

The Post-Traumatic Decade:
New Histories of the 1970s

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ABSTRACT: *The 1970s have long been overshadowed by the upheavals of the 1960s and the conservative ascendancy of the 1980s. This article surveys the recent surge in scholarly interest in the 1970s, a period now viewed as the crucible in which today's world was forged. We argue that the concept of trauma and healing in America's collective conscience helps explain the decade's dynamics. Watergate and the Vietnam War undermined the nation's sense of purpose in the world and inspired a search for moral renewal that shaped political, social and cultural discourse throughout the decade. We also explore two other broad analytical lenses prevalent in the new scholarship on the decade. The first relates to the ways that the social activism of the 1960s diffused across a range of progressive and conservative causes, coinciding with the transition to a postindustrial economy and the rise of neoliberal economic theory to policymaking orthodoxy. The second category emphasises the causes and consequences of real and perceived American decline and the restructuring of the international system toward multipolarity and increased interdependence.*

It's hard to imagine the historians of the next century getting worked up about this decade.

– Abbie Hoffman on the 1970s¹

A collage of iconic moments from 1970s America would almost certainly include an emotionally battered Richard Nixon in 1974, incongruously flashing the victory sign as he boarded a helicopter on the White House lawn after resigning in disgrace. A smiling Henry Kissinger would probably be pictured, too, perhaps alongside Le Duc Tho after signing the accords that ended the agonising Vietnam War, or on the arm of one of his famous Hollywood girlfriends, captioned with his oft-quoted line about the aphrodisiac effects of power. Another prime candidate would be John Travolta as Tony Manera, dancing in a white polyester suit in *Saturday Night Fever*, the film that made disco the most (in)famous fad of the decade. Edith Bunker (played by Jean Stapleton) might be next, listening with pained expression to her husband Archie inveighing against “spics,” “meatheads,” “pinkos,” “polacks,” “fags,” “chinks,” and “hippies,” in the enormously popular sitcom of white ethnic working class life, *All in the*

Family.² A scene from *Roots*, the television miniseries that transfixed the nation in 1977, might hint at how Americans began to rethink slavery. Phyllis Schlafly denouncing the Equal Rights Amendment or Jerry Falwell soliciting donations for the Moral Majority might illustrate the emergence of the Right as a full-scale political movement. Rounding out the collection might be Angela Davis, Andy Warhol, Toni Morrison, Earth Day, lines of cars waiting for petrol after the oil shock, the yellow ribbons of the Iranian hostage crisis, and Apple's first personal computer.

How was this decade ever seen as a time when nothing happened?³ It was a traumatic decade, marked by the ignominious end to the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal and the resignation of a president, and the first OPEC oil shock, to name only three of the body blows the American polity absorbed. But it was also a post-traumatic decade: the unwinnable war, the Nixon presidency, underlying economic weaknesses, and unsettling social change were all legacies of the Sixties. The character of the Seventies was shaped by a search for recovery after trauma—for a new equilibrium and a revised sense of what America stood for in a changing world.

Partly because it was such an unsettled decade, its larger significance has become clear only in retrospect. It is only recently that the Seventies have been fully recognised as epoch-shifting, host of the bumpy transitions from the hegemony of liberalism to the rise of conservatism; from postwar boom to economic slowdown; from a manufacturing economy to a postindustrial one; from the Bretton Woods international monetary system to a new era of economic uncertainty. The post-traumatic 1970s, it now seems, was the crucible in which today's world was forged.

Perhaps most notably from the perspective of our globalised era, everywhere in the 1970s people began to speak and write of a new international order defined by interdependence. The world seemed to shrink to a global village or a Spaceship Earth. Photographs of the earth from space that made it look like a tiny blue marble reinforced the sensibility that the planet was a single unit. "You don't look down at the world as an American," an Apollo X astronaut said, "but as a human being." Many of those who watched the astonishing new feats in space felt echoes of what astronauts felt during space flight: "an instant global consciousness, a people orientation, an intense dissatisfaction with the state of the world and a compulsion to do something about it."⁴ Historian Benjamin Lazier suggests that two photographs of Earth taken from the moon, the 1968 "Earthrise" picture and the "Blue Marble" four years later, reshaped human perspectives of the planet. The photographs changed political, moral, and scientific ways of thinking. What Lazier calls the "Earthrise era" coincided with an explosion of global vocabulary, with terms such as globalisation,

global environment, global economy, and global humanity achieving a ubiquity only explicable by the new vantage of planet earth.⁵

Naturally, there are difficulties in conceptualising these disparate strands under a single banner like “The Seventies.” After all, historical developments do not organise themselves by decade. Yet the historian’s task to forge order and coherence from the messy raw material of the past relies on periodisation: defining units of time that seem to hang together. In American history, events, leaders, movements, and cultural styles have served to demarcate these units: Reconstruction, the Jacksonian Era, the Progressive Era, the Jazz Age, and so on. In 1931 Frederick Lewis Allen’s famous history of the 1920s, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties*, added to this list what has become an enduring and characteristically American unit of historical analysis: the decade.⁶ To the American mind, the ringing-in of each new ten-year span inaugurates a new unit with a visible coherence, chopped off from preceding and succeeding frames by a self-evident logic. The roaring Twenties, the Depression Thirties, the self-satisfied Fifties, the revolutionary Sixties: each decade is like a sibling in a family, related to the others but possessing its own unique character. Like any period division, decades are constructs that both illuminate and obfuscate. Viewing American history as a sequence of decades highlights short-term ruptures at the expense of broader, longer-term developments, and periodisations that work for some developments fail to fit for others.⁷ But what makes decades useful and even indispensable for historians of the United States is that they track the lived experience of Americans, whose lives, memories, and pop culture categories have been shaped by the perceived validity of the decade as a salient marker of time.

Drawing on a wave of new scholarship, this essay suggests three interlocking themes as a way to conceptualise the American 1970s as a period that hangs together. The first is the emerging consensus that in popular memory and historical scholarship, the Sixties have unfairly overshadowed the Seventies—that in fact, as Thomas Borstelmann puts it, much of the Sixties actually happened in the Seventies. Though Tom Wolfe famously characterised the Seventies as the “Me Decade,” a period of narcissistic self-indulgence, it is clear that the decade saw an extraordinary range of organising around causes as varied as homeschooling, anti-abortion, and corporate responsibility. Far from signalling the demise of Sixties-style activism, the decade saw it diffuse outward into a dizzying array of causes, both progressive and conservative, and often with striking success. The second historiographical trend conceives of the decade as a period of profound psychological trauma, partnered with a quest to restore equilibrium. Recent studies vary in their assessments of what this grappling with trauma produced. In some accounts it generated politically

consequential anger. In others, the drive to heal produced a search for renewed moral clarity. In still others, the questioning was a spur to cultural productivity. The third theme centres on the significance of American perceptions of decline, as the country entered a new era of multipolarity and interdependence abroad and rising inequality at home. Declinism was an American obsession in the 1970s, but today's historians are finding new ways to limn its meaning.

Decades, like presidents, rise and fall in the estimation of historians. For a long time the Seventies were viewed with withering scorn, ridiculed as an ugly duckling of a decade whose flaws were all the more glaring next to the soaring heroism of the Sixties. At the time and as consecrated in public memory, the Seventies seemed an unsightly amalgam of malaise, decline, and self-centeredness—not to mention bad hairstyles, inane music, and preposterous clothes.⁸ Indeed the fashion cycle worked with particular vengeance on the cultural products of the 1970s. Orange shag carpets, polyester pantsuits, and disco music did not just fall out of fashion to be replaced by new trends, but almost immediately became a source of ridicule and embarrassment. (Think of the virulence of the anti-disco backlash that began in 1979.)⁹ Its cultural products seemed to taint the decade as whole as a bizarre, inexplicable anomaly, especially when paired with a litany of political, economic, and military setbacks. In a country where presidents set the tone, the Seventies saw a procession not of charismatic, inspirational leaders but of men upon whom the label “loser” might easily be pinned. Nixon, of course, was forced into a humiliating resignation. The affable but bland Gerald Ford found public confidence in his competence fatally undermined by simple physical clumsiness, parodied to devastating effect on NBC's new late-night comedy show, *Saturday Night Live*.¹⁰ And the one-term Jimmy Carter was saddled with a reputation for weakness that was encapsulated by a vacation photograph of the president, in a canoe, ineffectually batting his paddle to ward off a swimming rabbit.¹¹

First contemporaries and then historians vied to put the most dismissive labels on the decade. Columnist Joseph Alsop complained in 1975, with more than a hint of overstatement, that the Seventies were “the very worst vintage years since the history of life began on earth—with the possible exception of such intervals as the wanderings of Attila in Europe.”¹² Another journalist satirised the decade as “Boredomgate,” “the temporal equivalent of Canada,” and a period only “future connoisseurs of the sordid, the half-assed, the mediocre and the venal” would ever regard with affection.¹³ “The perfect Seventies symbol was the Pet Rock, which just sat there doing nothing,” a journalist wrote in 1979. “The Seventies don't exist,” he continued. “We agreed not to have the Seventies because we'd been had by the Sixties. Too much hype.”¹⁴ Famed radical Abbie

Hoffman echoed the sentiment, calling the period “one long exhausted inhale.” “About the best thing you can say of the seventies is that they didn’t happen,” was his acerbic assessment.¹⁵ Placed between two dominating narratives—the flamboyantly liberal Sixties and the conservative ascendancy of the Eighties—the Seventies were widely regarded as a mere interval, an age of waiting. Writing in 1982, Peter Carroll titled his account *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: America in the 1970s*.¹⁶ Americans emerged into the 1980s eager to forget the malaise, decline, and aura of self-centeredness that the Seventies had seemed to offer, and historians mostly followed suit.

In the last few years, however, the Seventies have become “hot.” Scholars are flocking to the subject and reconceptualising it as far more significant than earlier accounts allowed. Without negating the grim portrait we already knew, the kaleidoscope is shifting and new patterns are emerging. No longer a mere catalogue of failures and embarrassments, a detour of sorts, the decade is being rehabilitated as a period of creativity and gain as well as pain—and as the point of origin for developments and issues that shape the world today.¹⁷ Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer call the decade “the Big Bang” for creating the foundation for current public debates.¹⁸ Observers of the rise of the Right argue that the 1970s mattered more for the American political landscape than did the 1960s.¹⁹ The Seventies were also formative on a global scale. As a major new collection puts it, the decade was marked by *The Shock of the Global*: the end of an old era and the beginning of a new one, characterised by a restructuring of the international system as bipolarity gave way to multipolarity; an unprecedented expansion of the global economy and the arrival of accelerated globalisation; and a shift in public interest toward new transnational problems, such as the environment and human rights.²⁰ The preoccupations of today’s post-Cold War era—human rights, the role of nongovernmental organisations, and economic interdependence—all assumed new importance.²¹ And indeed, the decade’s sudden popularity is largely due to a presentist conviction that today’s important issues trace their roots to the 1970s.²² Also important are the timing of the declassification process, such that a reasonably complete archival record is now available. Perhaps, too, we are now removed enough to find the decade’s strange cultural products and embarrassing setbacks more fascinating than repelling.

Did the Sixties Die?

The first pillar of received wisdom to be felled has been the traditional “rise and fall” narrative of Sixties social movements, a framing first expounded by Sixties radicals disillusioned and disappointed by the

Seventies. The declension narrative maintains that Sixties activism peaked at mid-decade and then slumped, dissolving in the 1970s into divisive identity politics and facilitating conservatives' rise to power. The emerging consensus in the new literature challenges the views that Sixties activism largely petered out in infighting, failure and backlash. As Borstelmann puts it in his masterful new survey, "for most Americans, 'the 1960s' really happened in the 1970s."²³ It was not that progressive politics merely lingered on weakly, riven by divisions and distractions. They grew in strength and achieved gains for greater numbers of Americans than the Sixties had achieved. The rights revolution of these years saw mobilisation on behalf of Hispanics, immigrants, prisoners, the disabled, homosexuals, the elderly, children and youth, consumers, the environment, and animals.²⁴ The 1972 Democratic Party Platform even had a plank on "the right to be different."²⁵

Most revolutionary for the greatest number of Americans was second-wave feminism. Borstelmann justly notes that it was in the 1970s that feminism crested, remaking the cultural landscape and changing what he calls "the ethics of daily life."²⁶ The workplace was transformed by a stampede of women entering the job market; the Equal Rights Amendment came close to passing; abortion was legalised; Title IX banned sex discrimination in federally funded educational institutions; and cultural norms changed in ways that a short time ago would have been almost unimaginable. Older interpretations of second wave feminism—framing its gains as a breach with the efforts of the previous decade, or a story of the failure of progressive impulses because it provoked a backlash from the right or engendered divisions (between women and men, between white women and black women)—are now rightly falling by the wayside.

Over the last decade or so, a similar fate has been overtaking traditional views of the decline of the civil rights movement, which was supposedly undone in the late 1960s by Black Power and white backlash, and then forced in the 1970s into a kind of sinkhole by economic recession, "segreburbia," poverty, family breakdown, and illegal drugs. The headline-grabbing civil rights battles over busing and affirmative action lacked the moral clarity of voting rights and desegregation and were propelled not by charismatic activists and grassroots social movements but by the courts and government agencies. It was easy to paint the story in grim terms, foregrounding the failures to achieve economic gains in a period of economic hardship. According to recent scholarship, however, the "long civil rights movement" shifted terrain but remained a forceful presence in American life.²⁷ New studies show the persistence of protest and of patient, incremental gains. Stephen Tuck goes so far as to suggest that the 1970s were "the high-water mark of the black liberation movement." The struggles

moved to new arenas, such as electing African Americans to local office, and new actors gained a voice. But the movement did not fragment in the decade, as the old wisdom suggests; it proliferated, building on the achievements of the '50s and '60s to expand rights further.²⁸

This reconceptualisation is often as much about rehabilitating the legacy of the 1960s as it is about understanding the 1970s, a tendency that sometimes leads to overstating the continuities between the two periods. Historian of radicalism Dan Berger, for example, considers the 1970s to be “the sixties’ second decade ... clearly and organically part of the sixties.”²⁹ Yet movements such as feminism, though adopting modes of protest from the earlier period, did not emerge as seamless outgrowths of the culture of Sixties social movements. In fact, they were even partly fuelled by reactions against them.³⁰

Still contested is how to assess the fate of liberalism after its zenith in the Sixties. Given the clear signs of an empowered conservative reaction by the end of the decade, what conclusions can be drawn about liberalism’s strengths and weaknesses?³¹ For Meg Jacobs and Julian Zelizer, it was in the 1970s that rights-based liberalism became institutionalised and embedded in American culture.³² In contrast, Laura Kalman emphasises the failures and weaknesses of liberalism, whose tenets were abandoned even by Democratic president Jimmy Carter, as the major cause of the conservative ascendancy, even more than external forces and powerful conservative organising.³³ In a similar vein, Judith Stein challenges the Whiggish interpretation of the rise of the right, suggesting that it was made possible only by economic stagnation. In accounting for the working class’s deep losses in organising strength, political influence, earning power, and cultural resonance, Stein argues that failures of liberalism account for the ebbing fortunes of the New Deal consensus in favour of strong unions and an activist state. It was, she argues, liberal politicians who failed to support unions and acceded to free trade policies that inexorably led to the decline of manufacturing and then to the decline of unions, lower wages, and declining living standards. Democrats George McGovern and Jimmy Carter, not Milton Friedman or William Simon, are the villains in this story.³⁴ Others—including Jefferson Cowie and Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson—apportion blame for the decline of the working class to an energetic corporate counterattack against the labour militancy that manifested itself in a wave of strikes early in the decade.³⁵ The debate cuts to the question: “Is the history of the 1970s best understood as liberalism’s decline or conservatism’s rise?”³⁶

Natasha Zaretsky’s *No Direction Home* finds the answer to this question in the changing dynamics of American family life, where the

distinction between “external” and “internal” factors in America’s decline meant little. Military and economic setbacks abroad were intimately related to social and economic unrest at home. The increase of working women that came with the decline of manufacturing and a post-industrial economy resulted in a growing feminist consciousness and engagement that questioned the traditional role of women as caretakers of the home and of children. For Zaretsky, the decline of liberalism and the rise of conservatism are inextricable. Reagan’s success in 1980 came from linking the “politics of the family”—first adopted by the New Left in the late Sixties—to a narrative of American military and economic “rebirth and regeneration.”³⁷ In her much-discussed new study *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, Bethany Moreton in turn demonstrates how Reagan’s message found its popular expression in the aisles of Wal-Mart throughout America’s Bible Belt, where a generation of socially conservative “white southern mothers” sought spiritual and economic renewal through “faith in God and faith in the market,” a feature of America’s political landscape that has persisted to this day.³⁸

Bruce Schulman aptly concludes that in the long run, social movements for racial and sexual equality have had more enduring impact than the radical socio-economic objectives once identified with liberalism. Noting the decline in real wages, widening inequalities in the distribution of wealth, the weakening of organised labour, the unfettering of the market, and mounting attacks on government intervention in the economy, Schulman concludes that the economic foundations of the New Deal order have been far more vulnerable to conservative challenge than the gains made by women and minorities.³⁹ The tension between the rising status of women and minorities, on the one hand, and the growing inequality spurred by the loosening of the restraints on capitalism, on the other, is also the focal point of Borstelmann’s survey. The United States, in his apt framing, became more equal and less equal.⁴⁰

The Trauma Trope

A second major theme in the burgeoning literature construes the decade as a period of trauma with diverse social, political, and cultural consequences. The main source of trauma was the Vietnam War, which undermined Americans’ bedrock belief in their own benevolence, exacerbated their distrust of government, and created painful social divisions. It was a bewildering experience for many Americans to find their country condemned by its allies for its pursuit of the war and for its conduct. Above all, of course, losing was traumatic. Tens of thousands of American lives and tens of billions of dollars had been, it seemed, entirely wasted. Watergate, the painful effects of the 1973 oil shock, stagflation and falling

productivity, and embarrassing revelations about CIA misdeeds seemed merely to underline the self-doubts that the war had raised. Borstelmann likens these jolts to “lines of thunderstorms rolling across the prairie.”⁴¹ Journalist Theodore White lamented in 1973 that “nothing any longer was the same, no rules held, the world we knew was coming to an end.”⁴² In popular culture, as William Graebner describes, the mentality was reflected in “the sinking ships, burning buildings, shark attacks, zombie invasions, and other disasters and tragedies” that were staples of Hollywood in these years.⁴³ The single most prescribed drug was Valium, downed by tens of millions of anxious Americans to soothe their jangling nerves.⁴⁴ Borstelmann has astutely observed that it was no accident that the American Psychiatric Association registered post-traumatic stress disorder as a mental disease precisely as the decade ended. The new classification, he writes, was a metaphor for American society as a whole.⁴⁵

One interpretive prong in the new literature attempts to make sense of the varied ways Americans responded to the crisis of confidence early in the decade. In the academy, one effect of the crisis was the turn toward postmodernism.⁴⁶ In the cultural realm, Beth Bailey and David Farber view the sense of crisis as “productive,” spurring “a culture of experimentation” that manifested itself in developments as diverse as rising illegal drug use and born-again Christianity.⁴⁷ Along similar lines, one journal’s recent call for papers claims that on a global scale, the decade triggered “a massive wave of critical and creative energies sustained by a generalised transformative impulse that invested every aspect of human experience and every critical category used to describe it.”⁴⁸ In a slightly different frame, Andreas Killen’s *1973 Nervous Breakdown* posits the constellation of traumatic events in that year as inducing neuroticism, both political and cultural, that produced “moments of lucidity and flashes of brilliant insight.” The book charts the cultural products of the time, from blockbuster movies to reality television, as the offshoots of a time of ferment and dislocation.⁴⁹ Philip Jenkins, writing on the years 1975-1986, calls it a “decade of nightmares” in which a traumatised society grew obsessed with perceived threats from serial killers, child abusers, Satanic cults, and others.⁵⁰

Even a story like the turn toward international human rights promotion, so often depicted as the result of a rethinking of Cold War priorities and a natural response to a rise in horrific rights abuses, can be subsumed under this rubric. Barbara Keys conceptualises the country’s turn to international human rights as a form of domestic psychotherapy, designed to reclaim American virtue from the ignominy of the Vietnam War. First Congress and then Carter, she argues, turned to international human rights promotion as the new foreign policy mantra because it resonated so strongly with a traumatised public eager to feel pride rather than shame.⁵¹ Similarly

highlighting the nation's search for psychic balm, but finding a different outcome at mid-decade, Seth Center argues that the crisis of the early 1970s produced no substantive change in the strategic or ideological underpinnings that had guided the elite policymakers' conception of the U.S. role in the world since the end of the Second World War. Despite the prevalence of narratives of American decline in mainstream political discourse, nostalgia and tradition, rather than rethinking and new concepts, eventually won out. In Center's view, the resilience of old ideas of American power, even in the face of commanding evidence of change, ultimately defined the decade.⁵²

Decline and Interdependence

The perception of impending crisis, often global in scale, and a metanarrative of Western decline were widespread in the Seventies, perhaps most strongly in the United States.⁵³ Self-perceptions of America's declining role in a changing world order mushroomed as the relative simplicity of the post-World War II era—defined by benevolent American leadership of the recovering “Free World”—shattered in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The international system shifted from a zero-sum Cold War framework of superpower chess to an era of multipolarity and “interdependence,” as it was commonly called at the time. Weighed down by a new sense of limits, Americans felt they no longer had the means to dictate an agenda abroad. In political analyst Richard Rosecrance's pithy phrase, the United States had become an “ordinary country.”⁵⁴

The burgeoning literature on the Seventies identifies the roots of declinism in two main categories: one mostly internal, the other mostly external. Internal crises of confidence included the Vietnam War, Watergate, race riots, and economic malaise rooted in concurrent inflation and recession. External shocks comprised drastic changes in the international system, both economic and political: the uncertainties of the post-Bretton Woods era after Nixon took the country off the gold standard; the breakdown of superpower hegemony in Europe and the Third World, including the economic resurgence of Japan and West Germany and Sino-American rapprochement; the increasing power of nongovernmental organisations; and a growing emphasis on transnational issues such as the environment and overpopulation.⁵⁵ Cumulatively, the literature on this broad range of subjects construes Americans as demoralised by the pace of change and apprehensive about the prospect of future shocks.⁵⁶

A key fissure in the literature relates to the agents driving these changes. Though everyone agrees that decline had internal and external causes, accounts that give the Vietnam War preeminence implicitly attribute

a lion's share of blame to self-inflicted wounds. According to this view, it was the Vietnam War (the "canary down the mine") that starkly exposed the limits of American power and denuded Americans of the moral capital they had invested in their hegemony.⁵⁷ Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, for example, dubs the Seventies the "Vietnam Decade" and declares that no other crisis contributed more to the global shock than the War.⁵⁸ The War, she writes, exposed the limits of American power and damaged the U.S.-led "liberal" economic system.⁵⁹ Seth Center's superb dissertation on declinism also attributes the perception of American decline primarily to the Vietnam experience, with the further accumulation of domestic ills—Watergate, race riots, CIA revelations—creating a sense that America was "sick" and therefore unable to play its previous role in world affairs.⁶⁰

The perception of decline, however, cannot be attributed entirely to self-inflicted wounds. Daniel Sargent sees the birth pangs of interdependence in the fall-out of the oil crisis.⁶¹ Clearly apparent, too, is the rise of an anti-American Third World noteworthy not only for the fact that (in Kissinger's words) a "Bedouin Kingdom could hold up Western Europe and the United States," but because it challenged the country's missionary impulse, causing Americans to fear that where they had once attracted, they now repulsed.⁶² As contemporaries recognised and historians are now elaborating, the Seventies were also a period of changing circumstances and assumptions: years of upheaval, to borrow Kissinger's phrase. It was a time for old truths and established values to be shaken: not only by the incidence of change, but by its accelerated and global nature. Some of the world's most predominant issues—such as the oil crisis and widespread economic ills—defied resolution by means of superpower relations or American leadership. And other issues demanding attention throughout the decade (most notably environmental problems) seemed to defy resolution by the nation-state system altogether. Americans were unsurprisingly apprehensive about this complex, frightening new world and their place in it.

With Cold War lenses removed, historians have been far more attuned to the agency and relevance of actors beyond the superpowers and to issues unrelated to the Cold War. Vernie Oliveiro, for example, has examined the role of multinational corporations and their globalist boosters in making the case for market-based global economic competition and greater government support for U.S. business overseas.⁶³ In a climate dominated by concerns about the Middle East, it is not surprising that the oil crisis is receiving new scrutiny.⁶⁴ In the booming field of environmental history, J. R. McNeill distinguishes between the rise of "global-scale environmentalism"—that is, concern with global issues such as overpopulation—and "globalised environmentalism," meaning mobilisation around local issues such as oil spills or the construction of hydroelectric

dams.⁶⁵ As many of these studies show, Americans' growing sense of limits, decline, and interdependence was frustrating but also productive, generating new ideas and new approaches. The greatest change, however, was in the diminished sense of optimism with which Americans confronted the world.

The three themes highlighted here are far from the only ways to slice the 1970s. Nor are they truly distinct and separable. The feeling of trauma and the belief in decline were bound together; and both are tied to the legacy of the Sixties. Above all, however, what makes the decade distinctive is the palpable sense of trauma and its aftermath. The blows to American pride and confidence were numerous, serious, and deeply felt, hitting every area of American life, from the economy to political life to society and culture. It was a post-traumatic decade contoured by the country's quest to regain its footing on unfamiliar terrain.

With the natural inclination of historians to follow the trail of new documents, we can anticipate that the boom in Seventies scholarship will not peter out soon. As evidence that a fresh crop of young historians is tackling this period, this special issue presents the work of a number of talented Honours students who took a seminar on American history in the 1970s at Melbourne University in 2012 and 2013. The research papers they wrote spanned the gamut from studies of Nixon's failed health care reform to fraying in the Vietnam War. The essays included here highlight some of the questions and approaches at the cutting edge of the history of the 1970s.

As we have noted, interdependence captured the attention of Americans in the 1970s as never before. From polluted skies and waters to torture and political imprisonment around the world, new problems that transcended national borders seemed to demand new, transnational approaches. Nuclear nonproliferation was just such a transnational problem, one that seemed particularly acute as more countries pushed to join the nuclear club. At the same time, however, the traumatic legacy of the Vietnam War left a diminished appetite for the exercise of U.S. power abroad. As Benjamin Martin Hobbs's essay on the limitations of nuclear non-proliferation efforts shows, even though the Carter administration made non-proliferation one of its top priorities, its power to shape internal dynamics even in allies heavily reliant on U.S. aid was limited. Martin Hobbs's close examination of Carter's policies vis-à-vis Pakistan points to the ways that rising recognition of global interdependence and hopes for transnational cooperation ran up against old realities of nationalism and state sovereignty.

Adding to new scholarship on the fate of liberalism in the 1970s, Andrew Black's insightful essay on the 1972 election in Iowa pinpoints a crucial moment in this political rupture. By asking how it was that Iowa could vote into office both Richard Nixon and a highly liberal new Democratic Senator, Black contributes to enduring debates about why Nixon won in 1972 and illuminates one of the puzzles of recent American politics: the persistence of divided government, with Congress and the executive branch in the hands of different parties. His account underscores the role of personalities and of well-oiled campaign machines in explaining political outcomes.

The essays by David Mickler, Finola Finn, and Alex Midgley spotlight the continuing reverberations of the rights revolutions set off in the 1960s. Implicitly drawing lines of continuity between 1960s protest culture and the activism of the 1970s, Mickler explains Americans' reactions to the Indian occupation of Alcatraz that began in the waning days of 1969 and delineates the boundaries of tolerance, even in a place as liberal as the San Francisco Bay Area. Finn's essay resurrects the bizarre "Cress theory" proposed by psychiatrist Frances Cress Wesling, which posited that white racism stemmed from a lack of skin pigmentation that made them feel inferior to blacks. While Finn finds none of the white tolerance or bemusement that greeted the Alcatraz protest—instead, most Americans dismissed Wesling's ideas out of hand—her essay explores strains of African American activism that did take the Cress theory seriously. Delving into the realm of popular culture (and risking for readers endless, repetitive mental playback of "Y.M.C.A."), Alex Midgley explores the strange popularity of the Village People, an openly gay band that went mainstream. Midgley sees the band's drive for commercial success as complicating a narrative of progress in gay rights. Together, these essays show why the "new histories" of the 1970s are cause for excitement.

NOTES

¹ Abbie Hoffman, "Sixties Going on Eighties," in *Square Dancing in the Ice Age* (New York: G. Putnam Sons, 1982), 192.

² The list is from Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010), 193. The show aired from 1971 to 1979.

³ Peter Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982).

⁴ "The Greening of the Astronauts," *Time*, December 11, 1972, 57.

⁵ Benjamin Lazier, "Earthrise: or, The Globalization of the World Picture," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (June 2011): 602-30.

⁶ Jason Scott Smith, "The Strange History of the Decade: Modernity, Nostalgia, and the Perils of Periodization," *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 272-273. The packaging of history into relatively small ten-year slices was undoubtedly partly a result of

the compression of time wrought by technological and communications advances. On periodisation generally, see Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner and Others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁷ Among many historians who have chafed at the artificiality of these frames, Marc Bloch condemned the historical fixation on centuries for assigning “an arbitrarily chosen and strictly pendulum-like rhythm to realities to which such regularity is entirely alien.” Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 151.

⁸ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

⁹ Jefferson Cowie calls the “disco sucks” agitation of 1979 “the last stand of white blue-collar Midwestern males against all that was cosmopolitan, urbane, racially integrated, and, most of all, gay.” Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 323.

¹⁰ See, for example, “A Message from President Ford—Saturday Night Live,” at www.youtube.com/watch?v=nElpAlqzbTg [accessed December 27, 2013].

¹¹ The “killer rabbit” story—“President Attacked by Rabbit” was the *Washington Post* headline—was later blamed for creating a perception of weakness that fuelled Iranian hostage-taking and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Kenneth E. Morris, *Jimmy Carter: American Moralizer* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 274-275.

¹² Robert W. Merry, *Taking on the World: Joseph and Stewart Alsop—Guardians of the American Century* (New York: Viking, 1996), 525.

¹³ Charlie Haas, “Goodbye to the Seventies,” *New West* 4, no. 3 (January 29, 1979): 29.

¹⁴ Howard Junker, “Who Erased the Seventies?” *Esquire* (December 1977): 152-55, 229-30, quotations at 154 and 152.

¹⁵ Hoffman, “Sixties Going on Eighties,” 192.

¹⁶ Peter Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982). Compare the take in 2006:

Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ In Britain, where the 1970s came to be remembered as years of economic upheaval and political failure in ways strikingly similar to the United States, a similar rehabilitation is occurring. See *Reassessing 1970s Britain*, eds. Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970-1974* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), 9. A new book by journalist Christian Caryl that looks mostly outside the United States argues that 1979 marked “the birth of the 21st century”: Christian Caryl, *Strange Rebels: 1979 and the Birth of the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

¹⁸ Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 2. See also Meg Jacobs and Julian E. Zelizer, “Comment: Swinging Too Far to the Left,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 4 (2008): 689-693.

¹⁹ David Frum, *How We Got Here: The 70’s, The Decade That Brought You Modern Life—For Better or For Worse* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Schulman and Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound*, 5.

²⁰ Niall Ferguson et al., eds., *The Shock of the Global* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

²¹ Many historians remained “preoccupied with the vicissitudes of the Cold War that coincided with their own lives,” writes Akira Iriye, and were too “traumatised by the wars, atrocities, and economic crises of the twentieth century” to believe that a new transnational era had begun. The more hopeful outlook of the 1990s fostered fascination with new kinds of global and transnational developments of the recent past. Akira Iriye, *Global and*

Transnational History: The Past, Present, and Future (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 19-35, quotation at 25.

²² The rising popularity of the 1970s as a subject for scholarship is not limited to the United States. On the 1970s as a global moment of origin for today's world, see Philippe Chassaing, *Les Années 1970: Fin d'un monde et origine de notre modernité* [The 1970s: The End of a World and The Origins of Our Modernity] (Paris: Armand Colin, 2008). For recent German scholarship on the decade, see the special issue on the 1970s in *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 3 (2006); and for fascinating photos, Edgar Wolfrum, *Die 70er Jahre: Republik im Aufbruch* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2007).

²³ Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 3. Writing about Britain, Dominic Sandbrook makes much the same argument: *State of Emergency*, 9.

²⁴ On grassroots efforts on issues such as these and others, see Michael Stewart Foley, *Front Porch Politics: The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and 1980s* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2013).

²⁵ Democratic Party Platform of 1972, July 10, 1972, The American Presidency Project, copyright 2013, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29605 [accessed December 10, 2013].

²⁶ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 120.

²⁷ For a powerful statement of this view, see Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1233-1263; Timothy J. Minchin, *From Rights to Economics: The Ongoing Struggle for Black Equality in the U.S. South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007); idem, *Hiring the Black Worker: The Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry, 1960-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Timothy J. Minchin and John A. Salmond, *After the Dream: Black and White Southerners since 1965* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011). For echoes of these themes in British history, see Robin Bunce and Paul Field, *Darcus Howe: A Political Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

²⁸ Stephen Tuck, "'We Are Taking Up Where the Movement of the 1960s Left Off': The Proliferation and Power of African American Protest during the 1970s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 4 (2008): 637-654, quotation at 641. See also Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Devin Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics, 1965-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); Simon Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest: Social Movements since the Sixties* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); and Kevin J. Mumford, "The Trouble with Gay Rights: Race and the Politics of Sexual Orientation in Philadelphia, 1969-1982," *Journal of American History* 98, no. 1 (June 2011): 49-72.

²⁹ Dan Berger, "Introduction," in Dan Berger, ed., *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 4.

³⁰ Quotation in Jeremy Varon, Michael S. Foley and John McMillian, "Time Is an Ocean: The Past and Future of the Sixties," *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2008): 5. For a complex view of the women's movement partly as a reaction against the sexism many women encountered in the civil rights and antiwar movements, see Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

³¹ In 1980 the so-called gender gap emerged, as women narrowly favoured Carter while 55% of men voted for Reagan. The shift was among men responding to the changing politics of race and class, as well as to economic hardship.

³² Jacobs and Zelizer, "Comment," 691.

³³ Laura Kalman, *Right Star Rising: A New Politics, 1974-1980* (New York: Norton, 2010).

³⁴ Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). Since the financial crisis of 2008, historians' interest in

the history of capitalism and the rise of finance has been intense. On this trend, see, for example, Jennifer Schuessler, "In History Departments It's Up With Capitalism," *New York Times*, April 6, 2003.

³⁵ See Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

³⁶ Joseph A. McCartin, "Pivot Points in a *Pivotal Decade*: Reflections on Stein's Seventies," *Labor History* 52, no. 3 (August 2011): 337.

³⁷ Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 11.

³⁸ Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.

³⁹ Bruce J. Schulman, "The Empire Strikes Back—Conservative Responses to Progressive Social Movements in the 1970s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 4 (2008): 697-698.

⁴⁰ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 4.

⁴¹ Thomas Borstelmann, "Epilogue," in Ferguson et al., eds., *Shock of the Global*, 352.

⁴² Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1972* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), vii.

⁴³ William Graebner, "America's *Poseidon Adventure*: A Nation in Existential Despair," in Beth Bailey and David Farber, eds., *America in the Seventies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 158.

⁴⁴ David Herzberg, "The Pill You Love Can Turn on You": Feminism, Tranquilizers, and the Valium Panic of the 1970s," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (March 2006): 79.

⁴⁵ Borstelmann, *The 1970s*, 9.

⁴⁶ See J. David Hoeveller, Jr., *The Postmodernist Turn: American Thought and Culture in the 1970s* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1996).

⁴⁷ Bailey and David Farber, eds., *America in the Seventies*; see also Elsebeth Hurup, ed., *The Lost Decade: America in the Seventies* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1996).

⁴⁸ Call for Papers, "The Seventies, Now!" special issue of *Enthymema*, July 22, 2012, at call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/node/47182 [accessed December 20, 2013].

⁴⁹ Andreas Killen, *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of Post-Sixties America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), 11.

⁵⁰ Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵¹ Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁵² Seth Center, "Confronting Decline: The Resilience of the U.S. Conception of America's Role in the World," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 2011, 17.

⁵³ For a contrarian view that the 1970s, viewed globally, was less crisis-ridden than the decades that came before or after, see Niall Ferguson, "Introduction: Crisis, What Crisis? The 1970s and the Shock of the Global," in Ferguson et al., eds., *Shock of the Global*.

⁵⁴ Richard Rosecrance, "Introduction," in *America as an Ordinary Country: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Future*, ed. Richard Rosecrance (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 11.

⁵⁵ Worth noting on the environment and debates over population growth is Paul Sabin's excellent study, *The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and Our Gamble Over Earth's Future* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁵⁶ Matthew Connelly, "Future Shock: The End of the World as They Knew It," in Ferguson et al., eds., *Shock of the Global*, 339.

⁵⁷ Quotation in Center, "Confronting Decline," 40.

⁵⁸ Lien-Hang Y. Nguyen, "The Vietnam Decade: The Global Shock of the War," in Ferguson et al., eds., *Shock of the Global*, 159. For fresh evidence that the legacy of the Vietnam War continues to divide Americans, see the checkered reception of a recent work on American

war crimes. See Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013).

⁵⁹ Nguyen, "Vietnam Decade," 160ff.

⁶⁰ Center, "Confronting Decline."

⁶¹ Sargent, "The United States and Globalization."

⁶² Minutes of the Secretary of State's Staff Meeting, October 26, 1973, Document 226, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, vol. XXXVI: Energy Crisis, 1969-1974*, eds. Linda Qaimmawami and Edward C. Keefer, at history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v36; Center, "Confronting Decline," 48.

⁶³ Vernie Alison Oliveiro, "The United States, Multinational Corporations and the Politics of Globalization in the 1970s," Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2010.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Paul Sabin, "Crisis and Continuity in U.S. Oil Politics, 1965-1980," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 1 (2012): 177-186.

⁶⁵ J. R. McNeil, "The Environment, Environmentalism, and International Society in the Long 1970s," in Ferguson et al., eds., *Shock of the Global*, 263-78.