



Lecture

## FREDRIK LOGEVALL

Laurence D. Belfer Professor of International Affairs, Harvard University

### *Agency and Structure in International History*

Thursday, 16 May, 2019, 4:15 p.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall  
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala  
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The lecture will be followed by a reception.

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## ABOUT FREDRIK LOGEVALL

Fredrik Logevall is the Laurence D. Belfer Professor of International Affairs at Harvard University, where he holds joint appointments in the Kennedy School of Government and the Department of History. His most recent book, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, won the Pulitzer Prize for History as well as the Francis Parkman Prize, the Arthur Ross Award, and other prizes. His essays and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The London Review of Books*, and *Foreign Affairs*, among other publications. A native of Stockholm, Sweden, Logevall is a past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. He is currently writing a full-scale biography of John F. Kennedy.

## ABSTRACT

How should we think about agency and structure in international history, especially (in this talk) as they relate to causality and explanation? Among professional historians, there is a tendency to give primacy to structural, impersonal determinants, to the comparative neglect of individual agency. And indeed, structural analysis is imperative to an understanding of the human past. It's an approach that helps us to comprehend the limitations imposed on individual agency by institutions, social and economic conditions, popular views, demographic patterns, and other circumstantial factors that operate beyond personality. Human agency, that is to say, is qualified by the conditions in which individuals find themselves when making decisions. Yet too often structural explanations, soaring high above the everyday give-and-take of human interaction, tend toward a deterministic view of historical development which gives the impression that what happened had to happen. The result is to conceal the fluidity of past situations, to blot out the effects of contingencies, and to absolve individual human beings of personal responsibility--they are, after all, mere captives of forces they cannot control. The challenge for the historian is to balance out the elements of human agency on the one hand with impersonal forces on the other, and to write history that weaves together convincingly all the causative factors and takes into account their interaction.