

Why History?

David McCullough : The best way to know where the country is going is to know where we've been."

(Note: The following is an abridged transcript of remarks delivered on February 15, 2005, in Phoenix, Arizona, at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar on the topic, "American History and America's Future.")

Harry Truman once said the only new thing in the world is the history you don't know. Lord Bolingbroke, who was an 18th century political philosopher, said that history is philosophy taught with examples. An old friend, the late Daniel Boorstin, who was a very good historian and Librarian of Congress, said that trying to plan for the future without a sense of the past is like trying to plant cut flowers. We're raising a lot of cut flowers and trying to plant them, and that's much of what I want to talk about tonight.

The task of teaching and writing history is infinitely complex and infinitely seductive and rewarding. And it seems to me that one of the truths about history that needs to be portrayed – needs to be made clear to a student or to a reader – is that nothing ever had to happen the way it happened. History could have gone off in any number of different directions in any number of different ways at any point along the way, just as your own life can. You never know. One thing leads to another. Nothing happens in a vacuum. Actions have consequences. These all sound self-evident. But they're not self-evident – particularly to a young person trying to understand life.

Nor was there ever anything like the past. Nobody lived in the past, if you stop to think about it. Jefferson, Adams, Washington – they didn't walk around saying, "Isn't this fascinating, living in the past?" They lived in the present just as we do. The difference was it was their present, not ours. And just as we don't know how things are going to turn out for us, they didn't either. It's very easy to stand on the mountaintop as an historian or biographer and find fault with people for why they did this or didn't do that, because we're not involved in it, we're not inside it, we're not confronting what we don't know – as everyone who preceded us always was.

Nor is there any such creature as a self-made man or woman. We love that expression, we Americans. But every one who's ever lived has been affected, changed, shaped, helped, hindered by other people. We all know, in our own lives, who those people are who've opened a window, given us an idea, given us encouragement, given us a sense of direction, self-approval, self-worth, or who have straightened us out when we were on the wrong path. Most often they have been parents. Almost as often they have been teachers. Stop and think about those teachers who changed your life, maybe with one sentence, maybe with one lecture, maybe by just taking an interest in your struggle. Family, teachers, friends, rivals, competitors – they've all shaped us. And so too have people we've never met, never known, because they lived long before us. They have shaped us too – the people who composed the symphonies that move us, the painters, the poets, those who have written the great literature in our language. We walk around everyday, everyone of us, quoting Shakespeare, Cervantes, Pope. We don't know it, but we are, all the time. We think this is our way of speaking. It isn't our way of speaking – it's what we have been given. The laws we live by, the freedoms we enjoy, the institutions that we take for granted – as

we should never take for granted – are all the work of other people who went before us. And to be indifferent to that isn't just to be ignorant, it's to be rude. And ingratitude is a shabby failing. How can we not want to know about the people who have made it possible for us to live as we live, to have the freedoms we have, to be citizens of this greatest of countries in all time? It's not just a birthright, it is something that others struggled for, strived for, often suffered for, often were defeated for and died for, for us, for the next generation.

Character And Destiny

Now those who wrote the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia that fateful summer of 1776 were not superhuman by any means. Every single one had his flaws, his failings, his weaknesses. Some of them ardently disliked others of them. Every one of them did things in his life he regretted. But the fact that they could rise to the occasion as they did, these imperfect human beings, and do what they did is also, of course, a testimony to their humanity. We are not just known by our failings, by our weaknesses, by our sins. We are known by being capable of rising to the occasion and exhibiting not just a sense of direction, but strength.

The Greeks said that character is destiny, and the more I read and understand of history, the more convinced I am that they were right. You look at the great paintings by John Trumbull or Charles Willson Peale or Copley or Gilbert Stuart of those remarkable people who were present at the creation of our nation, the Founders as we call them. Those aren't just likenesses. They are delineations of character and were intended to be. And we need to understand them, and we need to understand that they knew that what they had created was no more perfect than they were. And that has been to our advantage. It has been good for us that it wasn't all just handed to us in perfect condition, all ready to run in perpetuity – that it needed to be worked at and improved and made to work better. There's a wonderful incident that took place at the Cambria Iron Company in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in the 19th century, when they were building the first Bessemer steel machinery, adapted from what had been seen of the Bessemer process in Britain. There was a German engineer named John Fritz, and after working for months to get this machinery finished, he came into the plant one morning, and he said, "Alright boys, let's start her up and see why she doesn't work." That's very American. We will find out what's not working right and we will fix it, and then maybe it will work right. That's been our star, that's what we've guided on.

I have just returned from a cruise through the Panama Canal. I think often about why the French failed at Panama and why we succeeded. One of the reasons we succeeded is that we were gifted, we were attuned to adaptation, to doing what works, whereas they were trained to do everything in a certain way. We have a gift for improvisation. We improvise in jazz; we improvise in much of our architectural breakthroughs. Improvisation is one of our traits as a nation, as a people, because it was essential, it was necessary, because we were doing again and again and again what hadn't been done before.

Keep in mind that when we were founded by those people in the late 18th century, none of them had had any prior experience in either revolutions or nation-making. They were, as we would say, winging it. And they were idealistic and they were young. We see their faces in the old paintings done later in their lives or looking at us from the money in our wallets, and we see the awkward teeth and the powdered hair, and we think of them as elder statesmen. But George

Washington, when he took command of the continental army at Cambridge in 1775, was 43 years old, and he was the oldest of them. Jefferson was 33 when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. John Adams was 40. Benjamin Rush – one of the most interesting of them all and one of the founders of the antislavery movement in Philadelphia – was 30 years old when he signed the Declaration. They were young people. They were feeling their way, improvising, trying to do what would work. They had no money, no navy, no real army. There wasn't a bank in the entire country. There wasn't but one bridge between New York and Boston. It was a little country of 2,500,000 people, 500,000 of whom were held in slavery, a little fringe of settlement along the east coast. What a story. What a noble beginning. And think of this: almost no nations in the world know when they were born. We know exactly when we began and why we began and who did it.

In the rotunda of the Capitol in Washington hangs John Trumbull's great painting, "The Declaration of Independence, Fourth of July, 1776." It's been seen by more people than any other American painting. It's our best known scene from our past. And almost nothing about it is accurate. The Declaration of Independence wasn't signed on July 4th. They didn't start to sign the Declaration until August 2nd, and only a part of the Congress was then present. They kept coming back in the months that followed from their distant states to take their turn signing the document. The chairs are wrong, the doors are in the wrong place, there were no heavy draperies at the windows, and the display of military flags and banners on the back wall is strictly a figment of Trumbull's imagination. But what is accurate about it are the faces. Every single one of the 47 men in that painting is an identifiable, and thus accountable, individual. We know what they look like. We know who they were. And that's what Trumbull wanted. He wanted us to know them and, by God, not to forget them. Because this momentous step wasn't a paper being handed down by a potentate or a king or a czar, it was the decision of a Congress acting freely.

Our Failure, Our Duty

We are raising a generation of young Americans who are by-and-large historically illiterate. And it's not their fault. There have been innumerable studies, and there's no denying it. I've experienced it myself again and again. I had a young woman come up to me after a talk one morning at the University of Missouri to tell me that she was glad she came to hear me speak, and I said I was pleased she had shown up. She said, "Yes, I'm very pleased, because until now I never understood that all of the 13 colonies – the original 13 colonies – were on the east coast." Now you hear that and you think: What in the world have we done? How could this young lady, this wonderful young American, become a student at a fine university and not know that? I taught a seminar at Dartmouth of seniors majoring in history, honor students, 25 of them. The first morning we sat down and I said, "How many of you know who George Marshall was?" Not one. There was a long silence and finally one young man asked, "Did he have, m: Appendix 1 to do with the Marshall Plan?" And I said yes, he certainly did, and that's a good talking about George Marshall.

We have to do several things. First of all we have to get across the idea that we have to know who we were if we're to know who we are and where we're headed. This is essential. We have to value what our forebears – and not just in the 18th century, but our own parents and grandparents – did for us, or we're not going to take it very seriously, and it can slip away. If you don't care about it – if you've inherited some great work of art that is worth a fortune and you

don't know that it's worth a fortune, you don't even know that it's a great work of art and you're not interested in it – you're going to lose it.

We have to do a far better job of teaching our teachers. We have too many teachers who are graduating with degrees in education. They go to schools of education or they major in education, and they graduate knowing something called education, but they don't know a subject. They're assigned to teach botany or English literature or history, and of course they can't perform as they should. Knowing a subject is important because you want to know what you're talking about when you're teaching. But beyond that, you can't love what you don't know. And the great teachers – the teachers who influence you, who change your lives – almost always, I'm sure, are the teachers that love what they are teaching. It is that wonderful teacher who says “Come over here and look in this microscope, you're really going to get a kick out of this.”

There was a wonderful professor of child psychology at the University of Pittsburgh named Margaret McFarland who was so wise that I wish her teachings and her ideas and her themes were much better known. She said that attitudes aren't taught, they're caught. If the teacher has an attitude of enthusiasm for the subject, the student catches that whether the student is in second grade or is in graduate school. She said that if you show them what you love, they'll get it and they'll want to get it. Also if the teachers know what they are teaching, they are much less dependent on textbooks. And I don't know when the last time you picked up a textbook in American history might have been. And there are, to be sure, some very good ones still in print. But most of them, it appears to me, have been published in order to kill any interest that anyone might have in history. I think that students would be better served by cutting out all the pages, clipping up all the page numbers, mixing them all up and then asking students to put the pages back together in the right order. The textbooks are dreary, they're done by committee, they're often hilariously politically correct and they're not doing any good. Students should not have to read anything that we, you and I, wouldn't want to read ourselves. And there are wonderful books, past and present. There is literature in history. Let's begin with Longfellow, for example. Let's begin with Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, for example. These are literature. They can read that too.

History isn't just something that ought to be taught or ought to be read or ought to be encouraged because it's going to make us a better citizen. It will make us a better citizen; or because it will make us a more thoughtful and understanding human being, which it will; or because it will cause us to behave better, which it will. It should be taught for pleasure: The pleasure of history, like art or music or literature, consists of an expansion of the experience of being alive, which is what education is largely about.

And we need not leave the whole job of teaching history to the teachers. If I could have you come away from what I have to say tonight remembering one thing, it would be this: The teaching of history, the emphasis on the importance of history, the enjoyment of history, should begin at home. We who are parents or grandparents should be taking our children to historic sights. We should be talking about those books in biography or history that we have particularly enjoyed, or that character or those characters in history that have meant something to us. We should be talking about what it was like when we were growing up in the olden days. Children,

particularly little children, love this. And in my view, the real focus should be at the grade school level. We all know that those little guys can learn languages so fast it takes your breath away. They can learn anything so fast it takes your breath away. And the other very important truth is that they want to learn. They can be taught to dissect a cow's eye. They can be taught anything. And there's no secret to teaching history or to making history interesting. Barbara Tuchman said it in two words, "Tell stories." That's what history is: a story. And what's a story? E.M. Forster gave a wonderful definition to it: If I say to you the king died and then the queen died, that's a sequence of events. If I say the king died and the queen died of grief, that's a story. That's human. That calls for empathy on the part of the teller of the story and of the reader or listener to the story. And we ought to be growing, encouraging, developing historians who have heart and empathy to put students in that place of those people before us who were just as human, just as real – and maybe in some ways more real than we are. We've got to teach history and nurture history and encourage history because it's an antidote to the hubris of the present – the idea that everything we have and everything we do and everything we think is the ultimate, the best.

Going through the Panama Canal, I couldn't help but think about all that I had read in my research on that story of what they endured to build that great path, how much they had to know and to learn, how many different kinds of talent it took to achieve that success, and what the Americans did under John Stevens and George Goethals in the face of unexpected breakdowns, landslides and floods. They built a canal that cost less than it was expected to cost, was finished before it was expected to be finished and is still running today exactly the same as it was in 1914 when it opened. They didn't, by present day standards for example, understand the chemistry of making concrete. But when we go and drill into those concrete locks now, we find the deterioration is practically nil and we don't know how they did it. That ingenious contrivance by the American engineers is a perfect expression of what engineering ought to be at its best – man's creations working with nature. The giant gates work because they're floating, they're hollow like airplane wings. The electric motors that open and close the gates use power which is generated by the spillway from the dam that creates the lake that bridges the isthmus. It's an extraordinary work of civilization. And we couldn't do it any better today, and in some ways we probably wouldn't do it as well. If you were to take a look, for example, at what's happened with the "Big Dig" in Boston, you realize that we maybe aren't closer to the angels by any means nearly a hundred years later.

We should never look down on those people and say that they should have known better. What do you think they're going to be saying about us in the future? They're going to be saying we should have known better. Why did we do that? What were we thinking of? All this guessing and the arrogance of it are unfortunate.

Appendix 1

Listening To The Past

Samuel Eliot Morison said we ought to read history because it will help us to behave better. It does. And we ought to read history because it helps to break down the dividers between the disciplines of science, medicine, philosophy, art, music, whatever. It's all part of the human story and ought to be seen as such. You can't understand it unless you see it that way. You can't understand the 18th century, for example, unless you understand the vocabulary of the 18th century. What did they mean by those words? They didn't necessarily mean the same thing as we do. There's a line in one of the letters written by John Adams where he's telling his wife Abigail

at home, “We can’t guarantee success in this war, but we can do something better. We can deserve it.” Think how different that is from the attitude today when all that matters is success, being number one, getting ahead, getting to the top. However you betray or gouge or claw or do whatever awful thing is immaterial if you get to the top.

That line in the Adams letter is saying that how the war turns out is in the hands of God. We can’t control that, but we can control how we behave. We can deserve success. When I read that line when I was doing the research on the book, it practically lifted me out of my chair. And then about three weeks later I was reading some correspondence written by George Washington and there was the same line. I thought, wait a minute, what’s going on? And I thought, they’re quoting something. So, as we all often do, I got down good old Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations, and I started going through the entries from the 18th century and bingo, there it was. It’s a line from the play Cato. They were quoting something that was in the language of the time. They were quoting scripture of a kind, a kind of secular creed if you will. And you can’t understand why they behaved as they did if you don’t understand that. You can’t understand why honor was so important to them and why they were truly ready to put their lives, their fortunes, their sacred honor on the line. Those weren’t just words.

I want to read to you, in conclusion, a letter that John Quincy Adams received from his mother. Little John Adams was taken to Europe by his father when his father sailed out of Massachusetts in the midst of winter, in the midst of war, to serve our country in France. Nobody went to sea in the wintertime, on the North Atlantic, if it could possibly be avoided. And nobody did it trying to cut through the British barricade outside of Boston Harbor because the British ships were sitting out there waiting to capture somebody like John Adams and take him to London and to the Tower, where he would have been hanged as a traitor. But they sent this little ten-year-old boy with his father, risking his life, his mother knowing that she wouldn’t see him for months, maybe years at best. Why? Because she and his father wanted John Quincy to be in association with Franklin and the great political philosophers of France, to learn to speak French, to travel in Europe, to be able to soak it all up. And they risked his life for that – for his education. We have no idea what people were willing to do for education in times past. It’s the one sustaining theme through our whole country – that the next generation will be better educated than we are. John Adams himself is a living example of the transforming miracle of education. His father was able to write his name, we know. His mother was almost certainly illiterate. And be Appendix 1
scholarship to Harvard, everything changed for him. He said, “I discovered bo
forever,” and he did. And they wanted this for their son.

Well, it was a horrendous voyage. Everything that could have happened to go wrong, went wrong. And when the little boy came back, he said he didn’t ever want to go across the Atlantic again as long as he lived. And then his father was called back, and his mother said you’re going back. And here is what she wrote to him. Now, keep in mind that this is being written to a little kid and listen to how different it is from how we talk to our children in our time. She’s talking as if to a grownup. She’s talking to someone whom they want to bring along quickly because there’s work to do and survival is essential:

These are the times in which genius would wish to live. It is not in the still calm of life or the repose of a pacific station that great characters are formed. The habits of a vigorous mind are

formed in contending with difficulties. Great necessities call out great virtues. When a mind is raised and animated by scenes that engage the heart, then those qualities which would otherwise lay dormant wake into life and form the character of the hero and the statesman.

Now, there are several interesting things going on in that letter. For all the times that she mentions the mind, in the last sentence she says, “When a mind is raised and animated by scenes that engage the heart, then those qualities which would otherwise lay dormant wake into life and form the character of the hero and the statesman.” In other words, the mind itself isn’t enough. You have to have the heart. Well, of course he went and the history of our country is different because of it. John Quincy Adams, in my view, was the most superbly educated and maybe the most brilliant human being who ever occupied the executive office. He was, in my view, the greatest Secretary of State we’ve ever had. He wrote the Monroe Doctrine, among other things. And he was a wonderful human being and a great writer. Told to keep a diary by his father when he was in Europe, he kept the diary for 65 years. And those diaries are unbelievable. They are essays on all kinds of important, heavy subjects. He never tells you who he had lunch with or what the weather’s like. But if you want to know that, there’s another sort of little Cliff diary that he kept about such things.

Well after the war was over, Abigail went to Europe to be with her husband, particularly when he became our first minister to the court of Saint James. And John Quincy came home from Europe to prepare for Harvard. And he had not been home in Massachusetts very long when Abigail received a letter from her sister saying that John Quincy was a very impressive young man – and of course everybody was quite astonished that he could speak French – but that, alas, he seemed a little overly enamored with himself and with his own opinions and that this was not going over very well in town. So Abigail sat down in a house that still stands on Grosvenor Square in London – it was our first embassy if you will, a little 18th century house – and wrote a letter to John Quincy. And here’s what she said:

If you are conscious to yourself that you possess more knowledge upon some subjects than others of your standing, reflect that you have had greater opportunities of seeing the world and obtaining knowledge of mankind than any of your contemporaries. That you have a book, but it has been supplied to you. That your whole time has been spent in the Appendix 1 men of literature and science. How unpardonable would it have been in you to have turned out a blockhead.

How unpardonable it would be for us – with all that we have been given, all the advantages we have, all the continuing opportunities we have to enhance and increase our love of learning – to turn out blockheads or to raise blockheads. What we do in education, what these wonderful teachers and administrators and college presidents and college and university trustees do is the best, most important work there is.

Citizenship isn’t just voting. We all know that. Let’s all pitch in. And let’s not lose heart. They talk about what a difficult, dangerous time we live in. And it is very difficult, very dangerous and very uncertain. But so it has always been. And this nation of ours has been through darker times. And if you don’t know that – as so many who broadcast the news and subject us to their opinions in the press don’t seem to know – that’s because we’re failing in our understanding of history.

The Revolutionary War was as dark a time as we've ever been through. 1776, the year we so consistently and rightly celebrate every year, was one of the darkest times, if not the darkest time in the history of the country. Many of us here remember the first months of 1942 after Pearl Harbor when German submarines were sinking our oil tankers right off the coasts of Florida and New Jersey, in sight of the beaches, and there wasn't a thing we could do about it. Our recruits were drilling with wooden rifles, we had no air force, ha we're made of sugar candy. It's as true today as it ever was. If our navy had been destroyed at Pearl Harbor, and there was nothing to say or guarantee that the Nazi machine could be defeated – nothing. Who was to know? I like to think of what Churchill said when he crossed the Atlantic after Pearl Harbor and gave a magnificent speech. He said we haven't journeyed this far because we are made of sugar candy." It's as true today as it ever was!