

Passport Question and Answer: “I signed up for what?”

Christopher McKnight Nichols & Danielle Holz

Editor’s note: *The following is a conversation about designing, writing, and delivering a TED Talk with Christopher McKnight Nichols (CN), interviewed by Danielle Holtz (DH), recorded at and after the SHAFR Annual Meeting in Arlington, VA, in June 2019; the conversation has been lightly edited and revised. AJ*

INTERVIEW/CONVERSATION

DH: Most of us have seen, heard, or at least know about TED talks, or think we do, but we have not been through the process of conceiving, writing, and delivering one. So that is the inspiration for this conversation about the process with Chris Nichols, who delivered a TEDx Portland TED Talk in April 2018 to over three thousand people in the audience and tens of thousands more streaming live online. Nichols’s TED Talk at TEDxPortland, “The untold story of American Isolationism,” is located at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ehlaox_bxi4
So, let’s begin at the beginning. How were you invited to deliver the talk?

CN: In January 2018 I received a slightly cryptic email asking for conversation to explore possibly giving a talk and providing a link. When I clicked the URL it opened to reveal a highly-produced video invitation to give a TED Talk, which featured journalist Tom Brokaw, the musicians Macklemore and Common, and others.

Not long before getting this email my mother had died after a long illness and my father was very sick. Suffice it to say that I didn’t do my usual due diligence. It seemed positive and like it might fun. I figured I’d be ready to do a talk in the spring and I wasn’t very focused on the details. I assumed it was like many other TEDx events that I had seen on YouTube or heard of elsewhere. I envisioned a small crowd, limited commitment, good opportunity but nothing too special, at least in the landscape of doing public talks. I said yes.

This turned out to be an amazing and unexpected experience. You may be surprised to learn, as I was, that TEDxPortland is one of the five biggest TEDx events in the world. It is amazing, inspiring, and uplifting. Held in Portland’s Keller Auditorium, it is an all-day event, with roughly fifteen speakers and performing artists or groups, in front of 3,000+ live audience members and live-streamed to somewhere in the tens-to-hundreds-of-thousands of people. It involves high production and high design, with a lot of talented design and technology folks on the leadership team, almost 100 volunteers, and swag like you would not believe—Nike custom shoes, branded TEDxPortland backpack, picnic blanket, hand towel, mug, beer, wine, tea, chocolate, syrup, board games, t-shirts, hats ... the TEDxPortland team covers the city in around twenty

enormous billboards, emblazoned with the faces and key phrases of the speakers and performers (including mine!). What is more, in 2020 TEDxPortland aims to become the biggest indoor TEDx in the world. It will run what is likely to be a spectacular program of ideas and performances taking over the whole Moda Center (where the NBA Trail Blazers play) for a full day. Many SHAFR members have likely delivered TEDx talks at colleges or in their cities or regions, which is what I envisioned when I agreed to participate, but instead I found out rapidly that I was involved in one of the biggest and most elaborate TED events in the world.

DH: So, did you or did they select the topic?

CN: At first, I pitched a bunch of ideas. If you watch the longer version of the talk at the end the emcee jokes that I wrote many books worth of text and numerous versions of the talk. That is true. In fact, on the TEDxPortland Team one impressive designer I worked with liked to say that every meeting with me was a history lesson and that nobody had done more TED talks, for a guy doing his first, than me. In terms of pitching, the scope and focus of my proposals for the talk varied but my initial core idea animated everything else: I wanted to talk about why history is important today.

But that was too abstract to organize a talk around. We went in a lot of directions and eventually we agreed to rip a headline from the news and contextualize that as an example of how history matters today in light of my own expertise. “Go with what you know,” they suggested. So, the unofficial title of the talk was “why history matters today” and the official line was “the untold story of isolationism.”

DH: Why did you choose isolationism? What struck you about isolationism that made it the right story to tell about why history matters? What was the headline or key term you finally selected?

CN: First, I wanted to address why I was shocked in 2016 as an historian to hear the phrase “America First” coming up. I thought that “America First” needed contextualizing for a broader audience and that embedding it in the longer history of isolationism would enable a deeper engagement in the complexity of U.S. foreign-policy visions.

Second, I wanted to tackle America First and the much-maligned and misunderstood concept of “isolationism” because the media tends to cover foreign policy in a dangerously oversimplified way, in my view. Much mainstream coverage focuses on how does the U.S. intervene in X or Y; whereas for most other countries and groups that’s not their first question. There’s an incomplete analysis on the ground, usually, and very spotty understanding of the ideas and timing at stake at higher levels in terms of media coverage and popular discussion—if there is any

at all. So, talking about isolationism and contextualizing isolationism helps adjust our expectations about what the United States should not do but also about our entire relationships with this foreign U.S. policy yet essentially always on intervention.

And, while isolationism receives short-shrift from historian and political scientists, the term pervades popular discourse. Regular folks as well as politicians and pundits throw around the epithet form of isolationism all the time and it does bad political work in our society. And it has historically.

For this reason, I firmly believe that it's incumbent on us to historicize isolationism as a concept and "America First" as a particularly extreme, or polarized, iteration of a long-standing and ideologically mobile foreign-policy tradition in U.S. history. Otherwise it will only be used erroneously and a-historically.

DH: Please expand more on what that bad political work is.

CN: Well, some of the bad political work that it does is as an unanalyzed caricature of isolationism, one that casts anti-imperialism and pacifism or any skepticism about intervention or collective security and binding treaties and alliances as kinds of inherently unpatriotic anti- or non-interventionism. As if good "internationalists" always stand in stark contrast to atavistic, naïve, or idealistic "isolationists."

But that isn't right. It will come as no surprise to SHAFR folks but tends to shock public audiences and students that if and when you historicize the term and attendant concepts and debates, you find that isolationist arguments that involve some international engagement come from both the right and the left historically. They haven't revolved around walling-and-bounding the U.S., but rather, were fundamentally about debating and exposing the limits of U.S. power in the service of national interest—often variously interpreted and hotly debated. Indeed, even the purportedly arch-isolationist America First Committee of 1940-41 wanted international exchange as they pursued a singular position in opposition to U.S. entry to the war and all policies that might further entangle the U.S. in what they saw as a European conflict.

When I became a scholar of the subject of isolationist and internationalist thought, I shocked myself to find that over time I really came to believe in the importance of those ideas in broadening American political debates, even if they have tended to have repugnant traveling companions such as xenophobia and racism. Isolationist conceptions of the limits of U.S. power, being circumspect about the possibilities of U.S.-led transformations—regional, national, and international -- military, economic, social, and religions—are perhaps the most potent and longstanding countervailing force against rash interventionism we see in the U.S. politico-diplomatic record. I really wanted to show the TED audience in person and online the complicated development of ideas about isolation. I aimed to make accessible the ways in which we Americans who opposed a range of restrictions on national sovereignty imposed by entering into global agreements, permanent alliances, and interventions in foreign conflicts advocated for forms of political isolationism, however the historical record reveals that they did not seek to wall off the nation from the world.

Indeed, one reason that I increasingly go back earlier and earlier in the history of isolationism in my accounts, recent articles and book chapters and one of my Andrew Carnegie projects, and in the TED talk, where I emphasize

Washington, Jefferson, and Monroe, is because when you go back to when the U.S. was not a major military or economic power, you find the traction of these ideas is much more obvious. It also taps into foundational logics for U.S. foreign policy ... and literally the founders, which helps persuade public audiences. That is, an array of ideas about the benefits of relative isolation—as I put it in the talk, never complete, always engaged with the world, and generally recognizing the "sandcastle-like" quality of building borders when ideas, peoples, and commodities flow so easily across them—are crucial to the primordial soup of American foreign policy.

So how do we get to the point where the debate is reduced to one where interventionism is the only viable response to any foreign policy question? Why do we reflexively respond to the question of intervention with "when and where to intervene" and not "why or how." Or if. This is what I hope the talk helps to illuminate for audiences.

DH: Let's talk a little bit more about the drafting process. You've decided with them that you're going to work on America First and you're going to explore isolationism. Did you send them a full draft of the talk first? How was the beginning of the process?

CN: There was a series of meetings. It was at this point when I started having these meetings that I realized that I was in it now. On my team was a design specialist, who helped sketch images and story-board ideas, along two main organizers, the visionary leader of TEDxPortland David Rae, a former Nike marketing executive who founded and runs a media and design firm, and a current Nike marketing leader who was a former British Parliament speechwriter, and in the end I also had an award-winning graphic artist on the team.

At times it felt like there were a lot of chefs in the kitchen. And it was nothing like working with a book editor or journal editor, or even co-writing. Of course, as a historian and somebody who has done a fair amount of public speaking inside and outside classrooms, they weren't very worried about my presentation—which they were for some other less experienced speakers going—but we all were concerned about how to get some complicated history distilled to really reach the TED audiences.

So, in all these meetings, I was always bringing more and more text and that probably wasn't going to be there in the end anyway. They were a little surprised by that. "Oh well if you think I should talk about you know 20th century or mostly the America First Committee," I would say, "give me a couple days." Then I'd return and say "here's five pages." These talks have to be under twenty minutes and preferably closer to twelve, or around two thousand words total. So the process began with storyboarding and cutting and revising my abundant text. Writing a TED talk with a team like this is intense, time-consuming, and in the end I found it to be a really good lesson for how to do any public talk. Because you have to really think hard about every line, about outcomes, about accessibility. One takeaway for me was that the team emphasized that you absolutely need to hit the audience hard with a great opening line.

Each segment of the talk needs to be mapped out very specifically. So, what you do in your first two minutes as an introduction must then transition to your next two minutes. That's point one. Your next two minutes are body text, point two, then no more than three total body sections of two-to-three minutes. And then the narrative arc must be clear all the way, where you're going to "land the plane" as they repeatedly said, has to be in mind from the start and is vital

to any good TED talk.

In drafting we stressed finding and refining key lines. The idea was to design a handful of lines to perform emphatically, with a pause, to get the in-person audience to say “wow” or “whoa, really?” and “I’ve never thought of it that way.”

But how do you achieve that? I usually don’t think of such things in my teaching or public engagement, or at least not too much. However, for this talk paring things down and word-smithing lines and phrases that might bring a shiver to the audience, when combined with images and in culminating previous points, had to be the goal.

Central to that was scripting and thinking about when to pause and deliver lines that the audience is really going to feel, that will resonate, and then leave them to sit with the line for a few beats, and when you are going speed up your cadence. I don’t know that I performed all those things as well as I’d hoped but deliberating about them a great deal in advance was maybe the most important part of crafting the talk. Then, with a teleprompter – which I had never used – I was able to put bullet points for those “land lines” after testing them out on the team, to be sure I slowed and really hit them. That was useful and another aspect I took away from the experience that I highly recommend. That is, if you have a great line, using it to start with emphasis, then including some other similar phrases at strategic points in the talk that evoke that opening line or claim, to touch on slowly, will enhance any talk, it seems to me.

But it wasn’t until about the last bit of drafting that that the that a line that I had just buried in the middle became like the main line of the talk and the core of the first captivating image. I continue to use it for other public talks and it works very well -- history is a vaccine against superficiality.

DH: Was there anything they didn’t want you to talk about as you suggested or includes that they advised you away from or against?

CN: The big thing that we went back and forth on was Donald Trump. In the opening, when I’m trying to contextualize America First, we grappled with whether or not I would talk about Trump. How to do this without seeming like I’m just there on the stump making a political case or being overly political or just dating the talk too much was an enormous challenge. It is also kind of verboten in the TED-talk universe to “do” politics or pitch products.

So, we went back and forth on the Trump thing and ultimately just decide to explain it in terms of the remarkable return of America First as a campaign motto and policy platform and then move totally beyond Trump and the present moment to go back to the eighteenth century and march up through time, thus actually solidifying the significance of this moment in history in conversation with the past.

The team in Portland and I weren’t too worried about Trump or the present until it got to be about four days before the talk. And we’re still working on the text and still working on images which is something we should talk about. And at that point they told me, “You’ve got to start practicing. You know we have to. And you have to like it has to come in under 20 minutes. It absolutely can’t be over 20 minutes and the target was 14.” And then they told me I would be in the last group of speakers for the day, that I would likely go right before journalist Ann Curry who would close the whole event with a rousing *cri de coeur* for truth in journalism.

Knowing I was to go before the closer for the whole day pushed me to redouble my effort and cut a ton. In fact, the cut words file is definitely in the nearly twenty-thousand word range. There were some versions of the talk that were great. That would’ve been great. Like 40 minute lectures for a four hour class. And so we had to strip out all the quotes and streamlined everything. We landed on a structure that began and ended powerfully by via the vaccine line but in making the case that words and phrases can be -- and are -- wielded as weapons, and the only guard against succumbing to powerful but vacuous symbols and terms, what William James termed specious abstractions, is to understand the history and deeper context.

DH: Let’s talk about that. As you edited and edited, how did you prioritize what you wanted to leave in? How did you make sure that you were clear on agency? We’ve talked a lot about rupture and continuity in ideologies, how do you keep those elements in the text? And also keep that text incredibly short?

CN: I thought it was a hard balance to strike. I think that what you focus on in a TED talk is a little different from other ways that you or I would be very particular and careful about trying to keep the agents in. I think in a TED talk you’re not as worried about the agents you’re worried about the clarity and the kind of language that will generate in the audience the ability to then look into the who’s and what’s of the history, or to or to question what you’re saying and say OK wait, and push back.

But the other piece of it was imagery. For me the really interesting thing about the highly-produced sort of TED talk and process I participated in was that unlike all almost all the other kinds of talks I have done or do, the images were commissioned and designed to directly enhance the flow and deepen the content.

Right in the middle of the drafting process the TEDxPortland lead organizers realized we were on to something with my talk and they decided to amp up the images, to make it really memorable in person, for posterity, and to be usable in classrooms. So that’s something they were thinking about for my talk that it would be something that high school teachers or college professors could assign and it has now begun to be on syllabi, as Google Alerts tells me. They said okay we need we need great images for this. And so they reached out to the guy who did all the TEDxPortland billboards a few years earlier, none other than an Eisner Award-winning graphic artist named Jonathan Case.

And this this was perhaps the biggest takeaway biggest lesson for me of the whole process was -- now I want to write a graphic novel. Working with this amazing talented artist, Case, and thinking about the potential for images to convey so much more than words really was a pleasure and has opened new vistas on to how to communicate historical concepts to wider publics.

We worked together and the design team had lots of great ideas; we did story boards; we debated if anyone knew or cared who any given person in the talk was, or if or how they should be represented to make the most visual and intellectual impact; we pondered core images to carry throughout the slides and when, where, and why to use color – something that, frankly, had never occurred to me. Case read a late draft of the script, we selected images and embedded historical ideas, some more overt some more subtle ... in the end Case did six great commissioned original design slides, pieces of art, for the talk and that I now have permission to use for other talks and events.

DH: So, did the images inform where you were going to draft? Knowing you would have the designer making these images did that change what you wanted to include?

CN: That's a great question. You know it did. I did not think that it would at the time but have an exceptional graphic artist doing the art work for the talk and knowing this was not just a talk but a performance with images really did shape how I thought about the talk. In particular, working with speaker coach and design team plus artist it was very clear how the talk needed to be blocked out, which is not something we usually do with invited talks much less lectures or discussions. What I mean is that each segment had to have a slide. Each segment was two-to-three minutes. But would the image precede, coincide with a strong line of emphasis, or come in the middle? Why? To what effect?

We went with color images to open and close the talk, and shifted black-and-white for all the past sections, with a blending of color and black-and-white for the 1940-41 America First Committee transitional moment at which I argue the term "isolationism" was "tarred" forever. The initial image is my favorite and it visually represents and adds complexity to my favorite line "history is vaccine against superficiality." But then where do you go from there? We ended up leaving that slide up for a full two minutes—and you can take a look at the Twitter birds and get a sense of the theme of birds to come, and you can wonder whether I am arguing history is a drug or an inoculation or a mixture of each? Then we worried about how to move from the eighteenth century to the present while keeping the audience engaged but not pushing superfluous facts. So, the next image is of the U.S. as a fledgling bird and Europe envisioned as fighting vultures or you know, predatory birds, eyeing the New World. I was trying to tease out for the audience the early U.S. as a weak nation and why isolationist ideas such as unilateralism, neutrality, and non-intervention—which I emphasized a lot in the talk—were bulwarks of an older era; that they might have made good sense then and at times later under nearly constant pressure being updated to meet the nation's needs in light of new geopolitical conditions.

At the intersection of images and text was performance. You have a big clock with red numbers glaring at you, counting down, there is an enormous boom crane with video setup and camera people swirling around, not to mention three thousand people in person and so many more online. And there's a teleprompter—I went back and forth and eventually put some text and some bullet points on it, as I wanted something to fall back on to help with the land lines but didn't want to overly focus on and distract me from the talk as a whole.

All of this comes with no time to unpack images as we usually do for students and audiences. So, for a talk like this, the slides had to have their own impact and explanatory and analytical power to complement what I

was saying and how lines were performed. Thinking about images and their use, if you look at some TED talks the speaker has a PPT clicker, but after some back-and-forth the team and I decided timing and images needed to be so in synch for my talk that the main story-board designer for my talk was backstage hitting the mark on dropping each image at a set moment, a key word, phrase, or concept, even when I was ad-libbing, to have maximum impact.

The problem, I think, was that this felt like it worked very effectively for the in-person audience. The huge images behind me took up the entire stage, with side screens flanking the stage showing close-ups of me talking, seemed to keep the audience rapt, or relatively so. You can see this and hear it a bit to get a sense watching the talk, but as it stands online the power of the images and the timing that we worked so hard on strikes me as lost. So, this is another oddity of the TED talk: it is both an in-person performance and a canned performance to live on online afterwards. For me, the delivery was contingent on the images and the audience, but not on the filming process. I didn't take the dual outcomes into account as fully as I might and I am not sure what else I could have done to be more effective in both ways, but if I had it to



do over again I think I might have focused a bit more on the video element of the performance and less on the live audience.

DH: Has the process of putting together the TED Talk and giving it had any kind of sat on your presentation and writing as a historian, or how you approach history classes in any way?

CN: Well, I didn't consider that much to this point. It's definitely changed things.

I've been dedicated to doing public history for a while, so that's not quite new. But one of the things that has changed is that I was really inspired - to be part of it.

Or, think of it this way -- if you haven't ever been to one of these major TED events it's easy to criticize them. They're kind of these neoliberal tech-entertainment-design promotional machines. There's a lot marketing, slogans, branding, tons of swag, as I said ... but when you go and there's three thousand plus people and it's online and there's a buzz in the auditorium, people stay all day from 9am to 5pm. There's a happy hour after the talks and people linger and want to talk to the speakers, they've taken notes, they want autographs even. It is clear the audience is deeply inspired by all the ideas they're hearing and almost everyone stays ALL DAY. The performers and speakers are often amazing, and inspired by each other; when I went, for example, the closer right after me was Ann Curry talking about truth and journalism. Wow, she was fantastic. But maybe most appealing and heart-wrenching on my day there was a guy, Tyrone Poole, who had been homeless and developed a new app to help people find

available apartments and save them time and precious money in the applications process for housing. There were speakers on transgender rights and parenting, on women's empowerment, on the importance of the arts to human flourishing. Just amazing people there, inspiring human stories as well as powerful ideas. It was just moving and an honor to be part of a speaking and performing group aiming to change their societies in profound ways.

As a whole, what I took away was that these TEDx talks around the world in small communities and large cities, and the TED phenomenon as a whole, gives me hope. It is like a modern day, world-wide Chautauqua. For our world in which we are beset by the omnipresent crush of facts and social media, that seems ever-more superficial, my experience, my talk, and the TED system overall gives me hope that we can work together developing and sharing ideas to generate a better, deeper, richer future. And that, in fact, akin to a turn of the twentieth century Chautauqua vision or mission, was how I ended my talk: with an image of a family outside the Smithsonian suggesting that history, and knowledge, can be our bridge to link questions we face today with echoes from the past. That we can turn the information age to our advantage; that we can and should dig deeper into context and ideas, to take time to unearth the full story, understand it, and gain new depth of insight, about who we were yesterday, who we are today, and how, together, we can create a better tomorrow.