



# 2024 Theme Narrative: *Turning Points in History*

CATHY GORN, Ph.D., Executive Director, National History Day\*

The National History Day\* (NHD) theme for 2024 is *Turning Points in History*. It is especially appropriate because National History Day is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. What better way to celebrate than for students to choose turning points in the past that interest them the most? As always, the theme is broad, so topics should be carefully selected and developed in ways that best use students' talents and abilities. Students should be careful to place their topics into historical context, examine the significance of their topics in history, and show development and change over time. Students should investigate available primary and secondary sources, analyze the evidence, and clearly explain the relationship of the topic to the theme, *Turning Points in History*.

But first, what's the point?

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines a point as "an individual or distinguishing detail." For example, the point of a debate or a joke. A point might be the "end or object to be achieved: the purpose."

But what, exactly, is a turning point?

*Merriam-Webster* defines a turning point as "the point at which a significant change occurs," in other words, a decisive moment.

So, what is a turning point in history?

Well, a turning point in history is more than just an important event that happened a long time ago. It is more than a new idea or a particular action taken by an individual. A turning point is an idea, event, or action that directly, or sometimes indirectly, causes change. Sometimes a turning point has immediate repercussions, making its significance obvious to people at the time. Sometimes, however, the impact of an event or decision or person is clear only in retrospect. A turning point can be a personal decision in the life of one person or a political choice affecting millions. It can be an event or idea with

global or local consequences, or it can be the life of a single person whose actions inspire or affect others. The effect of a turning point in history might be social, political, economic, or cultural. It might be a combination. History is often complicated.

Regardless of the topic selected, students must not only present a description of it, but also draw conclusions about how their topic affected individuals, communities, nations, or the world. **Simply put, what was it like before the turning point? What was the turning point? What was it like after the turning point?**

To understand the historical importance of their topics, students, like historians, must ask questions of time and place, cause and effect, change over time, and impact and significance:

- › What factors contributed to the turning point?
- › Why did the turning point develop? How did it create change?
- › What were the immediate and long-term consequences?
- › What impact did the turning point have on the people who experienced it? How did they, in turn, affect it?

Now, how does this apply to an NHD project?

Let's look at a topic that immediately comes to mind: war. From clashes limited to one nation to huge conflicts involving many countries, wars are among the most significant and obvious turning points in history. And there are so many to choose from: the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), the Crusades (1096–1291), the American Revolution (1775–1783), the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), the Guatemalan Civil War (1960–1996), and many more. Much more than simply a collection of battles, a war can transform the world, a nation, or a local community socially, politically, culturally, and economically.