

Presidential Message

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“I didn’t sign up for this!” How many times have we heard someone say this since the COVID curtain came down across the world in early 2020? How many times have we thought or said it ourselves? I know I have—a lot. The additional demands the pandemic has placed on our time have been enormous, especially when much of what we’ve had to do is new and requires learning on the fly. The toll is psychologically heavy, as we deal with intermittent lockdowns and the senses of isolation and frustration they bring. Worst of all, many people have had to deal with the effects of contracting COVID, or losing their job, or supporting colleagues, friends, and family who have.

The additional and novel challenges to teaching have a lot to do with the pressures we’re under. So does the effect on our research, from reduced budgets to closed archives to travel restrictions. And, of course, one of the most stressful things of all is dealing with constant uncertainty: is that surface clean? Did someone just use that door handle? Was that just a cough, or was it a COVID cough? How many times can I sanitize my hands before my skin begins to peel off? Uncertainty and volatility are the watchwords of our current moment. Even when there’s good news—I’m writing this in early November, right as news breaks of a possible vaccine—it still raises yet more uncertainty and unpredictability.

Professionally, we deal with these challenges because we have to; they’re part of the job, even if we never signed on for them. But what of the many tasks we do not, strictly speaking, have to do? The tasks we volunteer to do, either from a sense of duty or for the love of a cause, that lie beyond our immediate commitments to our employer or, in terms of research, to ourselves?

I joined SHAFR leadership just over a year ago, and the answer to these questions has renewed my faith in people. That might sound a little naïve, or perhaps unbearably sentimental—a year ago, I probably would have said so myself. But having now witnessed the dedication and hard work, and the endless hours, that SHAFR members have put into the Society during the pandemic is nothing short of inspirational. I’m in awe of just how much Kristin Hoganson and Amy Sayward did to deal with a rapidly shifting crisis, on top of their myriad commitments to their home institutions (not to mention life beyond the campus). I was touched by the good-natured stoicism with which the program co-chairs of the 2020 annual meeting, Gretchen Heefner and Julia Irwin, took down something they’d worked so hard to build up—no complaints, no self-pity, just a commitment to getting the job done. I’ve been heartened by the massive effort the editorial staffs of *Diplomatic History* and *Passport* have made to keep the show on the road without so much as a pause for breath. I’m constantly blown away by the tireless commitment people on various SHAFR committees show, and keep showing, as they fulfill their roles under adverse conditions. And I can’t say enough about the professionalism, good humor, and intellectual imagination of Megan Black and Ryan Irwin, the program committee co-chairs for the annual meeting

in June. They definitely did not sign up for this. To these people, and to the dozens and dozens more I don’t have space to mention: Thank you.

Compared to standard operating procedures, Megan and Ryan have already spent an inordinate amount of time planning the 2021 conference. This is because SHAFR is trying out a new way to hold a conference. Last June, Council decided on a hybrid format—part in-person, part online—for the annual meeting. At the time, the reasons for doing so were clear and compelling, and a survey of the membership confirmed them. So many people said that even if a vaccine were readily available they probably couldn’t afford to attend the conference in person, because of COVID-related cuts to their personal or institutional resources. Others, and not just those who have an underlying medical condition that puts them at higher risk (I’m in that category myself), are understandably nervous about air travel and large in-person gatherings. And as we discovered from the survey, there are plenty more reasons why members might not want to attend the conference proceedings at the now-familiar Renaissance Hotel in Arlington, VA.

Hybridity shouldn’t mean two parallel tracks that never meet. Instead, we believe a hybrid conference should see the in-person events intersect and interact with the online experience. Although that’s the new frontier of conferencing, I believe it’s unlikely to supplant the in-person gathering entirely once the pandemic has ebbed, and then hopefully disappeared, and we’re studying it as history rather than as current events. I could be wrong, but from the endless hours I’ve spent with colleagues and students on Zoom, FaceTime, Skype, Viber, Webex, Blackboard, Teams...and so on, and on...the benefits of meeting up in person are clearer to me than ever before. Don’t get me wrong, it’s fantastic that we have these virtual platforms to stay connected, and I can see the many ways the new methods, such as Zoom, will be used to do business. But the longing for a return to the Before COVID age is so strong that I doubt our new normal will actually remain normal. Zoom meetings will be held where meeting in person is impractical—that’ll be a net benefit of the pandemic, because those meetings wouldn’t have happened BC—and faraway members can Zoom into a Council or committee meeting they otherwise would have missed. We’ll even be able to wait to be called into Council from our sofa rather than loitering in a hotel corridor at the AHA! But even then, we’ll miss those moments when you’re sitting in the corridor outside a meeting room, a colleague is wandering past, a conversation ensues, ideas are exchanged, and a new relationship is forged. I’m so grateful for the virtual realm, but it just can’t replace the spontaneity, serendipity, and warmth of a friendly chat in the corridor.

So let’s all buckle up for a June conference that is at least partly online, and we’ll take it from there. Whatever happens, though, I am absolutely certain that SHAFR members will be there for each other, and for the Society, come what may—wherever they are.