

Thoughts From SHAFR President

Mitchell Lerner

In his 1929 inaugural address, newly elected President Hebert Hoover proudly declared that “I have no fears for the future of our country. It is bright with hope.” By the end of the year, the Great Depression had rocked the American economy, typhoons ripped through the Philippines, a member of the president’s cabinet was sentenced to prison for the first time in history, fears of a Parrot Fever pandemic (seriously!) swept the country, and the White House actually caught on fire on Christmas Eve. Although my transition to the SHAFR presidency has not been that dramatic, I confess that my first series of budget meetings have given me some insights into how Hoover must have felt! SHAFR, thanks largely to the generosity of its members and benefactors and the wise policies implemented by decades of foresightful leaders, certainly remains one of the most stable, prosperous, and vibrant professional organizations in the history discipline. Yet, we have not been untouched by the turbulence of the present moment around us, and as a result, council has been forced to make some difficult decisions to ensure that SHAFR remains “bright with hope” for future generations.

The impetus for these conversations was some alarming projections about SHAFR’s future fiscal situation. Our initial estimates projected years of deficits ahead, averaging more than \$30,000 annually over the next six years. These projections were even more troubling since they were based on current revenue and expense numbers but—just as in 1929—other alarm bells were also ringing. We are drawing near to the end of the Oxford publishing contract for *DH* (with an expected decline in future revenue), and are approaching a renewal of the *DH* editorial team’s contract (with an expected increase in costs). Conference expenses are exploding as well, and we are committed to a long-term contract with a facility in DC that charges us \$6.80 per banana (but, I hasten to add, only charges us \$4.60 per donut, so when you brush past the fruit plate to reach for that 5th donut at some future conference, remember that you are actually saving SHAFR money!). This year is also the last year in office for our wonderful executive director, Amy Sayward, who is stepping down after a decade of dedicated service, a fact that is not particularly relevant to our budget crisis but—when combined with everything else that is on the immediate agenda—did push me one step closer to my long-term goal of breaking the world record for Irish whiskey consumption.

These exigent circumstances, it is worth noting, are generally the result of forces beyond SHAFR’s control. The cost of journal production has skyrocketed with inflation, while challenges like open access publishing are forcing publishers to trim costs dramatically, all of which mean a decline in SHAFR’s revenue from Oxford University Press. Most of the work done by the terrific team of *DH* editors is situated at Temple University, where a recent strike yielded higher wages and benefit costs for graduate students that in turn raises the amount of the SHAFR contribution (and, in a personal commentary that in no way reflects an official SHAFR position, let me add: rock on, Temple grad

students!). Meanwhile, conference costs have exploded in general, increasing our outlays for everything from facility rental to social events to technology services to, most notably, bananas.

In order to meet these challenges, SHAFR Council has been forced to make some difficult decisions. A small increase in membership rates and conference registration rates, which had actually been approved before COVID but was paused in the wake of that crisis, will likely begin next year. Even at these slightly higher rates, however, SHAFR membership will remain cheaper than most of its peer organizations. Recognizing the high printing costs of *DH*, we hope to soon shift to a primarily online model, with an option to also purchase hard copies for an annual fee of approximately \$30. Funding for social events at the annual conference will be trimmed significantly as well. I admit that I take a back seat to few people in my enthusiasm for a good social event, but when faced with a choice of subsidizing another DC boat cruise or maintaining full funding for graduate student and junior faculty research grants, it was an easy decision. We will also be tinkering with the menus at lunches and receptions at future conferences (Kraft macaroni and cheese, just so you know, come in a wide variety of shapes and flavors!). The availability of technology at conference panels will also be restricted in future DC years. While I know that this is not ideal, it feels necessary considering that the Renaissance Arlington charged us \$275 per day for every podium we requested last year (up from \$84 in 2019) and another \$360 for each microphone we added; for those fancy-schmancy panels that sought the extreme luxury of a screen and projector, that came in at a mere \$1,537.33 per room for each day. We are also eliminating a few smaller programs, such as the Electronics Communication Committee (huge shout out to Brian Etheridge and Kelly McFarland for all of their great work in that field these last few years, including the podcasts, the website redesign, and so much more!), and our support for the National Coalition for History. Other reforms are still under consideration and may be implemented down the road if necessary. I am proposing, for example, a plan to send me to Vegas with the entire SHAFR endowment and a promise that I can triple it within a week. I also think that sales of a souvenir Mitch Lerner photo calendar would generate significant revenue for the organization, although I am still working on the details (apparently, there is some legal holdup over the April layout, which features me wearing nothing but a giant paperback copy of *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* and a smile). So, stay tuned for more to come on possible initiatives!

I want to offer my most sincere appreciation for the efforts of SHAFR council and ED Amy Sayward for helping us through these difficult decisions, and to all of our members for their understanding of the current circumstances. I have no doubts that SHAFR will come through these lean years even stronger and more vibrant than it has ever been, and soon, it will once again be unlimited bananas for everyone.