



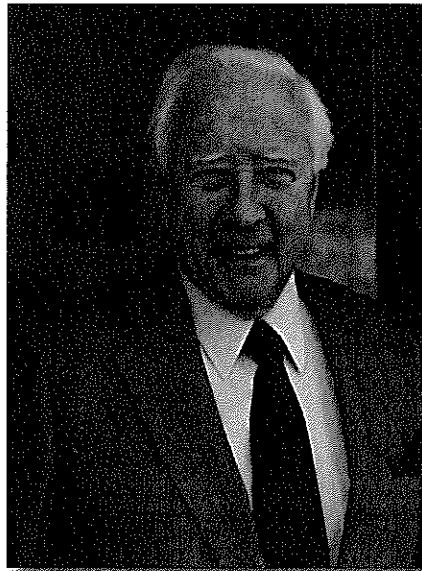
History and Knowing Who We Are

Learning about history is an antidote to the hubris of the present, the idea that everything in our lives is the ultimate.

BY DAVID MCCULLOUGH

FORMER PRESIDENT HARRY S. TRUMAN once remarked that the history we don't know is the only new thing in the world. Picking up on a related theme, the late Daniel Boorstin, an eminent historian, Librarian of Congress, and friend of mine, wrote that planning for the future without a sense of the past is similar to planting cut flowers and hoping for the best. Today, the new generation of young Americans are like a field of cut flowers, by-and-large historically illiterate. This does not bode well for our future.

After delivering a talk at the University of Missouri, I spoke with a young woman who said that until my talk she had not known that all of the original 13 colonies were on the east coast. How could a student at a fine university not know this, I wondered. On another occasion, I taught an honors seminar to 25 history majors at Dartmouth in Hanover, New Hampshire. The first morning I asked if anyone could identify George Marshall. Not a single person raised their hand. After a long silence, one young man asked tentatively if he had something to do with the Marshall Plan. Yes, I said. And that's where we started talking about the General who supervised the U.S. Army during World War II and later received the Nobel Prize as Secretary of State. We cannot, however, blame these



students for their lack of understanding and awareness of history.

All of us who are educators, parents, and writers bear a great responsibility: We must communicate to the younger generation that Americans—as individuals but also collectively as a nation—cannot truly know who we are or where we are going unless we know where we have been. We should value what our forebears—and that includes our own parents and grandparents—have done for us; otherwise our history will simply slip away. If we inherit an old oil painting and no one tells us that it is a priceless work of art, then we'll probably lose interest in it, either sticking it in a closet or selling it. Of course, history is not static like a painting, but eternally fascinating, because events and people can be freshly

examined with new techniques and perspectives. Each generation, we peel back biases that have blinded those before us. The more we know about the past enables us to ask richer and more provocative questions about who we are today. We also must tell the next generation one of the great truths of history: that no past event was preordained. Every battle, election, and revolution could have turned out differently at any point along the way, just as a person's own life can change unpredictably. Nothing occurs in a vacuum, a fact that is not as self-evident as it might sound, particularly to a young person.

And we would do well to remind young people that nobody ever lived in the past. Jefferson, Adams, and Washington did not walk around thinking, "Isn't it fascinating living in the past?" They lived in the present, of course, just as we do today, every bit uncertain of the future as we are. How easy it is for historians and biographers—or any of us—to look backward in time and judge the actions of others. Yet we are not making those tough decisions in real time with definite uncertainties.

We Americans are infatuated with the idea of the self-made man or woman, but there is no such creature. Every person has been affected, changed, shaped,

helped, and hindered by others. Each of us knows people who've opened for us a window into a new world, inspired us, praised our efforts, provided us with a sense of direction, and straightened us out when we've strayed. Most often they have been our parents, but almost as frequently they have been teachers, changing our lives perhaps with a single sentence, a lecture, or by just taking an interest in your struggle. Family, teachers, friends, rivals, and competitors have all shaped us. So, too, have those who lived long before us. Think about symphony composers, painters, poets, and writers of great literature: We walk around every day quoting Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Pope without even knowing it. We believe that it's our way of speaking, but it's actually what we have been given.

The laws that govern us, the freedoms we enjoy, the institutions that we often unfortunately take for granted, represent the hard work of others stretching back far into the past. Acting indifferent to this fact does not just smack of ignorance, but rudeness. How can we claim indifference to learning about those people who made it possible for us to become citizens of the world's greatest country? The freedoms we enjoy are not just a birthright, but something for which millions have struggled, suffered, and died.

Character and Destiny

None of the writers and signers of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia during that fateful summer of 1776 were superhuman; each had flaws, failings, and weaknesses. Some ardently disliked others. All said and did things he regretted. Yet the fact that these imperfect human beings rose to the occasion and performed as they did testifies to their humanity. It is our ability then and now to rise to the occasion and exhibit our strengths—not our failings, weaknesses, and sins—that define us as Americans.

In the 19th century, a German-born engineer named John Fritz, working at the Cambria Iron Company in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, captured this spirit,

when, after working for months to finish the first Bessemer steel machinery in this country, came into the plant one morning and said, "Alright, boys, let's start her up and see why she doesn't work." The desire to find out what's not working, fix it, and then maybe get it to work is an American quality and our guiding star. The founding fathers had no prior experience in revolutions or nation-making. The faces of these men, framed by powdered hair and marked by awkward-looking teeth, stare out from old paintings

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and the money in our wallets, like elder statesmen. But, when George Washington took command of the continental army at Cambridge in 1775, he was 43 years old, the oldest of the lot. Jefferson penned the Declaration at 33, while John Adams signed it 40. Benjamin Rush—a founder of the antislavery movement in Philadelphia and one of the most interesting founding fathers—was only 30 years old. Without money and lacking a navy or substantial army, these young people felt their way, improvising at every step, what we call today, "winging it." Their little country clung to a fringe of settlement along the east coast and contained only 2,500,000 people, 500,000 of whom were slaves. They had not one single bank and only one bridge stood between New York and Boston. What a good story! Almost no nation in the world knows how and when it was born with the detail we do.

In the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol hangs John Trumbull's great painting, "The Declaration of Independence, Fourth of July, 1776," which has been viewed by more people than any other American painting and represents the best known scene from our past. Almost nothing about the painting is accurate,

including the title. Our founding fathers began signing the document, not on July 4th, but on August 2nd, and it took months for everyone to make it to Philadelphia and affix their signature. Trumbull painted the wrong chairs, placed doors incorrectly, decorated windows with made-up heavy draperies, and entirely imagined the display of military flags and banners on the back wall. He did, however, accurately capture the likenesses of all 42 signers and five other patriots, and thus made them accountable. Trumbull wanted us never to forget them, because this momentous step was not the act of a potentate, king, or czar, but the decision of a Congress acting freely.

Our Failure, Our Duty

There's no secret to teaching history well or making it interesting. Barbara Tuchman summed up what every teacher, parent, and writer should know in two words: "Tell stories." E.M. Forster gave a wonderful definition of story. If you say that the king died and then the queen, that is a sequence of events. However, if you say that the king died and then the queen died of grief, then that becomes a story, because it calls for empathy on the part of both the storyteller and the listener. We need historians who have the heart and humanity necessary to help students imagine the lives of people who have lived in the past and were just as human as we are today.

Learning about history is an antidote to the hubris of the present, the idea that everything in our lives is the ultimate. Recently, while going through the Panama Canal, I couldn't help but reflect on the talent, ingenuity, and resilience of the American builders under John Stevens and George Goethals, who built that great path between two oceans in the early 20th century: the stupendous amount of information they had to absorb; their dependence on such a diversity of talent; their creative responses to a series of frequent and unexpected breakdowns, landslides, and floods. They built the canal under budget and finished before the deadline. It still runs today exactly

as it did when it first opened in 1914. By present-day standards, these men did not even understand the chemistry of making concrete. Yet when engineers today drill into those concrete locks, they find little if any deterioration. We do not know how they did it. The giant, hollow gates work because they float. The electric motors controlling the gates use power generated by water from the spillway from the very dam that creates the lake, which bridges the isthmus. It is engineering at its best—human creations working with nature. We could not do it any better today, and probably not as well. Take a look, for example, at the “Big Dig” in Boston today: we are not closer to the angels nearly a hundred years later.

Listening To The Past

Samuel Eliot Morison wrote that we should read history because it helps us behave better. So, too, we ought to read history because it breaks down dividers between the disciplines of science, medicine, philosophy, art, and music, which is all part of the human story. History enables us to understand the interconnections. Understanding the 18th century, for example, depends on familiarity with its vocabulary, because their words often mean something different than they do today. In a letter that John Adams wrote to his wife Abigail, “We can’t guarantee success in this war, but we can do something better. We can deserve it.” The word “deserve” has such a different meaning today when all that matters is success, getting ahead, and rising to the top.

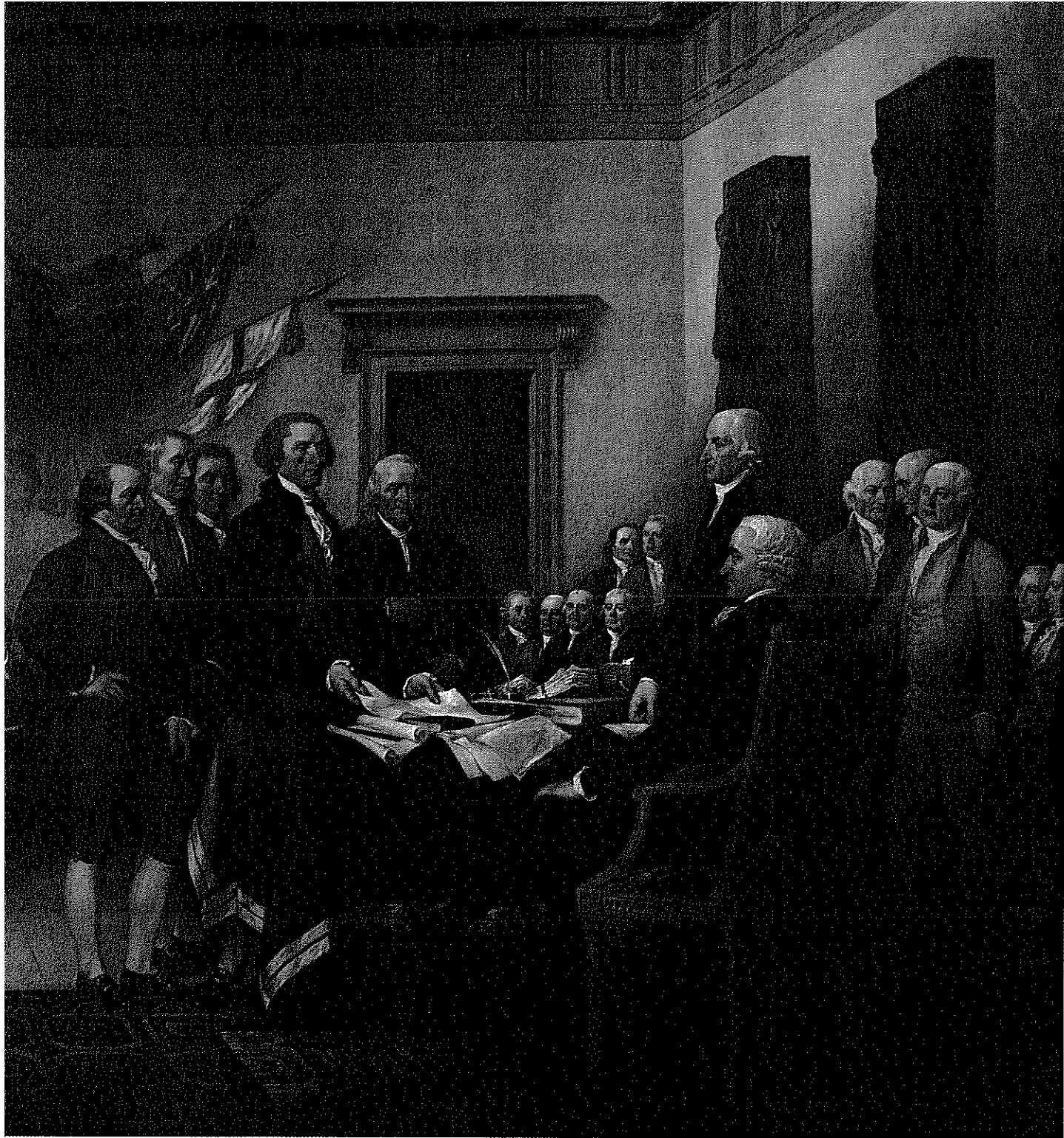
Adams’ letter indicates that while God controls the outcome of the war, the colonists can control how they behave. They can “deserve” success. That line practically lifted me out of my chair when I first read it. Three weeks later I found the same word in George Washington’s correspondence. It occurred to me that they both were quoting somebody else. I pulled down *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* from the bookshelf and scanned entries from the 18th century. Bingo, I found it in Joseph Addison’s play, *Cato*. Adams,

Washington, and others were quoting the language of the time, a kind of secular creed if you will. It is impossible to fathom their behavior without knowing why honor mattered so much that they put their lives and fortunes on the line for it. Those were not just words.

We hear talk frequently these days about the difficult, dangerous times we live in. Yet our nation has lived through darker times, although this is not evident

listening to those who broadcast the news. The year 1776 was perhaps the darkest time in our history. Or what about the first months of 1942 after Pearl Harbor when German submarines sank our oil tankers in plain sight off the coasts of Florida and New Jersey? Our recruits drilled with wooden rifles. Our air force did not exist, and the navy was badly hurt. The Nazi machine looked unstoppable. After Pearl Harbor, when Winston Churchill crossed





the Atlantic and gave a magnificent speech, saying that we had not journeyed this far because we were made of sugar candy. It's as true today as it ever was.

History is not just a subject that ought to be taught or read because it will make us a better citizen, although it will. Nor should we encourage young people to embrace history only because it create more thoughtful and understanding human beings. Nor should we only share

stories about the past because we will behave better. History should be taught for pleasure. The joy of history, like art or music or literature, consists of an expansion of the experience of being alive. And that is what education is largely about. 🐉

Adapted from a speech given by the author. Courtesy of *Imprimis*, a publication of Hillsdale College, Phoenix, AZ.

Good history can take us by surprise.

For generations, John Trumbull's famous painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence shaped our view of the founding fathers as elder statesmen. In fact, these remarkable men were relatively young, with no experience in revolution or nation-building. A 33-year-old Jefferson drafted the Declaration; John Adams signed it at 40. George Washington commanded the Continental Army at 43.