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At the Confluence of Public Policy and History: The Value of Historical Thinking in Public Policy Development

by Daniel Soucier

In 2011, while campaigning in New Hampshire for the Republican nomination for president, Michelle Bachmann declared, “You’re the state where the shot was heard around the world at Lexington and Concord.” Here, Bachmann referred to the outbreak of armed conflict between the American Colonies and the British Empire during the Revolutionary War (1775–1783) and the subsequent creation of the United States. The problem, however, was the “shot heard round the world” occurred in Concord, Massachusetts, not Concord, New Hampshire. Bachmann is not alone in making historical gaffes as a politician. Several other candidates during that campaign season joined her, as did President Obama. More recently, President Trump described the Continental Army taking over airports and manning aircraft during the conflict over a century before the technology existed. These missteps may seem harmless or simply unintelligent; however, distorting history—especially by the nation’s top decision makers—is potentially dangerous. Executive director of the American Historical Association, Jim Grossman describes that, “history provides legitimacy...we draw analyses of public life, and we make policy, we justify policy, we make arguments, we draw our narratives based on notions of the past” (Diegelbaum 2011).

I am often asked what a historian is doing working as a digital communications specialist and research associate for the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center. Before I was an academic, I was

a working-class political junkie and family tech guru. It was listening to politicians making historical mischaracterizations that got me interested in the study of history.

I came into political awareness during the height of the Tea Party in 2009. Both sides—the left and the right—were invoking the American Revolution and the founding of America in differing and contradictory ways. I often found myself asking: Who is right? Who is wrong? Can both sides be right? What are the nuances and complexities of history playing out in this election? How can I better educate myself as a citizen to make better choices in the voting booth? It was this intersection between policy and history that led me to pursue an MA and PhD in history. To the discerning readers of *Maine Policy Review*, the assertion of the role of a historian in public policy may not seem out of place. Indeed, the journal published an entire issue of the intersections of the humanities and policy. Within it, guest editor Liam Riordan defines the humanities as the “*qualitative* dimensions of human existence.” (Riordan 2015: 12) In other words, it is science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) that can tell us how to engineer, execute, and implement automation and artificial intelligence; however, it is in the humanities and an understanding of history that allows us to ask why we need this technology, what possible social and cultural impacts it could have, and whether or not it should be

implemented. Humanities provide us with skepticism in the face of the facts and truths of STEM.

In this same issue, Anna Bartel argues that if “policy is a set of codes and guidelines to advance the common good” then the humanities allow us to “imagine and explore the common good in general and to understand and address particular issues that obstruct it” (Bartel 2015: 118). She identifies the four stages of public policy—conceptualization, crafting, implementation, and evaluation—and the role the humanities can play at each step. The toolkit of the historian is well-equipped for enhancing policy decisions at each of these stops along the way (Green 2016). Historians can identify what the issues are and how they have evolved over time, who the stakeholders have been, who has been involved in the decision-making process and who has been excluded. Historians can also identify social and cultural complexities underpinning tensions between and among stakeholders, government agencies, local enforcement officials, and industrial leaders. Understanding this context is essential for the crafting and implementation of effective policy that is based on consensus and compromise instead of coercion or chicanery. In the assessment of policy, historians can measure and compare qualitative changes and continuities over time and evaluate the complex ways policy affects culture and society.

There is a perception in the United States that anyone can do history. However, policymakers, journalists,

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business leaders, and economic researchers often lack the historical toolkit that is acquired through academic training in the discipline. Karin Wulf, professor of history at William & Mary, argues in the *Washington Post* that “like medicine, law or engineering, history is a profession for which scholars spend years learning crucial skills and absorbing bodies of work that help them to interpret the past.” (“What Naomi Wolf and Cokie Roberts Teach Us about the Need for Historians,” June 11, 2019). Wulf noted how Cokie Roberts and Naomi Wolf, two respected journalists, drew erroneous conclusions about the past by misinterpreting key historical evidence. Why did this occur? Because the two journalists did not understand the historical context of the topics they researched, remained unaware of the scholarly literature surrounding their respective topics—Victorian England and nineteenth century women’s health—and they were unfamiliar with terminology that popped up in historical documents.

Policymakers have the paramount task of shaping the world we live in. Their decisions affect how people live, work, seek care, fulfill needs and wants, travel, purchase goods, and plan their future. Conversations between those who study how policy decisions affected society in the past and those tasked with shaping the future are a benefit to all. The Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center informs public policy processes and societal decision-making through research focused on critical issues facing Maine and the nation. We welcome policymakers, entrepreneurs, business leaders, and professionals to contact us to discuss the intersections of history, current events, and public policy. 🐟

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