

Why History?

The best way to know where the country is going is to know where we've been –
BY DAVID MCULLOUGH

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On a winter morning on the campus of one of our finest colleges, in a lovely Ivy League setting with snow falling outside, I sat with a seminar of 25 students, all seniors majoring in history; all honors students – supposedly the best of the best. How many of you know who George Marshall was?" I asked. No one knew. Not one. At a large university in the Midwest, a young undergraduate told me how glad she was to have attended my lecture, because until then, she said, she never realized that the original 13 Colonies were all on the Eastern Seaboard. This was said, in all seriousness, by a university student.

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Who are we, we Americans? How did we get where we are? What is our story and what can it teach us? Our story is our history, and if ever we should be taking steps to see that we have the best prepared, most aware citizens ever, that time is now.

Yet the truth is that we are raising a generation that is to an alarming degree historically illiterate. The problem has been coming on for a long time, like a disease, eating away at the national memory. While the popular culture races loudly on, the American past is slipping away. We are losing our story, forgetting who we are and what it's taken to come this far.

Warnings of this development have been sounded again and again. In 1995, the Department of Education reported that more than half of all high school seniors hadn't even the most basic understanding of American history.

Two years ago, a study by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni showed that four out of five seniors from leading colleges and universities were unable to pass a basic high school history test. To the question "Who was the American general at Yorktown?" More of these students answered Ulysses S. Grant than George Washington.

And there's been no improvement. This year the American Council of Trustees and Alumni reported that none of the nation's top 50 colleges and universities now require American history as part of the curriculum. In fact, one can go forth

into the world today as the proud product of all but a handful of our 50 top institutions of higher learning without ever having taken a single course in history of any kind.

But why bother about history anyway? “That’s history” – that’s done with, junk for the trash heap. Why history? Because it shows us how to behave. History teaches and reinforces what we believe in, what we stand for, and what we ought to be willing to stand up for. History is about life – human nature and the human condition and all its trials and failings and noblest achievements. History is about cause and effect, about the simplest of everyday things – and the mysteries of change and genius.

History shows us what choices there are. History teaches with specific examples the evils of injustice, ignorance or demagoguery, just as it shows how potent is plain courage, or one simple illuminating idea. History is – or should be – the bedrock of patriotism, not the chest-pounding kind of patriotism but the real thing, love of country.

At their core, the lessons of history are lessons of appreciation. Everything we have, all our great institutions, our laws, our music, art and poetry, our freedoms, everything is because somebody went before us and did the hard work, provided the creative energy, faced the storms, made the sacrifices, kept the faith.

This country was founded on change. It’s during times of tumult that we learn the most as a people.

Indifference to history isn’t just ignorant; it’s a form of ingratitude. And the scale of our ignorance seems especially shameful in the face of our unprecedented good fortune. What’s so worrisome about the college student who doesn’t know that George Washington was the commanding American general at Yorktown is that he also, therefore, has no idea that it was Washington who commanded the Continental Army through eight long years in the struggle for independence. I’m convinced that history encourages, as nothing else does, a sense of proportion about life, gives us a sense of how brief is our time on earth and thus how valuable that time is.

We live in an era of momentous change, creating great pressure and tensions. But history shows that times of tumult are times when we are most likely to learn. This nation was founded on change. We should embrace the possibilities inherent in such times and hold to a steady course, because we have a sense of navigation, a sense of what we’ve been through and who we are.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, history can be a source of strength and of renewed commitment to the ideals upon which the nation was founded. As unsettling as events may be, others before us have known worse. Think of what our predecessors endured and accomplished. Think of the dangerous times they knew! Churchill, in the darkest hours of World War II, reminded us that “we have not journeyed all this way because we are made of sugar candy.”

I passionately believe that history isn't just good for you in a civic way. History, really, is an extension of life. It intensifies the experience of being alive, like poetry and art or music. And there's no great secret to making history come alive. Historian Barbara Tuchman said it perfectly in two words, “Tell stories.” Part of what that means is that history is ours to enjoy. If we deny our children that enjoyment, that adventure in the larger time among the greater part of the human experience, then we're cheating them out of a full life.

David McCullough is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *John Adams* and *Truman*. This article is based on his 1995 acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.