Episode 60: Christopher Nichols

**KL:** Katie Linder

**CN:** Christopher Nichols

**KL:** You’re listening to Research in Action: episode sixty.

[intro music]

# Segment 1:

**KL:** Welcome to *Research in Action*, a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Check out the show’s website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast) to find all of these resources.

On this episode, I’m joined by Dr. Christopher McKnight Nichols, an associate professor of history at Oregon State University and director of OSU’s Center for the Humanities. He specializes in the history of the United States and its relationship to the rest of the world, particularly in the areas of isolationism, internationalism, and globalization. In addition, he is an expert on modern U.S. intellectual, cultural, and political history, with an emphasis on the Gilded Age and Progressive Era through the present. He is the author of *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age*, from Harvard University Press, the coeditor and coauthor of *Prophecies of Godlessness: Predictions of America’s Imminent Secularization from the Puritans to the Present Day*, from Oxford University Press, the senior editor of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of American Military and Diplomatic History*, the coeditor of Wiley-Blackwell *Companion to the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era*, and coorganizer and coeditor of the forthcoming Rethinking Grand Strategy, from Oxford University Press. He is at work on several new book projects. Dr. Nichols is a frequent commentator on air, online, and in print on the historical dimensions of contemporary U.S. foreign policy and politics. He is a 2016 Andrew Carnegie Fellow and is a permanent member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Thanks so much for joining me today, Chris.

**CN:** It’s great to be here.

**KL:** So, I want to start by talking a little bit about your current research and the kinds of things you’re looking at. So let’s just start with what are the kinds of questions that you’re asking in your current work?

**CN:** So, um, well, just to take it back a little bit, my current research focuses on isolationism and internationalism in U.S. foreign policy and also in domestic politics, so how there’s a correlation between domestic political thought and foreign policy thought, and then practice, so in politics itself. And that actually started with my dissertation research, quite a while ago, which was on the history—began on the history of American imperialist and anti-imperialist debates in the late 19th century and how Americans confronted the challenges of being a republic that now had the military and commercial power to possibly be an empire. And there are a whole range of really fascinating questions with contemporary salience that came out of that. So the sorts of questions I was asking were ones that the historical actors themselves were inquiring into, and that is, things like, you know, is there a quid pro quo between going abroad and staying at home, that is, focusing on things like racial reform or education reform or infrastructure development at home, and the opportunities for the U.S. to be involved in the world, be it commercial, cultural, or otherwise. And this is really a longstanding series of conversations that activists, intellectuals, politicians, and others have been having in the U.S. since at least in the late 19th century when the U.S. sort of came to prominence as a world power.

**KL:** So, what’s always really interesting to me about these kinds of projects is clearly you’re looking at kind of historical things that have happened that might influence or kind of impact the kinds of thinking that we’re doing in a contemporary situation, but I’m always curious about how you’re kind of balancing that, because.... In terms of the data you’re looking at and the kinds of cases you might bring into what you’re exploring, are you kind of always thinking about contemporary application, or is it ever just kind of a historical.... You know, what’s the balance there?

**CN:** That’s a great question, and different historians will answer that differently. So if you had on a bunch of us today being polled, I suspect that you’d get a wide range of answers. The one thing is that we don’t talk about data, per se, though we clearly have a data set. So, for me, in my work, my dataset that I’m asking these kinds of questions with contemporary relevance about ranges from formal government documents—things like memorandums; security studies; national security council, sort of in their era, declassified documents; also private and published correspondence of major figures, so these would be housed in, say, historical societies; some are in the Congressional Records, so everything that was either said or entered into the Congressional Record. So it’s a pretty wide range of both public and private documents and sources as well as kind of public commentary—so, the other range of items in the dataset would be something like, you know, contemporary political thought as channeled through the media, or—which, for whatever era, so it would be print journalism in the late 19th century, but by the mid-20th century you’re getting more radio and transcripts of that, and then of course television, if you’re tracking all the way later—and I don’t use a lot of multimedia now, because I don’t do studies that go too far to the present, but my latest project, which is a sweeping study of isolationism in American politics, goes all the way to the present, and so it will be looking at that more.

To the question of balancing sort of the contemporary relevance or echoes of the past and sort of historical knowledge for its own sake is slightly dependent on your data, that is, it’s slightly dependent on what sources you’re looking at, but also the fact that, you know, whether we consciously or unconsciously think about it, the questions of the present inform all of our work, whatever we’re doing, right? So in the hardest of hard sciences, the cutting-edge questions are being asked in part because of the contemporary moment, whether it’s funding, the funding matrix, how do you get a grant, what is attractive, the fads in research, you know. Faddishness is there whether we import a kind of negative or positive value or not. A lens of analysis, you know, simply wouldn’t have asked the kinds of race, class, or gender questions that we ask now in history 75 years ago. They weren’t on the table as lenses of analysis. So it’s there for all of us. I tend to embrace it when I take my sort of professional historical work and then channel it to a broader public. So when I do public commentary, write op-eds or op-essays, things like that, go on NPR, then I say, “Look, this is what the history tells us, and here are some echoes or shades that we can see today of those old debates, or possibly of ways that we can draw insights from the past.” Historians are very careful of saying that every past-to-present or past-to-near-past parallel is fraught, and that you can’t draw one-to-one comparisons. So one thing that political pundits very often do is say things, ahistorical things, like “The Iraq War is just like the Vietnam War,” and even the best Vietnam War scholars would tell you, you just can’t make that kind of comparison. You can’t talk explicitly about lessons learned in the way that we tend to in popular discourse.

**KL:** Mm-hm. I’m curious to what degree your work, and the different things you’re looking at, is exploratory, and to what degree you go in with, like, specific questions, really trying to examine a particular thing, and also if that’s changed over time. Did it start out exploratory and now you’ve really narrowed into what you’re looking at? So can you talk a little bit about that?

**CN:** Yeah. So I didn’t actually start thinking about questions related to isolation. I started my first projects related to this as a master’s student and then a doctoral student, looking at the imperialist and anti-imperialist debates in the late 19th century, and the U.S.’s—the sort of intellectual history of U.S. foreign relations. And what I found in looking at those debates of the late 19th century from American policy makes, intellectuals, activists, and others, was that they centered around visions of a historical tradition that you might call isolation or isolationism. But that in fact, for virtually everyone I found, they weren’t calling for a bounded U.S., they weren’t calling for a walling-off of the U.S. from the world, but rather they were noting that there should be limits for the U.S.—for instance, not ruling aliens peoples against their will, to use the language of the anti-imperialists of 1898, 1899—and that it was improper for a republic to do that. So I kept seeing these ideas about isolation, and actually the term coming up, and I thought, okay, there’s something here, and I then I looked at what other historians have said, and historians up to fairly recently hadn’t focused on that set of questions. In fact, because of the so-called “transnational turn,” this turn in history, but also a number of other fields, literary studies, to look at sort of global dimensions of the transfer of ideas or goods or peoples across borders, people weren’t really asking questions about the limits of that. And the historical actors, in fact, had been talking about these limits for a while, so what I argue in my book *Promise and Peril* is that as we, as scholars, turn to the analysis of all things transnational, the sort of rebound side of that is also fascinating and equally global but tends to be elided, eclipsed, obscured, and that is that boundary-making, border-making, is as important as border-crossing, if you think about what is global, what is transnational, and where historical actors have drawn the line helps us to inform the contemporary moment. And this is why the book, I think, received some good attention, and also I’ve been able to talk to more public audiences, because the protectionist debates, the isolationist debates, debates about immigration restriction, about the problems of global capital, these are very much 21st-century questions, except they were being asked from the 1880s through the 1930s and answered in very different sorts of ways, depending on the historical moment. So it would have been anathema at certain moments to, say, not be engaged in global commerce, and yet during the Depression, with higher protectionist tariffs and other sorts of remedies for that—supposed remedies—you saw a different kind of in vogue set of economic principles.

**KL:** This is fascinating. I mean I.... We will definitely link to your book in the show notes so people can take a look. And I know—you’d mentioned that it kind of got some interesting attention.

We’re going to take a brief break. When we come back we’ll hear a little bit more from Chris about directing the Center for Humanities here at Oregon State. Back in a moment.

[music]

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Chris, one of the things I’m really excited to learn more about regarding your work is—I know you’re the director of the Center for Humanities here at Oregon State, and this is a center I’m just starting to learn more about. I haven’t been here super long, a little over a year and a half, but it’s something I want to learn more about. So, first I’d love hear how did you come to direct the Center for the Humanities? And then we’ll talk a little bit about the work you do there.

**CN:** Great. Yeah, so I’m really proud to be the new director of the Center for the Humanities. I only started in January 2017, in fact. I came to direct it in part because I started an initiative here at Oregon State about three years ago called the Citizenship and Crisis Initiative, which took as its main mission—well, it began with the 100th anniversary of World War I, and trying to look at ways in which that anniversary provided sort of a springboard for having different kinds of conversations about questions in the U.S. and around the world, where citizenship or crisis or the two are implicated. So, there’s nothing like a world war, for instance, to generate kind of really important questions about who counts as a citizen, how citizenship should be defined, you could imagine, say, the draft, who’s a combatant, how do you get out of the draft. You know, in the U.S. context, there are all sorts of questions about passports and identification. The first widespread psychological tests are done in World War I induction camps in the U.S. So, some of those were issues that we brought up in the Citizenship and Crisis Initiative, and then gradually that expanded to be really a public humanities kind of set of programming, and we were asking questions about veterans and coming home in America in the 21st century; we were looking at issues of the carceral state and the high levels of prison populations in the U.S., and as we continued to develop these programs, it seemed like they fit more naturally in a center for the humanities, or somewhere like that, and so when the opportunity to become the director came up, I jumped at it. So and now what we’ve been doing at the Center for the Humanities is embedding some more of these kinds of public humanities programs within the framework of the Center for the Humanities, which takes as its sort of central mission helping to cultivate and advocate for high-quality humanities research at Oregon State and then, to some extent, disseminating that well beyond Corvallis, Oregon.

**KL:** Mm-hm. So I know, obviously, a big piece of the Center, as you’ve mentioned, is research, but you’re also doing other kinds of work as well, and I would imagine part of that work is really just educating the general public about the work of the humanities and the kinds of benefits of humanities research and projects. What are some of the kinds of things that are coming out of the Center? You mentioned this initiative that you were involved in, but are there other kinds of projects or, you know, faculty support structures that are happening out of the Center for Humanities as well?

**CN:** Yeah. We’re excited both about the ones that we have and the ones that we’re building. So, I think a center for the humanities at a university is a great resource, because it can be a physical location where lots of intellectual connections are made across the humanities. We talk a lot about interdisciplinarity, but that’s very hard to sort of configure in practice: Where does it happen? What incentives are there for it to happen? So a center for the humanities is a place and has a funding and support system that makes possible those kinds of true interdisciplinary connections. We have reading groups going on, for instance. We’ve got writing salons. One thing that I’m really excited to be developing with some of my colleagues and some of our current fellows at the center are writing salons, just two to four hours where people can come in, plug in, get some coffee, and write collectively but mostly in quiet. And I’m seeing and hearing that lots of sort of junior and mid-career folks are very eager to have these kinds of writing-conducive atmospheric spaces, and so we can offer that. We have a meeting room and a couple other rooms that are perfect for that kind of activity. Then there’s the sort of reading groups and works in progress groups and sharing those things. Often, at most universities, those happen within disciplines and rarely outside of or across disciplines. And so, again, a center for the humanities is a perfect kind of a place to put a sociologist in conversation with a political scientist. And I pick those two on purpose, because they would traditionally probably be more in the social sciences, but here at Oregon State, they count, to some extent, in the big tent of humanities, so we can have them in the same conversation with literary studies folks or philosophers who would be more, in a traditional sense, humanists. So everybody involved in humanistic inquiry can be engaged in these kinds of activities. We also have lots of public programs, and we’re building more. So we have collaborations and partnerships with, you know, different land conservation groups, photo guilds, symphony, that sort of thing. We’re working with the Oregon Humanities Group to bring their conservation series through our center. And we’re building up other kinds of programming, like the kind that I did with Citizenship and Crisis. And some of those have been really great collaboration, say, with Oregon Public Broadcasting to do town halls in Corvallis, in Bend, and in Portland, and one of those things that’s so exciting about those is you can get the best of sort of humanities scholarship and research out in a panel discussion with the public and can really make transparent to the wider public the relevance of the humanities, which is exciting. You could put a political scientist and a historian and a literary studies scholar all in that conversation, and we take very different kinds of perspectives, and yet it’s obvious to a wide public why it’s important that we’re doing the kind of work that we’re doing and the way that we analyze the past, the present, the future, different kinds of texts or sources, is really an empowering kind of a move, particularly in the current political climate of 2017.

**KL:** Absolutely. So, as we record this, humanities funding is a bit under threat. There’s been some question with the current political administration about whether or not that funding will continue. I’d love to talk with you a little bit about just the role that this center, and your role in particular, plays in advocating for the humanities, for things like funding or other kinds of resources, and I would imagine now it’s become more of a thing than maybe it was before, although with—you’re starting in Jan 2017, it’s—probably has been on your radar since you began.

**CN:** Yes.

**KL:** Can you talk a little bit about that, and what does it mean to advocate for the humanities, from your perspective?

**CN:** So, the first responsibility, I think, of the director of a center of humanities at an institution like Oregon State is to advocate for the humanities *at* the institution, within the institution. So, one of the problems that we have at a research university like this that’s probably true for lots of other colleges and universities that listeners may be familiar with is that this is more of a science-skewed institution. It’s traditionally been centered around ag fields. It’s got a great engineering school, an amazing robotics department. But the humanities sometimes are lost in that conversation, or maybe to put it more fairly, humanities are seen as “just” part of the equation, more like “merely” part of the broader educational enterprise. So, one thing that’s important for me as an advocate for the humanities here at this institution is to keep bringing up the amazing work that’s going on here in the humanities. So, what I know best is history here—we’ve got two best-book-in-fields in the last five or so years. You know, departments that are bigger or maybe even more prestigious can’t say that or could tie us. So that’s a kind of thing that I can quickly bring up, say, in a conversation with the president of the university or a major donor or the Board of Trustees or other people. So there are some sort of quick pointers that I can make as an advocate for the humanities here within the institution. And then there’s also the advocacy for support. So we know, and this podcast is all about, in some ways, you know, how do we put research in action, and I was saying earlier, one of the great things about—that I know from my own career is that I need *time* to write, you know, and it’s very hard when you have a large teaching load and a lot of service and mentoring. Say you’re a really good member of the community, you’ve very collegial. Where do you find that time? Well, the time, you know, is equated with dollars and support buyouts, that sort of thing—we could get into the weeds of it—but the point being we need to recognize how much time it takes to write good humanities work, whether it’s articles or books. And then we need to have the sort of infrastructure of support and a culture of support that helps us generate that. So an advocate for the humanities here, at this institution, probably like at any other institution, has to keep making the case for the importance of that both sort of support in a financial sense and cultural support, [inaudible] reward and recognize this for promotion, for merit, for all the other ways in which that can be conveyed and construed. And then I suppose I’d say beyond that, one of the fun things about being an advocate for the humanities here is that Oregon is a very humanities-oriented state. Liberal politics just lend themselves to advocating for the humanities, and so one thing the Center for the Humanities here does is partner with lots of local and state organizations. The Oregon Humanities is the big humanities organization in this state. We work with them on their Conversation series. We’re going to hopefully be bringing a Conversation here in a few months. We’re working with symphonies and land trusts and photo guilds and all sorts of local and state cultural institutions. We work with and support literacy projects. Martin Luther King Day, Holocaust Memorial Week, there’s a wide array of things that we’re active in in the ways in which—along the lines of supporting the best humanities research in action out in the world. It isn’t always as obvious what that humanities research is, but once you’re out in the world, then it becomes much more clear to wider publics.

**KL:** Well, your work is incredibly broad, but also deep. Thank you for sharing about some of the work that goes into directing a center for the humanities.

We’re going to take another brief break. When we come back, we’ll hear a little bit from Chris about communicating his research to the public. Back in a moment.

[music]

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Chris, one of the areas I know where you have a lot of experience is offering public commentary on your work, and you’ve done this through NPR, through Oregon Public Broadcasting, C-SPAN, you write op-eds, there’s lots of different avenues that you’ve taken to do this. I’m always curious about how people get started with this kind of work. You know, what was kind of your entry point into offering this kind of public commentary?

**CN:** Yeah, that’s a great question. I’m glad you asked. So, I think doing public commentary evolves, especially as an academic, from an academic foundation over time. Finding your voice as an academic, I think, is important—how polemical you want to be. Certainly where you are on the tenure track also matters a lot, or as a graduate student, so that’s important. And a lot of us with social media profiles, you know, have the potential to make lots of kinds of interventions, or feel like you’re making them, but in fact once you get started, it could take over your whole life. I mean, then you don’t have time for a whole lot of other things. So, I started writing op-eds in grad school, probably in the middle of my time doing a PhD in U.S. history. And they came out of the sorts of things that we’ve been talking about, the obvious contemporary salience of the some of the historical actors’ debates and topics that I was looking at. So at the time, this was more about the Iraq War and Afghanistan. And one of the things that’s interesting is that—you know, say, of writing of op-eds—you can write unsolicited op-eds and disseminate them out, distribute them, they have to be exclusive, so all the major papers, and very often they don’t find a home, especially early on when you have no platform and no real profile. There are lots of places that you can publish things, but they’ll fall flat if they don’t have a decent sort of a place in which they’re located. So, early in my career, I wrote lots of op-eds just based on what I was researching as a kind of side note, like a palate cleanser after a day of writing. “Oh, you know, I really want to talk about Henry Cabot Lodge, this Republican from Massachusetts and how if only his lessons could be imported into what George W. Bush is thinking about, maybe that would change things!” Or at least this would inform some readers about what was going on in the late 19th century and how there’s some contemporary salience or relevance. Lots of those op-eds didn’t find a home. They’re still on my laptop some, you know, collecting virtual dust.

But then as you publish more of them, you kind of figure out the genre a bit, you know? So it’s like becoming a journalist if you’re an academic, in a way. It’s hard. You know, what’s your lead, what’s the argument, can you condense to 750 words? And at a certain point, then, you start getting some invitations to do that kind of thing, and then that sort of shifts the balance, and we get to a question that you and I were talking about as well, in how do you strike a balance in your academic work, your teaching, your mentoring, everything else you’re doing, and that kind of activity. And that’s a really hard one to deal with, and I think that’s also always changing. One of the elements of an academic career where you do public work, too, that I think is little remarked on, is how much that changes over time. And I don’t know that anybody has a one-size-fits-all. Anyone who attempted to project one, I think, would probably find that their model didn’t fit very many of us, in fact.

**KL:** So, I will definitely link in the show notes to some of these op-eds so that people can take a look, and also to an organization called the OpEd Project, where people can get training on op-eds, which is something I went through several years ago, and it was fascinating. It is generally a genre of its own, and it (like you said) requires certain kinds of pieces to really be successful. And I have yet to publish my first successful op-ed, so I continue to struggle in that area. But also I think this thing you’re talking about in terms of balancing your research work with this kind of public dissemination of it, especially if (as you’ve mentioned) you start to get invitations. You have mentioned with the Carnegie Fellowship you’re starting to kind of go out into the world a little bit more and get invitations to speak. How are you kind of handling the balance between actually needing to produce, continue to produce work, and go out and talk about the work that you’ve already produced? And I would imagine, too, having your brain kind of split in couple directions with the stuff you’ve already done and the stuff you’re trying to work on in the future. How is that working for you?

**CN:** Yeah. I think it’s a struggle every day, to be honest. I try to carve out writing time every day, and I live with the sort of dictum that I think is really important for us, which is that writers write. And it’s very easy to think of yourself, if you’re a historian or a literary scholar, as a teacher, primarily, or as a mentor, or as an administrator, although we tend not to think that way, and lose our focus on writing. And then there’s nothing worse. We all know there’s nothing worse than when you get pretty removed from the context of what you’re writing that you have to reengage that. It takes a while. For me it often takes seven or ten days just to get back into that historical moment, the documents. And then, you know, how can you find that much time? So trying to constantly write, even if it’s just carving out a half-hour or an hour a day, even if it’s bad writing time, words you have to throw away, that’s okay. You have to recognize that’s part of the process. So I’ll write on the road, I’ll write at a hotel, I’ll write on a plane. Not always great stuff, and I often need a lot of documents around me and books and other things, so that’s a challenge as well.

You know, the other part of the invitations, though, I think, is that for me it’s energizing, and so I draw energy and intellectual kinds of questions from those engagements. You know, so what is the audience asking about when I present on isolationism or when I present on grand strategy in foreign policy. Those kinds of moments really invigorate me to then turn back to the research work and say, okay, this is important, people care. And I turn to it, and I say, okay, what’s a responsible, historical way to approach this subject, and then is there any contemporary relevance. So I can sort of go back and forth. The elastic band sort of stretches both ways, going from the historical research work to the public dissemination work. The downside is that, I think, one problem in the humanities and in academia today is a question for relevance and kind of instrumental arguments are all over the place, and this isn’t for everyone, and the sort of way in which that is forced on a lot of scholars is really a problem. You know, I enjoy doing it and draw energy from it, but some people wouldn’t, and it’s perfectly fine to have them producing historical knowledge or humanities knowledge or any kind of research knowledge for its own sake and not distributing it, and not being on NPR or C-SPAN. Some people’s work or the way that they approach it or just their general countenance and teaching style doesn’t lend itself to that, and that’s fine too. But for me, I find that when I’m engaged with wider publics, it actually really helps inform and energize my writing work, and therefore I can get more done overall.

**KL:** So I would imagine that some people listening to this feel a little bit of relief knowing they don’t need to be pursuing CSPAN and NPR and all these other things. As you’re working in these different areas you mentioned kind of the impact that the audience is having on your work. I’m wondering if you can expand on that a little bit. You know, like are you actively seeking out what it is that people night want to know to think about how your work can gain a broader audience, because it occurs to me that much of what you’re talking about could be more of a tradebook. I mean it’s clearly going to be a topic of interest beyond academic audiences to people how are working in politics or other areas. Is that something you’re actively thinking about?

**CN:** It definitely is. Yeah, so some of my work, some of my articles, essays, are really just intended for other historians or historians who work in the US or world, American politics, that sort of thing. And some, I seek, you know mostly my book projects look for that crossover audience, so it’s not exactly what we call “academic trade.” So if it’ll hit the academic market it hopefully will be a sign djksfnjsd, but really you hope if it strikes the right kind of notes some wider audiences will be interested in it, and I do think a lot about that. You know, trying to bring the best of history, and you know, primary source research, serious archival research, but to broaden it out through the writing so that regular folks who are interested can engage that stuff. And therefore, trying out new ideas on audiences and public is really quite useful. Seeing what interests them, what doesn’t, or how what kind of academic ideas might go over their heads. You know, we’re often in our own bubbles when we’re writing, and you can’t always try these things out on students, say, if you’re in the classroom. So giving an invited public talk somewhere, or being in a round table, can provide an outlet for sort of an attempt at distilling some complicated academic ideas for a wider audience. And then the feedback you get there, if you get any feedback, could help inform the rewriting process.

**KL:** So as you’re working on projects that are more academic trade, how is that informing your tone, your word choice, the kinds of writing that you’re doing? Is it having an impact there?

**CN:** It certainly has some of an impact, yeah. And you can’t use, for instance, occasionally on one of my projects an editor says “You can’t say Hegalian, you can’t talk about Kant too much,” or something like that. Not that I would normally, but even slipping in philosophical terms and certain names without fully explaining them is a problem. But more than that, I think for history in particular, but probably for all kind of trade-oriented books, you need a narrative, and you need to think more about a whole narrative. What’s the kind of structural drumbeat that keeps the whole thing together? And that is something that you don’t necessarily have to have in an academic book where you can have a series of chapters that touch on similar topics, but in fact don’t need to be strung together as self-consciously to drive a reader all the way from A to Z if possible. I keep that in mind, and that is hard work because first you have to sort of, for me at least, do the academic bit, and then do the writing part to make sure you have a narrative that is obvious to a wider readership that isn’t as conversant in historical courses, the debates, the documents, other historian’s of interpretations. And maybe the interdisciplinary conversations that you’re also embedded in. So I find that as a great challenge. If you can do work that you fellow scholars appreciate, and then also can reach a wider audience, I mean that’s the gold standard for me at least. And it’s an aspiration, I don’t know that I do it necessarily that well, but it’s where I would like to be.

**KL:** Well I cannot wait to see what happens both with your own work, but also with your work with the center for humanities. Chris, thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show and share a little bit about your research,

**CN:** Thanks so much for having me.

**KL:** And thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week’s episode of Research in Action. I’m Katie Linder and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

Show notes with information regarding topics discussed in each episode, as well as the transcript for each episode, can be found at the *Research in Action* website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast).

There are several ways to connect with the *Research in Action* podcast. Visit the website to post a comment about a specific episode, suggest a future guest, or ask a question that could be featured in a future episode. Email us at riapodcast@oregonstate.edu. You can also offer feedback about *Research in Action* episodes or share research-related resources by contacting the *Research in Action* podcast via Twitter [@RIA\_podcast](https://twitter.com/RIA_podcast) or by using the hashtag #RIA\_podcast. Finally, you can call the *Research in Action* voicemail line at 541-737-1111 to ask a question or leave a comment. If you listen to the podcast via iTunes, please consider leaving us a review.

The *Research in Action* podcast is a resource funded by Oregon State University Ecampus—ranked one of the nation’s best providers of online education with more than 40 degree programs and over 1,000 classes online. Learn more about Ecampus by visiting [ecampus.oregonstate.edu](http://ecampus.oregonstate.edu/). This podcast is produced by the phenomenal Ecampus Multimedia team.

Research in Action transcripts are sometimes created on a rush deadline and accuracy may vary. Please be aware that the authoritative record of the Research in Action podcast is the audio.

# Bonus Clip #1:

**KL:** In this first bonus clip for Episode 60 of the Research in Action podcast, Dr. Christopher Nichols discusses the process of being nominated to be a Carnegie Fellow—take a listen.

Chris, our listeners might be interested in kind of the behind the scenes of how to become a Carnegie Fellow, and I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about the process and what it entailed to go from being nominated for that to actually winning the award.

**CN:** Absolutely. So, well it’s not an application process at all, at least on the front end. You don’t apply, you can’t inquire into when the deadline is. I mean you could find it on the website, but that won’t help you. So the way it works for me is that a certain number of people in the US are allowed to nominate up to two individuals, one junior person and one senior person. And I wound up being nominated as a junior person, and it turned out that the president of Oregon State University, Ed Ray, was able to put out these nominations. He was asked by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to be a nominator. And I’m not exactly sure how my name came up, but when I was asked by some deans if I would be interested in being nominated I said sure, of course. And they said ok, well just figure out exactly what you do with their sweeping set of criteria, which is something like how will your work address, and perhaps change, challenges to American democracy and international order. And I thought, well, that’s a heavy lift.

**KL:** Yeah, no pressure there. [*laughs*]

**CN:** Exactly! Yeah, well, no historian can get this, but I’m happy to apply for things. I apply for lots of stuff, like occasionally get things. Sometimes. [*laughs*] So I put together this proposal that was a suite of projects surrounding American isolationism, and internationalism, and populism. And to be honest, I think that in the selection cycle, the rise of Donald Trump was part of what made my work seem so relevant, and probably helped me get the award. So thank you Donald Trump, but the president of the university nominated me, and then a little bit of time went by, and then I was asked to put in a whole lot of application materials. So things like a one page prospectus of this range of projects that I proposed, which for me is basically three books, one edited book and two monographs, and some other kinds of summaries and public conversation. And then a longer document, I don’t remember the exact length, but somewhere from five to ten single spaced pages elaborating those proposals, a number of letters, CVs, and also images and other things that attested to doing your scholarship in public. And then I put all of these things in a big package sometime in, I think, November, and I had to wait until about March, the middle of March. But I didn’t know when anyone would hear, and I honestly thought that I wasn’t going to get it. So then I was flying off to a conference, and I was in traffic on the way to the Portland International Airport, and I received several phone calls, sort of urgent sounding phone calls, and I didn’t pick up because I was in traffic. And when I got to the airport, I heard “You’ve won! You can’t tell anyone, because we’re going to roll out the publicity for this as a surprise.” And it was at that point, actually, that I realized the power of the surprise in academia. I mean it’s a very big award, it’s not that big of an award, but by building up the surprise and having all of the information coming out on a single day made it feel much more important. And the institution and public relations and other people were involved in that, so that was really exciting when it was launched. There was a full page ad in the New York Times, it was in a couple other papers. And so it added kind of a imprimatur to the award. It was the way that they rolled it out, in fact, but I had no expectation that I’d get it. Now that I have it, I have to produce a whole lot, so there’s a little bit of pressure, but it’s a really exciting kind of an award. And a number of the other people who have won it are major economists, ad there are only, I think, two historians, maybe three, who got it, so I was one of the only people who at the time were assistant professors, so I was really thrilled, and frankly shocked.

**KL:** Well I love this. I’m so glad you brought up the kind of surprise part of it, because every year one of my favorite days is when we hear about the MacArthur Genius Awards, and like, who do I know, who have I heard of that got one of these awards? And we always kind of cheer for the academics who are on the list, so it’s fun to hear that Carnegie is doing it the same way. Thanks so much for sharing a little behind the scenes.

**CN:** Oh yeah, happy to.

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 60 of the Research in Action podcast with Dr. Christopher Nichols discussing the process of being nominated to be a Carnegie Fellow—thanks for listening!

# Bonus Clip #2:

**KL:** In this second bonus clip for Episode 60 of the Research in Action podcast, Dr. Christopher Nichols defines isolationism as it relates to his work—take a listen.

Chris, one of the concepts I know that is really central to your work is isolationism, and I’m wondering if you could give us a definition of that and offer some context of how you use that in your work?

**CN:** Yes, exactly, and the term isolationism is certainly a hot button one, and has been throughout US history, and it continues to be in 2016, 2017, the current presidential administration and then their attitudes and foreign policy very much tap into the issues of what is isolationism, what are the limits on US foreign power, foreign policy and power politics, and what are sort of the longer historical precedents are what I’m most interested in my work. That sort of longer history of the term, and the various ways isolationism have developed, what they’ve been compatible with in terms of other sorts of foreign policies, and to what extent this long legacy impacts us today. So those are separate ways of thinking about it, they’re interconnected. So the term isolationism really has been used most frequently by the opponents of isolationists to brand them. It’s an epithet, and this really originated in the 1890s in debates over the imperialist and anti-imperialist debates for whether or not the US should annex territories like Puerto Rico and the Philippines. And people who are branded with the epithet isolationist, figures like Andrew Carnegie, who was against taking the Philippines. And so what that moment did, which we very much live with today in 2017, and are likely to encounter for the rest of US political history, is setting up isolationism as the antithesis of either internationalism or interventionism, but what’s interesting is that that’s a false binary, or a false set of assumptions. And so from the origins, the sort of argument that isolationists were an epithet, the epithet form, in fact, it misses the fact that Americans who made the argument for isolationism were tapping into a very sort of primordial US foreign policy concept, that deep value. That value was avoiding, actually, power politics alliances, entangling alliances, particularly with Europe. So the conditioning factors of isolationism in US history have been a vision of the limited ways the US should intervene abroad, and that the US shouldn’t be entangled in binding commitments, say security alliances, with major foreign powers. And the idea here, this goes back to Washington and to Jefferson, that catchphrase “entangling alliances with none,” the idea of that was one that’s very much with the US today, a kind of perspective on unilateralism, that the US should act alone in its own best interest. The US is the best arbiter of its own best interest; the will of the people as voiced by its representatives is the way to understand that. So one thing that’s interesting in this history that I think listeners will be intrigued by is that isolationists arguments for a popular referendum on war have come up very often in American history. So around World War 1, World War 1 was not as popular with Americans as we tend to think. Opponents of the war, Michael Kazin’s book War Against War, demonstrates what some of my own work talks about. Opponents of the war argue that American people should have a referendum on war, and that they should decide, not Congress. This came up again in the 1930s. There was an amendment known as the Ludlow Amendment that almost got through Congress that would have brought a referendum to the people to have a constitutional amendment that would say that war-making power would be vested in the people, except in the case of an attack, and then obviously the US would have the right to defend itself. And then this came up again in Vietnam. So what’s sort of interesting about these isolationist arguments that prioritize the people and the will of the people, and what were premised on a sort of limited view of US’s role in the world. So one of the things that I track in my book, Promise and Peril, and some of my new work is what the other ideas related to this are. Ok, so if you’re defining isolationism as a view of the limits of US power, as a policy of steering clear of foreign entanglements and collective security alliances that are binding, these are things like NATO, which was established in 1949, North Atlantic Treaty Organization. These sort of collective security visions are the ones that have often come under the most scrutiny for isolationists. And we’ve heard this again in the recent past, that part of the Trump campaign, part of this populist nationalism that has been rising in the US, and also in Europe. You can look to France, you can look to Brexit; this is about pushing back against world governance and collective security kinds of organizations, and this is something that nationalists who operate out of an isolationist framework understood very well. In the nineteenth century and the twentieth century, now the twenty first century, there’s been a return to isolationism, so the non-entanglement part of that, unilateralism is part of that, but also visions of self-sufficiency and of avoiding war. I think forget that isolationists aren’t necessarily hawks, or can be hawkish in terms of the use of power, so there have been both pacifist isolationists and sort of bellicose interventionist isolationists in American politics. So one of the core arguments I make in a number of my books and articles that I write on isolationism and internationalism is that, in American political thought and practice, there have been no thinkers who wanted the US to be fully walled and bounded. The assumption that isolationism means that the US would act like an ostrich with its head in the sand, which itself is false, ostriches don’t put their heads in the sand, they have a great defensive posture where they get low to the earth, low to the ground, is wrong. The popular connotation of isolationism doesn’t fit. In fact, isolationist very often made arguments for the US to be involved with the world. The crux of the issue for them is what is the degree and type of international engagement be? And that’s very much with us in 2017, and the problem, back to the beginning is the epithet, right? Isolationism obscures more than it illuminates as a term; its history has been mangled and mistreated, but the core concepts are very much with us. Protectionism, political isolationism, non-entanglement, unilateralism, self-sufficiency; these are the very foundational precepts of American foreign policy.

**KL:** Well thank you so much for offering that definition and context.

**CN:** Thank you.

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 60 of the Research in Action podcast with Dr. Christopher Nichols defining isolationism as it relates to his work—thanks for listening!

[*outro music*]

# Bonus Clip #3:

**KL:** In this third bonus clip for Episode 60 of the Research in Action podcast, Dr. Christopher Nichols shares about some of his work as a Carnegie Fellow—take a listen.

I know you’re also a 2016 Carnegie Fellow, and so I’d like to talk a little bit about that, because clearly these are issues that are very relevant, people are interested in these questions, and in our current political climate they have a lot of applicability. Can you talk a little about the work you are doing specifically with that Carnegie Fellowship, and what are some of the kinds of things you’re focusing on there?

**CN:** Yeah, absolutely. So I was thrilled and honored to get the Carnegie Fellowship, and I had no idea really that it would come through. So one of the things that it does is help provide that most important thing that all researchers need—everybody probably listening to this—that’s time. So it provides generous funds, and institutional support, too, to give me the time that I need to ask these questions and write a bunch of books. So that’s the biggest part. It also creates a sort of platform, because it certainly is a high profile kind of award, so it generated more speaking engagements and other kinds of things, which presents its own—you could do your own show on this—which presents its own set of challenges. How do you balance your schedule when now you both have time but also have lots more demands in that time? But in any case, those are good problems to have.

So what I’m doing with this is a range of projects. I’m looking at, so my next few projects are one on the history of grand strategy. This is a concept that is very popular in political science, and it tends to be.... Your listeners will probably recognize containment during the Cold War as a typical grand strategy, an archetypical grand strategy. That is the George Kennan-esque vision of the U.S. and western democracies as containing Soviet military expansionism, and also ideological communist expansionism. That’s one of the ways that people think about grand strategy, but in fact, I argue, and my co-authors argue in this book *Rethinking Grand Strategy* argue, that there are a lot more capacious ways of understanding grand strategies historically.

So in a chapter that I’ve written about this, and some talks that I’ve given, you can think about, for instance, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, which was founded by Jane Addams and Emily Balch, the first two American women to win the Nobel Peace Prize, as articulating and pursuing a kind of global grand strategy to end war. They come out of an American context but they’re in global conversations about their strategic imperatives. So, other figures in this sort of project, you can think about Black internationalism, people like W.E.B. Du Bois whose career changed a lot, his politics changed a lot over his lifetime. But looking for kinds of pan-African solidarity across borders, and that this is a sweeping kind of a grand strategy, and this is not often in the literature, which focuses more on military and hard policy kinds of ways of understanding grand strategies. This is one of the projects that I’m doing, and the implications of this are to push contemporary policy figures to look at this history and think about “Okay, if I’m more narrowly defining grand strategy, what am I missing?”

And a great essay and a conference that I organized in May 2016 here at Oregon State University on everything grand strategy focuses on PEPFAR, the AIDS relief programs that George W. Bush pursued in Africa. And that PEPFAR is actually emblematic of a kind of public health grand strategy. So if you expand grand strategy and think about those, you can actually open up the tool kit for contemporary policy makers and history is a great way of showing how these worked or failed or been debated in the past.

Another project I’m working on is on the early Cold War and the ways in which, in fact, there were more alternatives to what we think about as 20th century U.S. hegemonic internationalism than most sort of listeners are aware. For example, I’m writing about the election of 1952, and Dwight Eisenhower wins, most people know that. What they don’t know is the most popular candidate in the race until Ike announced was Roberts Taft, who was an isolationist, nationalist who was pursuing a strategy where the U.S. would not send divisions to Europe, would pull back from—he opposed NATO, for instance. Sounds a little bit like contemporary politics in the U.S. today. So what I’m doing in that book project is to show some of the alternatives in the early Cold War to what became the Cold War we know and to illuminate a few key moments that were really pivotal moments in the early Cold War, and this kind of paradoxical insight, which my new book will show, is that the alternatives were mostly coming from the right, not from the left, in the early Cold War.

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 60 of the Research in Action podcast with Dr. Christopher Nichols sharing about some of his work as a Carnegie Fellow—thanks for listening!

[*outro music*]

# Bonus Clip #4:

*[intro music]*

**KL:** In this fourth bonus clip for Episode 60 of the Research in Action podcast, Dr. Christopher Nichols discusses his interpretation of grand strategy—take a listen.

Chris, I know one of your current projects is really focused on rethinking grand strategy. Can you talk a little bit about what that means?

**CN:** Absolutely, yes. So, *grand strategy* is a term in international relations and American diplomatic history that refers to a kind of capacious world view that policy makers tend to have. And the idea is—the definition that I prefer—is that grand strategies are the intellectual architecture that structures how individuals and groups think about the proper relationship between means and ends in foreign relations. Now, one reason why my new work on rethinking grand strategy is different from previous work is usually that kind of a definition has been fitted to high level policy makers: secretaries of state, presidents, those sorts of folks, and has tended to talk about the use of military power or hard power as a definition in structure. So that archetypal grand strategy is containment in the early Cold War, right? That the U.S. policy to contain Soviet expansion, as articulated by Kennan and others, was one that lasted multiple generations and that it operated to structure all sorts of foreign relations, for the U.S. but also for the U.S.’s allies and other forces.

Okay, that’s one way of thinking about grand strategy, for sure, but I argue in some of the articles that I’ve been working on, my new book project *Rethinking Grand Strategy*, that if we broaden grand strategy, we can see that there are other sorts of actors who have capacious worldviews that are these sorts of intellectual structures and that balance means and ends. So one example that I love to use that comes from my work in *Promise and Peril* and on isolationism and internationalism is the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, which was developed during World War I by two of the leading lights of American domestic and foreign policy, progressive policy, Jane Addams and Emily Balch, two women, the first two American women to win the Nobel Peace Prize, in fact. And their view of world peace was one that would be structured through women’s political activism across borders. It was a transnational process, so it wasn’t even literally internationalist. They didn’t especially care about the nation-states involved, though of course they wanted peace through the nation-states, but they were about going over and under borders, transnational literally in that sense, to enact a kind of world peace initiative.

And you could think of other kinds of grand strategists like this. Maybe the best example would be missionaries. So, there’s no—I often say when I give talks about this—there’s no better example of a grand strategy than trying to save souls around the world. And there’s lots and lots of literature on missionaries, and major figures leading groups like the Young Men’s Christian Association and other groups to try to save souls, but also, in practicing that in foreign missions work, doing work in public health, in education, and all sorts of other ways of restructuring societies and helping individuals and groups towards social betterment, right? So this too is a grand strategy, okay, and I could argue for a few more. There are lots of ways that a broader vision of public health, of social movements, of women’s peace activism, of religious missionary work, could fit as grand strategies. So if you grand strategy to that, if you rethink it in that way, the one thing that we see is that there are lots of grand strategic actors on the world stage today and historically who should be in that same conversation with people like Kennan or Henry Kissinger, sort of arch-grand strategists in an older tradition of thinking about high policy makers and users of power.

Now one reason why this has great interest in the world recently is that coming out of the Cold War, the U.S., the West, China, have struggled to find and define broader kinds of grand strategies. What are these big missions, these big orientations to the world that will help structure, then, particular policies? So we saw under the Obama administration a pivot to Asia, for instance. This sort of language is a signal that presidents and policy makers and big nation-states, especially, are seeking to develop grand strategies. One criticism of the Bush years was that it had too robust of a grand strategy—this was the National Security Strategy of 2002: preemption, right, and intervention, and democracy promotion. And another critique of the Obama administration was that it didn’t have enough. I wrote an essay on Obama’s demi-grand strategy, a sort of half strategy or partial grand strategy.

And the point here is that policy-makes feel like they need to have these grand strategies, and if you rethink grand strategy also to include folks outside of the policy realm, then in some ways it changes how we think about what it is that nations do in terms of grand strategy if they are also lots of other figures and groups pushing grand strategies today and that they’ve done that historically. And another reason, I think, that we should take grand strategy seriously is that it’s a place where ideas really matter. It proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that international relations and domestic policy, that there’s a connection between a foreign policy and a domestic policy, that a nation can’t do everything in the world at the same time, there are limited resources, and that thinking that out, and thinking that out longitudinally in a long-term kind of view, has worked historically, and it reminds us, I think, today that the narrower vision of policy, whether you’re in Germany or the U.S. or China or South Korea, may in fact be working to the detriment of your nation, and that a longer view, a grand strategic view, whether it’s at the high level of containment or the seemingly-lower—but I would argue very comparable—level of, say, mission movements or world peace movements, is very important and needs to be recovered, this history recovered, and then the ways in which that kind of thinking could be really effective in enacting change, not just in this generation, but for future generations.

**KL:** Well, you’ve certainly got me thinking about it differently. Thanks for elaborating!

**CN:** Great! Thank you.

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 60 of the Research in Action podcast with Dr. Christopher Nichols discussing his interpretation of grand strategy—thanks for listening!

[*outro music*]

# Bonus Clip #5:

**KL:** In this fifth bonus clip for Episode 60 of the Research in Action podcast, Dr. Christopher Nichols explains how he views the relationship between isolationism and internationalism—take a listen.

Chris, two terms that are really central to your work are isolationism and internationalism. Can you talk about the relationship between those two things? I would imagine some people might get them confused or just not quite understand how they’re connected to one another.

**CN:** Absolutely, yeah. So, *isolationism* and *internationalism* are both terms that are bandied about a lot, and often it seems to me that they’re empty vessels [*laughs*] that we fill up with whatever ideas we think fit in there, or maybe we’re just not sure what’s in that vessel. So one of the things I’ve traced in my historical research is the development, the origins and genesis of isolationism, a view of the limits of U.S. power premised on non-entanglement and not having binding alliances with foreign powers, those origins lie in the late 19th century. And what’s interesting about that is that they tap into a longer tradition in U.S. foreign policy that goes back to Washington’s farewell address in 1796 and Jefferson’s first inaugural address in 1801, and these primordial concepts in U.S. foreign policy. At the same time in the late 19th century that ideas about isolationism were gaining traction, the U.S. was rising in world power, commercial and military power, and it made the question, should the U.S. intervene? Where should it intervene, how should it intervene, should the U.S. have colonies or not? It made those kinds of questions really poignant and important, because the U.S. finally had the power to do that outside of the continent.

At that same moment that those questions are being asked, new visions of internationalism are being born in the U.S. and around the world. So you have some really important Hague conferences and other conferences that articulate international law. You begin to see protections on individuals in the international legal system. You begin to see the rise of what several scholars call a sort of legalist empire in the U.S., that is, that legal structures, international legal structures are born in the U.S. to govern international law and the U.S.’s relationship with it, and those folks, those lawyers, international lawyers who are involved in empire for the U.S. help govern places like the Philippines or Puerto Rico and are deeply invested in U.S. commercial empire abroad. Sort of cultural internationalism, commercial internationalism develop in the late 19th century as the U.S. rises in commercial power. So what I argue is that isolationism and internationalism in some ways are inherently connected because of this genesis moment in foreign policy thought in the late 19th century, and that what you find in people arguing for either more internationalism, that is, more U.S. engagement with the world in particular ways, usually through world governance and arbitration or organizations like the League of Nations, but not necessarily, is that many of those same people have been making arguments about isolationism at the limits of U.S. power or, say, for instance, going abroad in terms of commerce and culture but not military power, not having more bases. So there’s always an internationalist component to isolationist arguments, I find, in American history. Very rarely is there not also a domestic corollary. So, very often, folks who are talking about international engagement to, say, increase market share in China, they’re also arguing that the U.S. needs to invest more in infrastructure in the U.S. or in generating more industry, or subsidies, or protectionism, the opposite side. A kind of isolationist protectionism is very much about the self-sufficiency of industry and the economy and growth in the U.S. It has often backfired when the U.S. has raised tariffs high, but that kind of protectionist isolationism, interestingly, is in part about international trade and about internationalism. And I think people who just hear the terms *isolationism* and *internationalism* don’t tend to think about these complicated ways in which historically and in the present they’re actually intertwined.

And the significance of that, I think, one significance of that, is that it gives legitimacy to both kinds of arguments, if you follow my logic here. That is to say, isolationist kinds of arguments that say “Look, like, hold on, put the brakes on, the U.S. shouldn’t intervene militarily” can be coupled with internationalist arguments that say the U.S. should be advancing a sanctions policy for a particular place to enact change on the ground for, say, human rights violations, or that it’s not the U.S.’s proper place to intervene in civil wars in sovereign countries abroad, is a logical extension of some deep and ethical American ideals. And we could quibble about whether or not that’s the right policy in a particular moment, but it fits neatly between isolationism and internationalism. The U.S. is inherently international; it has to be understood as such. And yet some of those isolationist kinds of arguments are very much about the U.S.’s degree and type of international engagement, and therefore, sort of more profoundly, in some ways all kinds of isolationist arguments are in fact at least partly internationalist.

**KL:** That’s fascinating. Thanks so much for sharing about the distinctions.

You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 60 of the Research in Action podcast with Dr. Christopher Nichols explaining how he views the relationship between isolationism and internationalism—thanks for listening!

[*outro music*]