

# ***The Applications of History to the Practice of Strategic Foresight***

***For the FFCOI by the DTRA Global Futures Office  
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Unclassified



# First, an Encouraging Word

**“History Rarely Repeats, But It Often Rhymes” -  
Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain)**



## Next, a Disclaimer

- Nothing in this presentation is meant to convey or imply that this work or any portion thereof is the official position of, or endorsed by, the United States Government, the Department of Defense, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency or any Component thereunder.
- Other than the citations contained in this work, all opinions and interpretations presented are those of the speaker and the speaker alone (and some days he's not even sure about that level of support). Credit to others is given as appropriate (both to maintain good manners and avoid litigation).
- Shortcomings in this work are the responsibility of the speaker alone. Complaints should be directed to him. They will be received graciously and in all probability subsequently ignored, and you're all old enough to know better than to expect any different outcome.



# Finally-What am I doing here?

- **ANSWER**-this is going to be a discussion on how the depictions and lessons of history can be applied to the practice of strategic foresight.
- This discussion will focus on
  - What applied history can do to help the practice of strategic foresight,
  - What it can't do,
  - What it should do, and
  - What it shouldn't do.
- The last thing discussed will be the interrelationship between the application of the lessons of history and depictions of alternative history (What if...)



# For Those Who Have to Leave Early....

- **BLUF (Bottom Line Up Front):**
- **HISTORY MAY NOT TELL US WHAT TO DO IN ANY GIVEN FUTURE SITUATION, BUT IT CAN GIVE US A PRETTY GOOD IDEA OF WHAT NOT TO DO**
- If you want to know what this means, you'll have to stay for the rest of the talk
- Consider this pay-back for the donuts



# The Two Schools of Historical Application in Strategic Foresight

- **The “Precedent” vs. “Pivot” Schools of Historical Analysis:**
  - The **“Precedent” School** applies history to future events through examining past events, and examines how cultures and decision-makers **might** react when confronting **similar** challenges. This is also called “Structured Analogy”, and requires understanding circumstances surrounding both the analogized historical precedent and the future challenge, especially the “Strategic Personality” (motivations and priorities) of the parties in conflict.
  - The **“Pivot School”** identifies the smallest substantive change that can be applied to a critical point in a past event, and then follows the altered historical pathway to its’ conclusion. Also known as “Alternate History”, this approach emphasizes the non-determinative nature of time. It asks “What If?”



# History as Precedent, Applied by Analogy to Future Events

- Traditionally, a Quantitative Process-
  - Identify sufficient points of similarity between the historical precedent and the future challenge and you could (with a straight face) posit an arguably justifiable idea of what **might** happen.
- **But in an increasingly fractured and complex reality, the “Dead Hand of History” more often proves an unreliable predictive trap.**
- Unquestioning reliance on historical analogy can lull us into the sin of “straight line extrapolation”, assuming the future will be a continuation of past trends/patterns and failing to take into account elements of the unexpected and surprise.



# 2011: The Precedent School Reformulated

- Dr. Stephen Millett authors “Five Principles of Futuring as Applied History” in *The Futurist*
- Shifts from “analogous history as predictive tool” to current approach identifying “indications of patterns, trends and long-term consistencies in cultural behavior”.
- **“Millett’s Principles”:**
  - **The future will be some unknown combination of continuity and evolutionary/disruptive change** . There may be no right answer-only a sliding scale of accuracy, right and wrong educated guesses.
  - **The future is inherently conditional**, and the greatest variable is human free will.
  - Historical precedents driving plausible visions of relevant potential futures and responsive end-state visions must complement each other. **Contradictory evidence is bad evidence.**
  - The **applicability** of historical precedents to the future **must be based on both qualitative** (“well considered expectations of plausible futures”) **and quantitative analysis.**
  - ~~There is no immutable, unchangeable future-it is inherently unpredictable.~~ At best, historical precedent offers us guidance for informed speculation or a working



# Since the Millett Article...

- Application of Historical Structured Analogy has significantly changed.
- Analysis no longer focuses on the **what** happened, but also on the **why**. Cultural and motivational contexts of decision-makers characterizing an historical event have become a critical source of precedential weight and value.
- Cultural and motivational changes in response to developments and challenges inevitably impact behavior. Variables of human nature, free will, and change magnify levels of unpredictability & surprise, and combine with the risks inherent in complex environments to often reduce the perceived value of direct historical precedent. This also emphasizes a subjective, qualitative element of historical analysis in strategic foresight.

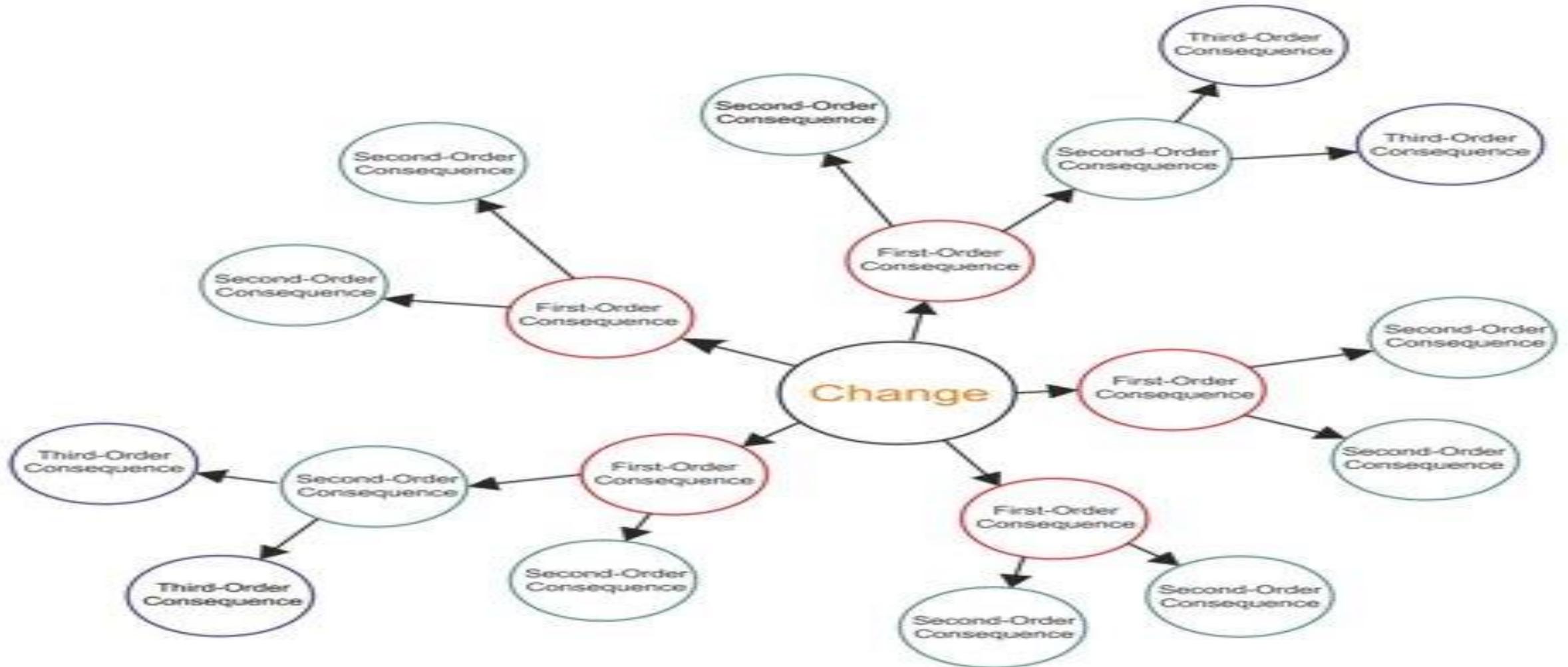


# Is there still value to the use of Historical Precedent in Strategic Foresight?

- **“Yes”**, in at least three applications:
  - **Bad decisions remain eternally bad decisions.** The Charge of the Light Brigade; Wehrmacht Armor Design after 1942; Andrew Jackson’s economic and civil rights positions; and late Roman Empire policies of all types portray valuable historical Lessons Learned on what not to do for leaders in every generation. History forgotten is history repeated.
  - **Arguably correct decisions that had better alternatives:** Meade immediately after Gettysburg is a prime example of applying historical Lessons Learned to a potential future military challenge.
  - **Decisions correct at the time with subsequent negative consequences:** US SE Asian policies immediately post-WW2 are examples of decisions undertaken with little consideration of long-term causation, consequences and implications. A key element of Strategic Foresight identifies the future causal consequences, implications and interactions of actions and decisions. “It seemed like a good idea at the time” remains, throughout the ages, a poor excuse.



**We can't mention consequence and implications analysis without citing Jerry Glenn's Futures Wheel. Sorry, but it's the law.**





# Final Thoughts on the Uses of Historical Precedent in the Practice of Strategic Foresight

The application of historical analogy in the practice of strategic foresight requires intellectual rigor.

- It applies lessons learned from a past fixed point in time and applies them forward to a future contingent on an inherently unknown outcome.
- It combines the objective truth of past events with subjective analysis to ultimately determine applicability. It incorporates both qualitative and quantitative judgmental elements.
- It incorporates the “Why” as much as the “What”.
- Historical lessons applied in an environment of uncertainty, complexity and a multiplicity of variables are usually at best suggestive and not predictive. They **can** highlight bad decisions and consequences.
- Historical precedent’s value ultimately may be in highlighting what **not** to do in a similar future event, a unique benefit of contextual analysis.



# And Now for Something Completely Different- The Pivot School of Alternative History

- The Precedent School posits that historical events are fixed, immutable points in time with defined outcomes and causal pathways that **may** provide guidance for the future).
- The “Pivot” (or Alternative History) School of Historical Analysis dispenses with this assumption.
- It views past historical events and asks: “What if”?
- This school of historical analysis identifies the smallest minor substantive change that can be applied to a critical point (the pivot point) in a past event, and then follows the altered historical pathway to conclusion. “For want of a nail...”
- The Pivot School emphasizes the non-determinative nature of time, that there are no guaranteed outcomes of history.



# Pivot School Principles and Relation to Strategic Foresight

- History is not written in stone;
- Any depiction of an alternative outcome to a known historical event must be plausible;
- Plausibility is achieved by applying the smallest substantive change to a critical point in a past event, and then following the altered historical pathway. The divergence must be a plausible contingency within the context of the historical event.
- The Pivot School emphasizes potentially infinite numbers of outcomes to any event in time (“String Theory History”), limited only by plausibility, context and causation.
- These narratives remind us that there is no such thing as predestination. Emphasizing creative plausibility, they are valuable guides to Scenario-based Planning and Strategic Foresight.



# Some Seriously Talented Alternative History Writers

- **Dr. Harry Turtledove:** Author of the 11 novel "Timeline 191 Series", depicting an 80 year global history where the Confederacy achieves independence in 1862.
- **Dr. Niall Ferguson:** With Fellowships at Oxford, Harvard and Stanford, Niall Ferguson is best known in this field for his 1997 *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*. Ferguson stresses the contingent nature of history-people (not great cyclical forces) drive history and nothing is predetermined. The introduction to this work is the best summary of the competing approaches to alternative history available.
- **Robert Cowley:** Founding Managing Editor of *Military History Quarterly*; has published 5 volumes of alternative history depictions by eminent historians.
- ~~Would you believe **Newt Gingrich** and **Winston Churchill**?~~



# Thank God, he's Finished

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- Questions & Comments?
- Thank you for your time and attention.
- Any resemblance to any depiction of Dr. Who is entirely coincidental.