, though not, of course, in a literal sense. However, in a play called *The American Clock* he is a character as he appears in a crucial work, *After the Fall*, which also features all three of his wives along with the figure of Elia Kazan who had named names before the House Un-American Activities Committee and who directed the play. His last play, *Finishing the Picture*, features his second wife, Marilyn Monroe, and those around her, including Miller himself.

8. What advice would you give to a modern actor playing one of the "wives" in Miller's best-known plays? Should they play them according to the social mores of the time of writing or is incorporating a contemporary lens important for modern audiences?

It is difficult to know how they would incorporate a contemporary lens. They are key figures. Linda Loman has kept the show on the road. Without her, Willy would not



Arthur Miller, c1960s. Photograph by Wolfgang Fischer. Creative Commons 4.0 License.

have been able to function. In *All My Sons* Kate Keller is the one who knows everything. In *The Crucible*, Abigail has a disturbing power, challenging a society in which she would have been marginalised. Elizabeth Proctor has her own integrity, in effect risking her soul when she utters a lie. There is more complexity in his women than is sometimes assumed. But, for a play in which this is debated, see: *John Proctor is the Villain.*

9. Do you feel Miller's plays tend to focus on tortured white males, thereby ignoring the diversity of America?

Well, his plays have women characters. They have Jewish characters (male and female). He even wrote a film and play based on Fania Fenelon's account of her time playing in the women's orchestra at Auschwitz-Birkenau. *The Last Yankee* focusses as much on the female character as the male. *A View from the Bridge* features Italian Americans. Tituba is black. I'm not quite sure what other groups he should have introduced.

10. What distinguishes Miller's work from other greats like Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill?

He admired them both, as did they he. Like Miller, both wrote plays which offered a critique of American values. Both addressed the issue of sexuality, largely absent from the English theatre at the time. O'Neill and Williams tackled racism head on. Miller wrote an unpublished novel on the same subject. Though Mary McCarthy thought that O'Neill had a tin ear, in fact all three were capable of writing prose which could bend in the direction of the poetic.

KEYWORDS
THE DEMOCRACTIC PARTY

President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, Feb. 22, 1993, Silicon Graphics, California. Courtesy of the William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum.

By some measures, the Democratic Party is the oldest political party in the US. For much of its history, however, it has not been an ideologically liberal party. Instead, it has been organised around region, occupation, ethnicity, and religion. Some historians have argued that there are threads that run through its 200-year history, notably Michael Kazin, who contends that the Democratic Party has been consistently committed to the creation of 'moral capitalism,' to an economy that serves the ordinary American. Only in the twentieth century, following the presidency of ranklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal, was the Party transformed into a more recognisably liberal vehicle.

The political juggernaut that Roosevelt consolidated, which dominated national US politics from the 1930s to the 1960s, was also rife with internal contradictions. The disintegration of the New Deal coalition at the end of the 1960s precipitated an identity crisis for the Democratic Party. Over the ensuing half century, various Democratic factions have struggled for control of the Party, and to chart the future course of 'liberalism' itself. To some extent, the Party has not yet overcome that crisis.

COLD WAR LIBERALS

By the 1950s, the dominant ideology within the Democratic Party was known as 'Cold War liberalism.' Cold War liberals believed in pragmatic reform at home and confronting Communism overseas. In economics, they adopted an American form of Keynesianism, believing they could secure permanent economic growth through the regulation of free markets. At root, this ideology – which Kevin Mattson has described as liberalism's 'fighting faith' – trusted in expertise and the capacity of government to resolve the nation's problems. The administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, with their ambitious reform agendas and assertive foreign policies, were the apogee of Cold War liberalism.

This ideology came apart in the 1960s, amidst a backlash to civil rights reform, growing public hostility to Great Society programmes, and the quagmire of the Vietnam War. In the 1970s and '80s, some within the Party tried to revive Cold War liberalism. The Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM), formed in December 1972, urged the party to 'Come Home.' However, they failed. Some CDM members – such Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and Jeane Kirkpatrick – later re-emerged as 'neoconservatives' and found a new home in the Republican Party.

REAGAN DEMOCRATS

From 'Democrats for Nixon' to 'Obama Republicans,' there is an established tradition in modern American politics of voters 'lending' their support to partisan opponents. One of the best known, and most enduring, of these has been the 'Reagan Democrat,' a term that entered political vocabulary in the 1980s and continues to shape debates to this day. The pollster Stanley Greenberg wrote the definitive work on 'Reagan Democrats' in his 1995 study of Macomb County, Michigan, a working-class suburban county outside Detroit.

The county had given nearly two-thirds of its vote to Democrat John F. Kennedy in 1960, but by 1980 was voting for Republican Ronald Reagan by near identical margins. Greenberg's explanation for this realignment was that these voters had been alienated by the party's supposed prioritisation of minority groups, particularly African Americans, its growing social and cultural liberalism, and dovishness on questions of foreign policy. They represented a blue collar 'backlash' to the Democrats. The figure of the 'Reagan Democrat' is invoked in intra-party debates to this day by those who fear the Democratic Party has – through cultural liberalism or a 'weak' foreign policy – lost touch with white working-class voters.

THE RAINBOW COALITION

Even as some Democrats sought a return to traditional values and constituencies, others urged the party to embrace and build on its evolving base. In the 1980s, Jesse Jackson ran two primary campaigns as the leader of a 'Rainbow Coalition,' a class-based movement that sought to bring together the poor and dispossessed, racial and ethnic minorities, and other marginalised groups, such as LGBTQ+ Americans. He appealed to urban voters, but also to farmers frustrated by Reagan's policies. Jackson was a civil-rights organiser, who had been in Memphis in 1968 with Martin Luther King, Jr., when he was assassinated, and continued his career as a leader and organiser in the 1970s.

Jackson ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984 and 1988, relying on a political approach that would be dismissed as 'identity politics' by critics. In his speech to the 1988 Democratic convention, he likened his support to a quilt: each 'patch' (voter bloc) had a distinct form but together they made up something stronger. Jackson was a serious contender for the presidency, placing third in the primaries in 1984, and second in 1988, when he claimed nearly a third of votes cast. He was the first to win a presidential primary for a major party. Many commentators drew direct links between Jackson's campaigns and the diverse, liberal coalition that Obama put together in 2008.

ATARI DEMOCRATS

This term was jokingly, but not pejoratively, applied to those Democratic politicians in the early 1980s who embraced high tech industries and an information society as the solution to the problem of deindustrialisation. Instead of trying to revive manufacturing industries, these Democrats argued that the US should welcome the new opportunities of the 'knowledge economy,' focused on education and retraining. The label referenced Atari, a now defunct consumer electronics company based in California, and a symbol of American competitiveness in this sector. As Colorado senator and proud 'Atari Democrat' Gary Hart remarked, 'Let the Japanese and Germans compete in our automobile markets.

We would build their communication systems.' Historians such as Lily Geismer have written about the growing importance of 'knowledge economy' workers (mostly affluent, educated, and suburban) to the Democratic Party in the 1980s, and their impact on the Party's priorities. Tennessee senator and later vice president Al Gore is perhaps the best-known politician associated with the faction. Many Atari Democrats would also describe themselves as 'neoliberals' in the sense that they represented a break with traditional 'big government' and were supportive of market-friendly reforms.

NEW DEMOCRATS

In 1985, less than a year after the Democrats' second 49-state landslide defeat in just over a decade, a group of Democratic governors from the South and West founded an organisation to pull their party back to the centre ground, the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC). The DLC promised a 'Third Way' that would transcend the old left-right political binaries. Its members styled themselves as 'New Democrats.' Progressive Democrats were sceptical of the group and its efforts, as they saw it, to drag the party away from liberalism. Jesse Jackson lampooned the DLC as 'Democrats for the Leisure Class.' The organisation also drew criticism for how white, male, and Southern it was (which put it at odds with the party's increasingly diverse voter base).

In 1992, a self-described New Democrat, and former DLC chair, Arkansas governor Bill Clinton would win both his party's nomination and the presidency promising a 'New Covenant' with middle-class America. Historians Judith Stein and Nelson Lichtenstein have recently argued that Clinton's first term was more of a confrontation between progressive and centrist factions than has been appreciated. It was the centrists who won out, with Clinton pursuing landmark welfare reform and criminal justice legislation that proved controversial with the Party. It would also inspire 'New Labour' in the UK, both in terms of policy approach and branding.

PROGRESSIVES

In the midst of the 1988 campaign, outgoing president Ronald Reagan accused his Democratic opponents of trying to conceal their true beliefs from the American people. 'You'll never hear that 'L' word – liberal – from them,' he claimed in a radio broadcast. Many Democratic politicians were wary of the 'liberal' tag, convinced that voters associated it with profligacy, elitism, and weakness. But some sought to reclaim the word. Minnesota senator Paul Wellstone and Princeton economist Paul Krugman both published books with the title *The Conscience of a Liberal* in the early 2000s.

Courtesy of the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

Others sought a new name, with 'progressive' often touted as an alternative. Since the 2000s, 'progressive' has been embraced by the more leftward elements of the Democratic coalition to distinguish their ideas – often influenced by social democratic or socialist thinking – from liberals that they regarded as compromised or unambitious. In a spate of national and local elections, a vibrant grassroots 'progressive' movement has vied for control of the Democratic Party.

Members of Congress like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or Rashida Tlaib, or local officials like New York mayor Zohran Mamdani or Seattle mayor Katie B. Wilson have been hailed as embodying this progressive revival. The 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns of self-described 'democratic socialist' Bernie Sanders has demonstrated the vitality of a national progressive coalition, though whether this can command majority support remains to be seen.

Patrick Andelic is an assistant professor of American History at Northumbria University, Newcastle Upon Tyne. He is the author of *Donkey Work: Congressional Democrats in Conservative America, 1974-1992* (University Press of Kansas, 2019).

EVENTS

BAAS Schools Conference, Manchester, Oct. 2025. Courtesy of Andrew Fearnley.

BAAS SCHOOLS CONFERENCE, MANCHESTER, OCTOBER 2025

The BAAS Schools Conference returned to Central Manchester in October 2025, and once more drawing a strong, and lively audience of A-Level students and teachers, from local and regional schools. The event was organized around the theme of 'Power and Influence in US Politics and Society,' and as much as it was intended to foreground materials relevant to those studying modern US History, or US Politics at A-Level, it also allowed us to dissect the headlines.

The event opened with two morning talks, focused on the 'institutions' of US government, a main theme of A-Level Politics specifications, where students are expected to understand how the US federal system of government is organized, and how, in the latter decades of the twentieth century, the relationship between various branches and institutions shifted, in response to historical events, such as Vietnam or Watergate, and broader trends. Professor Philip Davies (former Director of the Eccles Centre) opened the conversation with a panoramic presentation on voting patterns and electoral shifts across the first 25 years of the twenty-first century, while Dr Patrick Andelic (Northumbria)'s paper on the place of Congress, 'from Nixon to Trump', gave a sense of the ebb and flow of the institution since the late 1960s.

In the afternoon session, the programme turned to two case studies. Dr. Elizabeth Ingleson (LSE) spoke on US trade and relations with China, while Dr. Andrew Fearnley (Manchester) addressed the court-led pushback against civil rights in the decade between 'the *Shelby* to *Students for Fair Admissions*' decisions.

Like in past years, each of the talks sparked several questions, and the final discussion with the audience pushed panelists to contemplate not only the current shape of US politics, but also the ramifications and connections these trends had for British ones.

US Politics Today Conference, Nov. 2025. Courtesy of Adam Burns.

US POLITICS TODAY, NOVEMBER 2025

This year, the US Politics Today Conference – the successor to the long-running Congress to Campus scheme – was hosted on Monday 3 November and Friday 7 November by the Eccles Institute at the British Library. The event brought together four academic experts and two former members of the US Congress (FMCs). This year the academic speakers were: Professor Philip Davies (former Director of the Eccles Centre), Dr Josephine Harmon (Northeastern University, London), Dr Emma Long (University of East Anglia), and Professor Andrew Moran (London Metropolitan University). Their talks covered recent developments surrounding key areas covered by the Edexcel and AQA US Politics specifications: the US Congress, the Presidency, the US Supreme Court, and elections.

Each year the two FMCs represent both of the main US parties, and this November they were Jeff Duncan (former Republican US Representative from South Carolina's 2nd District [2011-25]) and Mike Ross (former Democratic US Representative from Arkansas' 4th District [2001–13]). Being two southerners, these FMCs perhaps unsurprisingly shared some more conservative social views than is often the case during this event – especially when it came to gun ownership and the morality of abortion, though they differed markedly on a variety of issues, leading to lively discussion and debate.

The event provides an extremely valuable experience either in person or online (both options were free of charge this year), for both teachers and students of US politics. The Friday event was recorded and can be accessed via this link: https://www.youtube.com/live/FSvUCg0CE04. The British Library has also commissioned an accompanying educational resource this year, which will be available online in early 2026.

BAAS NEWS

MONTICELLO AWARD REPORT

This summer I was fortunate to have been awarded the 2025 Barringer Monticello Teaching fellowship by BAAS. The award afforded me the opportunity to attend the Monticello Teacher Institute, a week-long professional development programme providing teachers with the chance to study and research early American History, at Monticello and the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

I made my way from to Charlottesville via a 2-hour 30-minute Amtrak train from Union Station, Washington DC. The train journey validated Clint Smith's observations in '*How The Word is Passed*' that Virginia is almost two states: the first hour I travelled through the DC sprawl, of plush towns and suburban housing; the second felt like I was in the authentic American South, of muddied lakes and Confederate flags.

The Institute began with the 'Behind the Scenes' tour of Thomas Jefferson's house. The tour provided an interesting insight into Jefferson's idiosyncrasies. We saw the ice-cold bucket of water that he dipped his feet into every morning, a clock he designed driven by weighted cannonballs, and the self-operating doors he created for his parlour. This was followed up by a horticultural tour of the estate, a highlight being the Tulip Poplar tree, which recreates the two trees that stood for 200 years after Jefferson planted them.

My feelings towards these tours, and Jefferson's quirky nature, changed when, the next day, we were taken on the 'From Slavery to Freedom' tour, which brought out the realization that all of the stories we had previously heard were enabled by Jefferson's ownership of slaves. We came to understand the paradox of the man—both a critic of slavery and one who continued to enslave African Americans and hold abhorrent racist views.

These tours and discussions led me on to focus my project at the Institute on the memory of Thomas Jefferson, and to produce an enquiry aimed at Year 8 students. It would center on the question, 'How should we remember Thomas Jefferson?' Jefferson's gravestone at Monticello is a symbol of how he wished to be remembered. Its inscription honours his authorship of the Declaration of Independence, the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and his founding of the University of Virginia, while omitting his time in office, his governorship of Virginia, and his slave ownership.

I wanted to ensure that the enslaved from Monticello were present in my enquiry. The first lesson will centre around Robert Hemmings, the man enslaved as Jefferson's valet in Philadelphia in 1776. Hemmings would have slept in the corridor outside the dorm room where the words 'All men are created equal' would have been written. The piece

will encourage students to explore what and how we know about the enslaved at Monticello, especially Jefferson's fathering of children with the teenage Sally Hemings, and how such is viewed today in America. I felt that this enquiry was timely, given the 250th anniversary of American Independence, as well as the Trump Administration's review of how such topics are handled at the Smithsonian Institution.

The entire week at Monticello was led by Hannah Zimmerman, Melanie Holland, Ariel Armenta, Kevin Gurubatham and Mira Spacarcino, and the experience was enriched by my fellow participants, who were mainly US teachers, and one colleague from the Ukraine. I enjoyed listening to how they approached early American history, how they bring it to life for their students. The experience gave me an insight into the US educational landscape, and how it varies from school district to school district. Some teachers shared stories of being told to refrain from discussing the 2024 Presidential election with their classes, while others spoke of their autonomy to plan schemes of work that reflected their expertise and enabled them to provide students with greater understanding.

The Monticello Teacher Institute was the best professional development I have ever received. I want to thank the colleagues from my own school for allowing me to go, and colleagues at BAAS and the Thomas Jefferson Foundation for enabling it to happen. I would strongly recommend it to others teachers of US History and Politics in the UK.

Michael Saunders was the 2025 recipient of the BAAS Monticello Award. He is a teacher of History and Politics at Notre Dame High School, Sheffield.

NOTES FROM THE BLACKBOARD

"WHO IS AN HISTORIAN?"

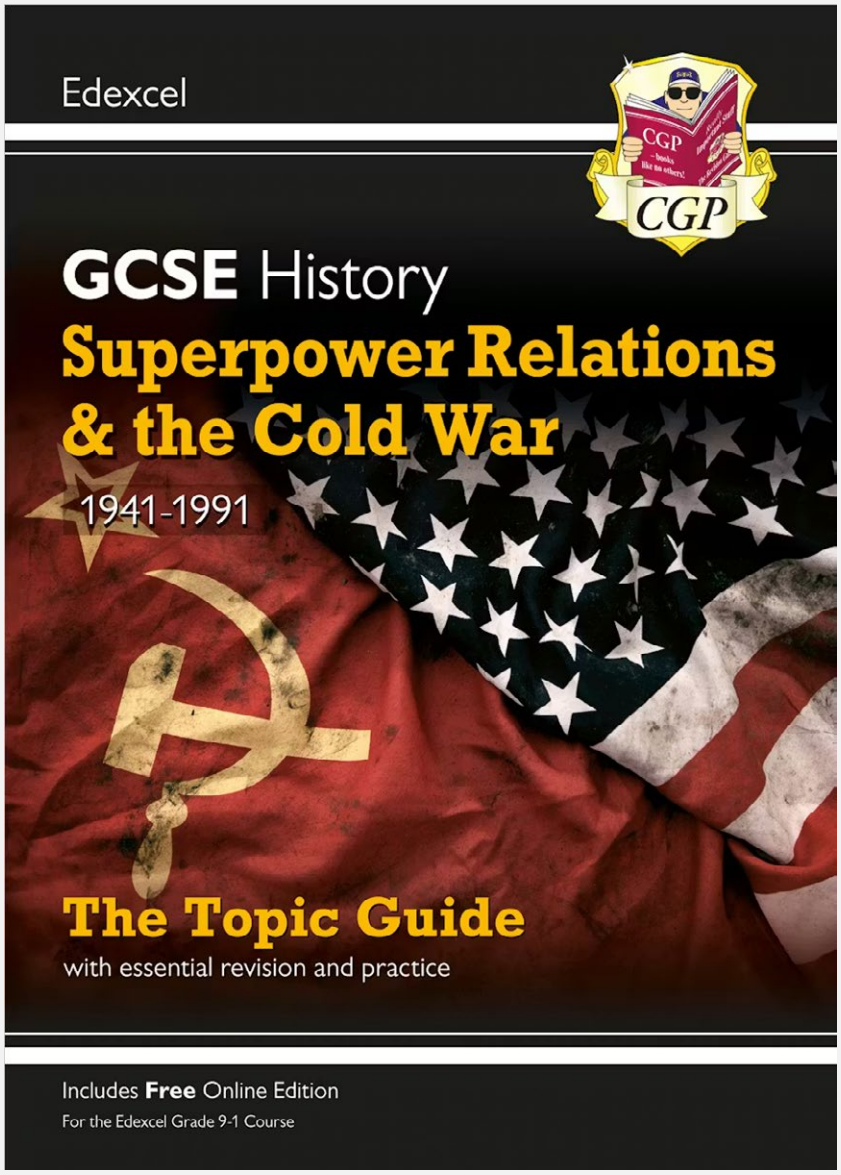
It was toward the end of a workshop at AQA's headquarters in Manchester, on a gloomy Friday afternoon in November 2024, that one of the teachers present threw their hands up and exclaimed: "what we're doing in schools isn't really history at all, is it?" I admired the force of the contribution and knew exactly what they meant, given the conversation we'd just been having around teaching, content, assessment, and mark schemes across the discipline of History. Although I can't recall exactly how I responded—with grace and a modicum of intelligence, I hope—I've been thinking about that point, off and on for much of the time since.

Like many sharply expressed statements, it was both right and wrong. In arguing that a gap in terms of approach, methodology, skills, and assessments has emerged between schools and universities, the teacher was right. The demands of the national curriculum, particularly since its last major overhaul under Michael Gove in 2011, have made History into a subject that emphasises rigour, facts, and breadth over approaches that prioritise analytical skills, interpretation, and approaches that intersect with students' interests and concerns. The tendency to determine in advance what the correct answer to a particular historical question is, or to create assessment that intentionally surprises students with an historical scenario, and tests how well they can respond, under time pressure — these are not ways of working that many historians would recognise. Alongside universities' reluctance to schedule in-person examinations, the gap between the two sectors has grown quite wide over the past decade.

There is, though, another way to consider what is happening in schools as being very much about "doing history." All teachers, irrespective of curriculum constraints, engage with their students in practicing history. From deciding which stories and sources to emphasise, to the questions and follow-up tasks they pose in class, to the way they encourage their students to think, not to mention the extra reading, preparation, and research they undertake to frame the study of the past in distinct ways—in all of these ways and more, what teachers are doing in schools is most definitely "doing history." It is to some extent the most vital part of what they do, and which brings the topic alive. And it is in this sphere that schools, teachers, exam boards, and universities can most fruitfully collaborate.

What I want to do in this short essay, is to reflect first of all on my own initial efforts at working with those teaching history in secondary schools and then, beyond that, to think through some of the ways in which interrogating this idea—of who a historian is—offers exciting possibilities for future collaboration. After all, we have a shared interest in preparing students for advanced study and in cultivating the sort of skills that would allow them to thrive in the modern workplace. Given the assault on the Arts and Humanities that shows little sign of slowing down—in both national governmental and, increasingly, in Higher Education—finding ways of encouraging students' passion for studying and better understanding the world in which they live is an urgent undertaking. My work in this area grew out of a project, begun in 2019, to establish a network of those researching and teaching the history of US foreign relations. The aim was to think about the state of the field and to consider what difference place makes to the work we do. Rather than replicating a model whereby scholars in the UK try to follow the lead of those in the US, we wanted to identify things that made our perspectives and research distinctive, and to think through the ways that this intersected with how our students now see the United States.

During our initial discussions, we realised that we didn't know enough about what was being taught at GCSE and A-level. Somebody in the room put us in touch with the History team at the AQA Exam Board, and this led to them coming onboard as a project partner. We organized a series of workshops with them, inviting teachers involved in using their curricula. Those sessions encouraged teachers to express what they thought of the topics they taught; to begin a conversation about their own professional development, and ongoing topic revision; and, in the longer term, to think about how we might bridge the gap between school and university, and what future GCSE or A-level topics in American history might look like.



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It was fascinating to participate in conversations between academics, teachers, and exam boards, and to see where there were points of convergence. We also encountered a series of obstacles that we were never able to overcome. First, schools, exam boards, and universities all work in different ways, and on different timelines. Second, it soon became clear that teachers' ability to participate in events outside of the school gates is limited by pressures on resources and the unwillingness of senior staff to approve such activities. Navigating these issues was hard, and it ultimately defeated us. To cite one example, securing funding for the project from my own institution required I sketch something out with tightly-defined phases of work and outcomes that simply wasn't feasible given the challenges above. The project I described read well in a funding application, but didn't match up with the real world. We still held some fruitful discussions, but the bigger plan of developing a larger group and collaborating on curriculum reform, proved unachievable.

I don't have any good or immediate answers about how we can fix that. The scale and scope of the problems are such that they defy easy solution and require action on a number of levels. Where I do have greater optimism is in the other aspect of this work: in the fact that, in the work they do in preparing for class and helping their students to interpret topics, teachers are clearly active participants in the production of history, undertaking their own research in a series of important ways.

This optimism was prompted by a more recent event, a collaboration between the University of Nottingham's Centre for US in the World Studies, and the School of Education, and a regional network of History teachers. As part of that event, several teachers presented on their teaching practices and reflected on how they interpret topics for their students—oftentimes buying their own books, compiling their own resources, and undertaking their own historical research to offer insights and approaches that they believe will speak more effectively to their students. All of them were, without question, "doing history" and working in ways that spoke to ideas around bridging gaps, subject development, and even potential curriculum reform.

What has emerged out of that is an idea for a project called "Who is an Historian", which seeks to identify ways in which universities and those working outside of higher education—teachers and schools, obviously, but also museums, archivists, curators, librarians, those in the heritage sector, journalists, local historians, hobbyists—can find fruitful ways of collaborating. Though this project is still in an early phase, our aim is to organise an initial workshop later in 2026 for invited participants to talk about what they do, the challenges they face, and to start to identify ways that universities can help with that work as well as facilitate possibilities for cross-sector collaboration.

It feels like a small step, but a positive one. Rather than setting out an unachievable project with predetermined goals and outcomes to meet University funding requirements, it can instead serve as a more responsive and organic group that enables us to participate in fruitful conversations about the subject that we are all so passionate about, and the work we do collectively to inspire our students.

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PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICS

NO KINGS AND THE SELECTIVE RECLAMATION OF 1776'S DEMOCRATIC PROMISE

In 1776, the American colonies issued the Declaration of Independence, a defiant rejection of King George III's arbitrary rule and a bold assertion that governments derive legitimacy from the consent of the governed. This revolutionary document articulated a vision of liberty that inspired generations. Yet it was riddled with contradictions, crafted by an elite cadre of white, male, property-owning slaveholders who upheld racial supremacy, patriarchal exclusion, and favouring propertied interests.

As America approaches the 250th anniversary of this moment, a profound irony emerges. The "No Kings" movement, a grassroots uprising against Donald Trump's authoritarianism, invokes the spirit of 1776, to defend democracy while rejecting its oppressive baggage. Through a Gramscian lens, the current movement represents a counter-hegemonic struggle: selectively reclaiming the democratic elements of 1776 to challenge Trump's monarchical ambitions and forging a more inclusive "common sense." This essay explores the movement's nuanced reclamations of 1776, its battle against Trump, and the challenges and possibilities it faces in reshaping America's democratic future.

CONTRADICTIONS OF 1776, AND THE IRONY OF 2026

The Declaration of Independence was a radical document, proclaiming that "all men are created equal" and endowed with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It rejected monarchical tyranny, asserting that legitimate governance rests on the consent of the governed—a principle that challenged the divine right of kings and laid the foundation for modern democracy. Yet this rhetoric was steeped in contradictions. The "consent of the governed" applied only to a narrow sliver of society.

Fast forward to 2026, and the irony is no less stark. As America celebrates the 250th anniversary of its creation, it faces a crisis that echoes the monarchical hubris the founders rejected. Trump's return to power in 2024—built on a cult of personality, populist rhetoric, and billionaires' donations—threatens the republic's democratic experiment. The President's calls to suspend Constitutional checks, vilification of the press, defiance of the courts, declaration of national emergencies without cause, and punishment of political opponents—all evoke the arbitrary rule of a would-be king.

In an essay I published in 2017, *"The Legitimacy Crisis of the U.S. Elite and the Rise of Donald Trump"* (2017), I argued that Trump's ascent exploited a profound crisis in the American elite's legitimacy, stemming from economic inequality, cultural dislocation, and the erosion of trust in traditional institutions. This crisis allowed Trump to position himself as an outsider challenging the entrenched power structures, and thereby normalising authoritarian tendencies under the guise of populism.

The "No Kings" movement, a diffuse coalition of activists, emerges as a counterforce, invoking 1776 not to glorify its flawed legacy but to extract its democratic kernel—the rejection of unchecked power. This selective reclamation is deliberate: "No Kings" embraces the Declaration's anti-monarchical thrust while rejecting its complicity in slavery, misogyny, and elitism.

In 2026, as Trump's second term unfolds amid ongoing challenges to electoral integrity, "No Kings" framed its resistance to Trump not as mere protest, but as a necessary response to the systemic enablers of Trumpism.

A GRAMSCIAN LENS

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony provides a powerful framework for understanding this struggle. Hegemony refers to the process by which a ruling group secures consent for its dominance by shaping society's "common sense"—the taken-for-granted norms and values that define political reality. Trump's political project represents such an effort to reshape America's democratic culture into one that normalises authoritarianism: his proprietary language—"my people," "my country," "my generals"—and a favourable media ecosystem cultivate a worldview where loyalty to Trump supersedes democratic norms; his attacks on electoral integrity, judicial independence, and the press aim to erode institutional checks, portraying dissent as betrayal and himself as the embodiment of the "real America."

Trump's regime, as I showed in an article with Tom Furse, has also forged alliances with far-right networks, domestically and globally, to deconstruct liberal internationalism. These networks include elite factions disillusioned with globalisation, echoing the legitimacy crisis that fuelled Trump's initial rise in the US. The Supreme Court, reshaped by Trump's appointments, and compliant Republican lawmakers have further entrenched this dominance.

Second "No Kings" Protest, Chico, California. Photo taken by Frank Schulenburg, October 2025. Creative Commons 4.0 License.

Decisions undermining voting rights, expanding executive power, and shielding Trump from legal accountability reflect a judicial and legislative apparatus aligned with his vision. His rhetoric, amplified by a disciplined media machine, constructs a narrative of crisis—immigrants, "woke" ideologies, and globalist elites as existential threats—requiring his strongman rule to restore order. This hegemonic project seeks to normalise a quasi-monarchical "common sense" where Trump's authority is unquestioned, and democratic institutions are subordinated to his will.

The "No Kings" movement counters this, with a Gramscian "war of position," a cultural and ideological battle to redefine America's democratic "common sense." Comprising young activists, disillusioned conservatives, progressive organisers, and marginalised communities, "No Kings" rejects Trump's kingly pretensions and invokes 1776's anti-monarchical fervour. Its protests, from Atlanta's streets to Chicago's plazas and Washington, D.C.'s National Mall, and its presence on social media, articulate a vision of inclusive democracy. Marchers wielded signs quoting the Declaration's promise of consent-based governance while also demanding a system free from racial, gendered, or class-based subjugation. This is not a nostalgic return to 1776 but a forward-looking effort to transcend its limitations and realise its unfulfilled promise of universal liberty.

EMBRACING 1776'S IDEALS, REJECTING ITS FLAWS

The "No Kings" movement's invocation of 1776 is nuanced and deliberate. It embraces the Declaration's rejection of arbitrary rule, while explicitly distancing itself from the racial hierarchies, patriarchal structures, and elite biases that defined the founding. Activists highlight the founders' hypocrisy, noting that many, like Jefferson, enslaved people while preaching liberty. At "No Kings" rallies, speakers often referenced Frederick Douglass's 1852 speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" which exposed the Declaration's exclusionary reality. By invoking *Douglass*, the movement underscores its commitment to a democracy that includes those historically denied its benefits—Black and Indigenous communities, women, and the working class.

This selective reclamation is evident in the movement's rhetoric and actions. Protests have featured readings of the Declaration, alongside critiques of its blind spots, framing Trump as a modern monarch whose authoritarianism betrays even the flawed ideals of 1776. "No Kings" organisers in Atlanta, a city with a deep civil rights history, have linked their struggle to the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., emphasising inclusive governance over elite rule. Social media posts under #NoKings2026 have juxtaposed quotes from the Declaration with calls for reparations, gender equity, and Indigenous sovereignty.

THE WAR OF POSITION
Building a Counter-Narrative

Gramsci's "war of position" involves a gradual, cultural struggle to shift societal values before seizing political power. "No Kings" wages this war by building a broad coalition—Black and Indigenous activists, feminists, working-class voters, and moderates—a united front - who articulate a democratic vision that counters Trump's divisive narrative. Unlike Trump's hegemony, which thrives on exclusion and loyalty to a single leader, "No Kings" promotes inclusivity and collective empowerment. Its rallies, often multiracial and intergenerational, foster solidarity across divides, from urban campuses to rural communities. This organic, grassroots character aligns with Gramsci's concept of "organic intellectuals"—leaders emerging from the people, not imposed from above—who articulate a counter-hegemonic vision.

CHALLENGES AND STRENGTHS OF NO KINGS

The movement's use of X is particularly effective. This digital activism complements street protests, creating a multi-front war of position that challenges Trump's narrative at both cultural and ideological levels. My recent commentary in Economic and Political Weekly (2025) on highlighting Trump's desperation and the manufactured China threat" extends this analysis globally, highlighting how Trumpism's external aggressions—such as anti-China sabre-rattling—serve to consolidate domestic hegemony, a tactic No Kings critiques as a distraction from internal democratic erosion.

"No Kings" faces significant challenges. Critics argue that its invocation of 1776 risks alienating moderates, who view the founding as sacrosanct. Others see its decentralised structure as a weakness against Trump's disciplined media machine and institutional allies. The movement's reliance on grassroots energy, can lead to fragmentation, with competing priorities among its diverse coalition.

Yet these challenges are offset by the movement's inclusive character and ideological clarity. Its rejection of 1776's oppressive elements, and embrace of its democratic ideals, resonates across groups, attracting support from unlikely allies, including conservative "Never Trumpers," who regard the President's authoritarianism as a betrayal of republican values. The movement's activists, artists, and community leaders amplify its message through creative means, from protest art to viral videos, making it accessible and compelling. Its decentralised nature allows it to adapt to local contexts, from urban centres to rural heartlands, broadening its reach.

THE STAKES IN 2026

As America marks its 250th anniversary, the irony of a nation founded to reject monarchy now battling a would-be king underscores the stakes of this struggle. This is not merely a political contest, but a cultural and ideological battle to define America's democratic "common sense." Trump's hegemonic project seeks to normalise authoritarianism, portraying his rule as the will of "real Americans" while marginalising dissenters. "No Kings" counters this by reclaiming 1776's rejection of arbitrary power, and reimagining it for a diverse, inclusive future. This movement's success will hinge on its ability to sustain its coalition, bridge divides, and translate cultural victories into political change.

By honouring 1776's revolutionary promise—not as it was, but as it could be—"No Kings" fights to forge a democracy where power serves all. In this Gramscian framing, the 250th anniversary becomes a pivotal moment to redefine America's democratic soul, ensuring that the rejection of kings in 1776 inspires a truly universal liberty in 2026.

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