

Lionel Gelber Prize 2012: Five books on dangerously precipitous times

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As Syria burns, Libya lurches, Russia rises up and Europe staves off financial collapse, “time of transition” is the phrase on every pundit’s lips. Even economic gurus who long trumpeted the virtues of the market are slapping their foreheads in remorse.

But change — both violent and economically imposed — has been the rule for most of human history. And last century’s chilly stalemate of the Cold War, which was all about staving off change as long as possible, was an exception.

So this year’s shortlist for the Lionel Gelber Prize, North America’s most prestigious award for books on foreign affairs, is a reality check for the 21st century, revisiting some of the pivotal scenes and figures of eras at least as dangerously precipitous as our own.

The winner will be announced Feb. 27. The prize is awarded annually by the Lionel Gelber Foundation, the U of T’s Munk School of Global affairs and *Foreign Policy* magazine in Washington.

Digging farthest back into the past, British biographer Amanda Foreman’s massive study *A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided*, probes the little-known history of Britain’s role in the American Civil War.

But Foreman, who became enmeshed in its history while researching characters in her best-selling *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*, went through interlocking layers of relationships between America and Britain, its newly shed colonial ruler. Had Britain decided to enter the war on the South’s side, the history of the U.S., and the world, might have been different.

Foreman uncovered the complex machinations of American-British relations and of some players in Britain’s own anti-slavery movement — who surprisingly converted to the southern cause after naively accepting the South’s propaganda that it would deal with the “slavery issue” once the North’s “oppression” was over.

At the end of the day, cooler heads prevailed. And, Foreman writes, if Britain had succumbed to the pro-southern lobbies and recognized the Confederacy, it would have gone down a perilous path “for uncertain gains.”

“Such recognition will mean war!” warned U.S. Secretary of State William Seward. “The whole world will be engulfed and revolution will be the harvest.”

Another potential conflagration bedevilled America’s leadership in *Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth*, by Atlantic Council president Frederick Kempe.

It tells a nail-biting story of the aftermath of the construction of the Berlin Wall, which stopped millions of East German refugees from streaming west but directly challenged the Soviet Union’s arch foe, America.

How scary was it? Berlin was the “epicentre” of the Cold War, Kempe told the U of T’s Rob Steiner. “Two worlds were divided. There was enough prestige at stake that they would have been willing to go to war. And it was the only place where (their) soldiers faced off without intermediation.”

So John F. Kennedy, a White House newbie, and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, a wily veteran player, faced off too, the latter sizing up the former as “weak and indecisive.”

With the Berlin Wall in place, the Cold War might have turned to a nuclear winter. But Kempe’s controversial conclusion — based on massive research and experience as a journalist in Germany — questions the Kennedy legend of tough, resolute leadership. Kennedy’s decision to stand pat, he says, ensured that the Wall would also stand for another 28 years and that the Soviet Union would pay a very little price for it.

Kennedy himself believed it was a bad decision, Kempe points out. And that “his first year in office had nothing to show for itself but a string of disasters. He was outmanoeuvred by Khrushchev.” But below those lofty circles of power in 1961, many heaved a collective sigh of relief.

A vital witness to the ferment beneath the Cold War iceberg was George Kennan, a diplomat of enormous stature and lifespan to match: 103.

In his equally massive biography, *George F. Kennan: An American Life*, Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis dissects Kennan’s intimate notebooks, letters, documents and diaries, even gaining access to unpublished poems. The result chronicles the development of Kennan’s influential “containment” doctrine that helped to prevent a hot war of disastrous consequences.

By giving up on a negotiated truce and opting instead for a permanent chess game to check the Soviet Union’s extraterritorial ambitions, containment eventually reversed Khrushchev’s threat to America: “History is on our side. We will bury you.”

Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping was less dramatic in his dealings with the West than in his bloody crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests. But Harvard emeritus professor Ezra Vogel maintains he was also an agent of change who helped to transform a country nearly crippled by Mao Zedong's lengthy rule.

Vogel's weighty study of Deng's leadership, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* maintains that the dedicated communist who ruled after Mao for nearly two decades, believed in the same "virtues" but used the Communist Party as a disciplinary structure to hold the country together while remaining open to advances from the outside world.

By keeping one eye on order, the other on Western progress, Vogel says, Deng paved the way for today's rise to near superpower status: "Today hundreds of millions of Chinese are living far more comfortable lives than they were in 1989, and they enjoy far greater access to information and ideas around the world than at any time in Chinese history." Human rights advocates, however, would disagree.

Henry Kissinger, the eminence guise of America's China policy, might not. His book *On China*, sees the emerging country as one of ancient endurance that did what must be done regardless of the many victims along the way.

But it's also a rare insider's look at how America came to China at a time when it seemed least likely. President Richard Nixon's visit to a declining Mao was meant to tip the geopolitical balance away from Moscow — which at the time, appeared to be preparing a nuclear attack on China.

Instead national security adviser Kissinger's quiet diplomacy prepared the way for a new and strange alliance, resulting in Nixon's extraordinary 1972 meeting with Mao. The rest is history.

The Nominees

- Amanda Foreman, *A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War*
- Frederick Kempe, *Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth*
- Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*
- John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life*
- Henry Kissinger, *On China*