

History for a Democracy

by Wilfred M. McClay

Americans are said to be notoriously indifferent to the past. They are thought to be forward looking, practical, innovative, and results oriented, a people passionately committed to new beginnings and second (and third) chances. They are optimists and dreamers, whom the green light of personal betterment and social transformation always beckons, and whose attitude toward history was conclusively (if crudely) summarized in the dismissive aphorisms of Henry Ford, the most famous perhaps being this: “History is more or less bunk.”

Maybe those propensities were inevitable features of the American way of life. The United States has been a remarkably energetic and prosperous mass democracy, shaped by the dynamic forces of economic growth, individual liberty, material acquisitiveness, technological innovation, social mobility, and ethnic multiplicity. In so constantly shifting a setting, a place where (in Henry David Thoreau’s words) “the old have no very important advice to give the young,” what point is there in hashing over a past that is so easily and profitably left behind? “Old deeds for old people,” sneered Thoreau, “and new deeds for new.” That could almost be the national motto.

Even on the rare occasions when tradition enjoys its moment in the spotlight, the nation’s love affair with possibility manages to slip on stage and steal the show. Consider, for example, the standard fare in an outdoor concert for the Fourth of July. Along with Sousa’s “Stars and Stripes Forever” and Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*, one can expect to hear Copland’s stately *Lincoln Portrait*, with an inspirational narrative that draws on the 16th president’s own words. But in addition to familiar phrases from the Gettysburg Address, Copland includes the following: “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. . . . As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves and then we shall save our country.”

Disenthrall is a rather strong word to use against the past on a day of national piety. Yet Lincoln’s words seem merely to echo Thoreau’s sentiments—or, for that matter, those of Thomas Paine, who urged his contemporaries to discard useless precedents and think “as if we were the first men that thought.” Such statements limn a familiar American paradox: We are to honor our past on Independence Day precisely because it teaches us that we should become independent of our past.

What, indeed, could be more American than to treat the past as a snare, something to which we are always potentially in thrall? Yet by that standard, it would be hard to account for a notable phenomenon of the American summer of 2001. I refer to the re-emergence of John Adams—revolutionary leader,

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Founding Father, second president of the United States, sparring partner of Jefferson, nonadmirer of Paine—as an icon of our public life. Who can have failed to notice Adams’s round and rosy countenance peering at us with 18th-century seriousness and stolidity from the cover of David McCullough’s new biography—the publishing sensation of the summer, a 751-page tome stacked high in nearly every bookstore in every mall and airport terminal in the land?

Adams hardly seems the stuff of which modern bestsellers are made. Despite his boundless energy and ambition, and his many accomplishments, he cannot be judged an especially skillful politician or a notably successful president. (It was not for nothing that he was our first one-term president, and his son John Quincy our second.) A man of high integrity, he was free of the lower Jeffersonian or Clintonian vices that stir the interest of tabloid-minded readers. Nor was he a figure cast in the classic heroic mold, being small and rotund, with a vain and prickly personality and a self-confessed tendency to fits of pettiness and pique. His sober and distrustful view of human nature, including his own, would earn him a thumbs-down from the positive thinkers in the Oprah Book Club. His approach to politics was grounded in a belief in the inevitability of permanent social and economic inequalities—and that approach, even in his day, was slowly but surely on its way out of American life.

And yet, astonishing to report, there are close to a *million* hardcover copies of McCullough’s book in print. We cannot account for this success merely by noting the author’s literary gifts or Simon and Schuster’s marketing prowess. There must be other factors boosting Adams’s popular appeal. Does the revival of his reputation have something to do with public disillusionment over the low character of our public officials, past and present, and a desire to find at least one who was estimable? Might it relate to Adams’s stubborn commitment to principle throughout his political career, a commitment that repeatedly cost him power and influence—in stark contrast to recent politicians whose success seems directly related to their utter lack of principle? Does it have to do with the steadily declining reputation of Thomas Jefferson, so often seen as Adams’s opposite number? Could it be because of the human interest of Adams’s unusually devoted and companionate relationship with his wife, Abigail? Is it because Adams’s principled straight talk and aversion to “spin” and partisanship contrast so sharply with the pervasive verbal dissembling of our current political culture?

All of those possible explanations have some merit, but the real reason may be a good deal simpler: A considerable part of the American public actually has a broad and sustained hunger for history and has repeatedly shown that it will respond generously to an accessible, graceful work about an important subject by a trusted and admired author. Americans yearn for solid knowledge of their nation’s origins, which in a real sense are their own origins too. Their hunger is entirely healthy and natural, though it is often neglected and ill fed.

One could see the yearning in the celebration of the nation’s bicentennial in 1976, particularly in the excitement generated by the spectacle of the Tall Ships.

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A hunger for history: Crowds jam Civil War reenactments like this one in Gettysburg, Pa.

That parade of venerable, restored sailing vessels passed in review through New York harbor on July 4, like a procession of great and ghostly heroes from a vanished epic world, and was observed by a crowd estimated at seven million. Although the Tall Ships had little or nothing to do directly with the American Revolution, their remarkable presence elicited an affective link to the American past, a link so clear and poignant that a broad American public needed no scholarly explanations to grasp it. A similar response was evoked by Ken Burns's television series on the Civil War, which did more than any number of professional historians to keep alive public interest in the American past.

Americans do not want to view the nation's history as merely a cultural-literacy grab bag of factoids and tales. They want, rather, to establish a sense of connection with it as something from which they can draw meaning and sustenance, and in which their own identity is deeply embedded. That should suggest how critical a role the writing and teaching of history play in refining the nation's intellectual and moral life. Far from being of little interest—a record of old deeds for old people—history turns out to be of great consequence in the formation of the public mind.

That may help to explain why discussions of historical subjects, and conflicts over questions of historical interpretation and practice, have become so visible and lively a feature of our cultural life in recent years. The gradual passing of the World War II generation has served as an especially powerful stimulant to historical consciousness, and has given rise to films such as *Saving Private Ryan* and the TV miniseries *Band of Brothers*, attractions such as the D-Day Museum in New Orleans and the controversial World War II Memorial planned for the National Mall in Washington, and popular books such as Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation* (1998) and Stephen Ambrose's *Citizen Soldiers* (1997).

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A passion for history is reflected as well in various heated, and sometimes nasty, debates that have occurred over the past decade, often as an offshoot of the so-called culture wars: debates over the National History Standards, the *Enola Gay* exhibition at the Smithsonian, a slavery exhibition at the Library of Congress, the public display of the Confederate flag, reparations for slavery, Jefferson's personal relations with the slave Sally Hemings, Edmund Morris's fictionalizing in his biography of Ronald Reagan, the historian Joseph Ellis's lying in the classroom about his military service and personal life. All of those episodes—and more—mirror the public's growing engagement with historical controversies.

But even as we note the engagement, we must acknowledge something else as well: the immense, appalling, and growing historical ignorance of most Americans. To say that an abiding appetite for history exists is not the same as to say that the hunger is being satisfied. On the contrary. The steady abandonment of instruction in history by our schools and colleges shows no sign of reversal, and makes it a near certainty that the next generations of young Americans will lack even the sketchiest knowledge of the country's historical development.

Survey after dismal survey confirms that Americans are being poorly served by their educational institutions, at all levels. One-fifth of American teenagers don't know the name of the country from which the United States declared independence. A fourth don't know who fought in the Civil War, and cannot say what happened in 1776; three-fifths do not know that Columbus discovered America in 1492. Perhaps the most depressing study of all, released last year by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), examined the historical knowledge of *graduating seniors* at America's 55 most selective colleges and universities. The study found that 81 percent of the seniors could not pass a simple test of American historical knowledge, which asked about such basic matters as the separation of powers and the events at Valley Forge. Not one of the colleges required the students to take a course in American history, and less than a fourth of them required any history courses at all. (On the bright side, 99 percent of the students surveyed were able to identify the cartoon characters Beavis and Butthead. So they are learning something.)

The ACTA report caught the attention of Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), one of the Senate's most historically minded members. He resolved on the spot to show his concern in a highly tangible way: by adding a \$50 million amendment to the Department of Education's FY 2001 appropriations bill (and promising \$100 million more in FY 2002) to support the development and implementation of "programs to teach American history." But the ACTA survey suggests that money is not the problem. It was, after all, a study of students at America's *elite* colleges, most of which are private institutions that charge upward of \$30,000 a year for their services, and that have endowments in the hundreds of millions, and in some cases billions, of dollars. Whatever problems these institutions may have, a lack of financial resources is not one of them—and is certainly not the reason they are failing to teach their students American history.

Nevertheless, Byrd's passion on the subject is encouraging. It suggests that, with the clashes over the National History Standards now behind us, there might be

grounds for a national consensus on the need for dramatic improvement in history education. But formidable barriers remain—barriers that cannot be much affected by the appropriation of fresh federal money.

To begin with, one would have to challenge the entrenched power of educators who have relentlessly sought over a period of decades to displace the study of history in our schools in favor of a “social studies” curriculum that they believe is more conducive than the “fact-grubbing” specificity of history to the creation of useful habits of problem solving, generalization, and harmonious living. The triumph of what social critic Russell Kirk called “social stew” led to a whole series of subsequent disasters: the downgrading of history in state social-studies standards, the near disappearance of history from the primary grades, the weakening of standards for history teaching, and the replacement of real books with inane, plodding, politically correct texts that misrepresent the subject of history by robbing it of its narrative zest and interpretive fascination. It will take nothing short of a revolution in educational philosophy to reverse the trends. More money poured into the system will only reinforce the status quo and compound the historical illiteracy of Americans.

There are other, more complex barriers to improvement: the character of the historical profession itself and the nature of its public responsibilities in a democratic society. In reality, the clashes over history standards are no more behind us than the culture wars that lay behind the clashes. Americans have generally been willing to trust in the probity and judgment of those calling themselves historians. But that trust has eroded somewhat in recent years, and for entirely understandable reasons. Part of that erosion derives from ideological factors, made all too obvious by such follies as the American Historical Association’s official opposition to the Reagan defense buildup in 1982, or, more recently, the ill-advised petition signed by historians who opposed the impeachment of President Bill Clinton. In both cases, certain professional historians drew improperly upon the authority of their discipline to lend force to partisan political positions, and, in so doing, damaged the long-term credibility of all historians.

But the distrust is also grounded in divergent views of the function of history and the responsibility of historians. There are profound tensions inherent in the practice of history in a democracy—between a history that is the property of all and a history that is the insight of an accredited few, or between a history organized around the requirements of American citizenship and a history that takes its bearings from, and bases its authority upon, more strictly professional criteria. The tensions cannot be, and should not be, finally resolved; neither side holds a trump card. Certainly, professional historians should be able to challenge conventional wisdom. One can understand, for example, the chagrin of the historians and curators who found their professional judgments being overruled in the *Enola Gay* case. But their perspective was not the whole of the matter, particularly when the subject in question was a publicly supported commemoration of a profoundly significant event in the nation’s four-year-long war effort. Historians who use public money in public forums to express views with public implications cannot expect to be insulated from the public’s reaction. On the contrary, the endless interplay between the public and professional uses of history should be a source of intellectual vitality. This makes it all the more lamentable that so many pro-

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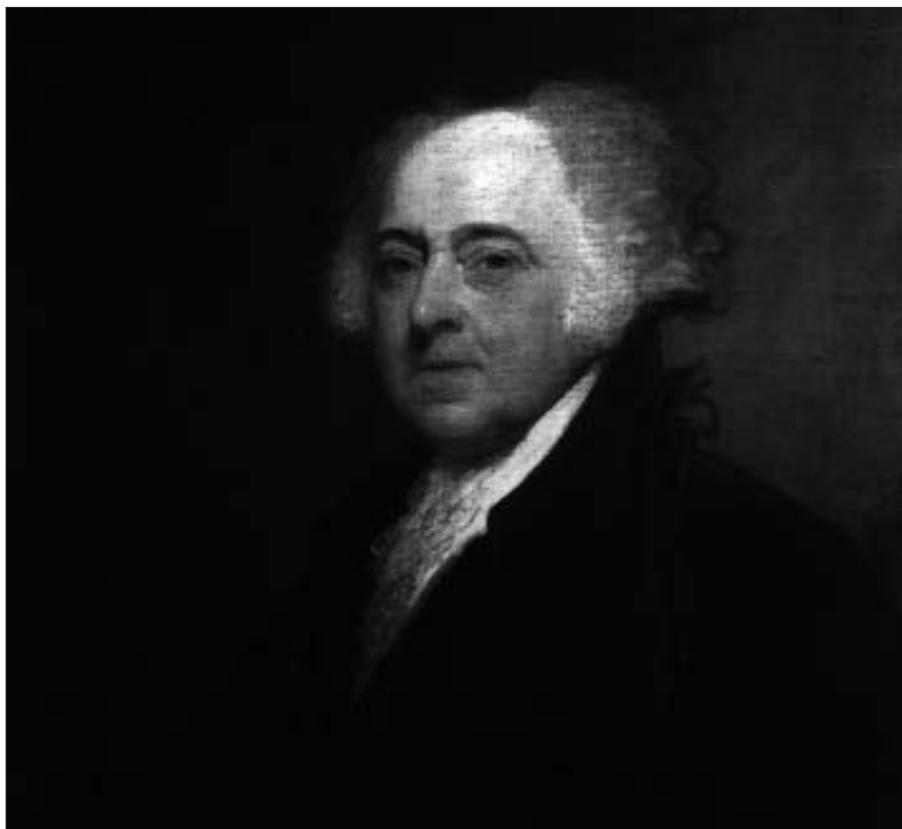
Professional historians have come to embrace an understanding of history that looks more and more like a dead end, both on its own terms and for the enrichment of public life.

More than three decades ago, the British historian J. H. Plumb, in a book called *The Death of the Past* (1970), argued that “true history” is a “destructive” process: It assaults all the forms of “created ideology” by which people give meaning to the life of their institutions and societies, and it intends finally “to cleanse the story of mankind from those deceiving visions of a purposeful past.” That credo may sound brutal, but it is nothing more than a particularly succinct and candid expression of the logical conclusion to which the relentlessly critical spirit animating modern professional historiography is drawn. That spirit would ruthlessly sweep away both the large narratives of nation-building and the small pieties human beings have always used to shield their eyes from the harsh light of reality. It’s not that there is nothing to be said for the work of the critical spirit. The difficulty, rather, is that what would be available to put in the place of the large narratives and small pieties when they are finally vanquished has never been made clear.

In the beginning, of course, there was great value in bringing the conventional narratives of American history into question, for they had often served the purpose of rendering minorities and marginalized groups silent or invisible. But the energy of those more particular histories is almost entirely derivative and, ironically, dependent upon the grand narratives of American national identity against which they push. The nation has not yet disappeared entirely from American history, but it often resembles nothing more than, in John Higham’s marvelous phrase, the “villain in other people’s stories.” Yet without the nation, and some of the other narratives and pieties that critical history has dispensed with, there can be no plausible way to organize history into larger meanings that can, in turn, inform and inspire the work of citizenship and reform.

Indeed, by the late 1980s, historian Peter Novick was arguing in *That Noble Dream* (1988), an exhaustive and highly influential study of the American historical profession, that there was no unifying purpose at all left in the profession; there remained only a vast congeries of subdisciplinary fields within which small armies of specialists worked at solving small-scale technical problems. “As a broad community of discourse,” said Novick, “the discipline of history” envisioned in the founding of the American Historical Association in 1884 “had ceased to exist.” Under such circumstances, the very possibility of cultivating a public historical consciousness, substantively informed by academic historical work, was rendered practically nil, as was the antique notion that historical understanding might contribute to the refinement or deepening of individual awareness. French historian Pierre Nora brought a touch of Gallic intellectual delicacy to his summary of the situation: “History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it.”

The problem with such programmatic skepticism is not only that it is completely self-contradictory and unworkable in human terms, but that its final result is a historical understanding as cleansed of human interest as it is of deceptive visions. To suppress and destroy memory is to violate human nature in a fundamental way.



John Adams was a familiar face at the beach this summer thanks to David McCullough's biography. Books on the Founders—Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton—have enjoyed a recent vogue.

And to imply that the honest writing of history requires such erasure is a travesty. As professional historiography trudges further and further down its chosen path of specialization and fragmentation, satisfied with its increasingly hollow rhetoric about “pushing back the frontiers of knowledge,” it pays a steep price for every step, and the price comes directly out of its own hide, out of an animating sense of purpose. In writing off the larger audience it might have had, professionalization of that sort impoverishes not only the public mind, but the discipline itself.

This is not to suggest that historians should entirely abandon the critical enterprise. But they need to be honest enough to turn their criticism back upon the act of criticism itself, modest enough to concede that man does not live by critical discourse alone, and wise enough to understand that a relentlessly debunking spirit cannot possibly be a basis for anything resembling a civilized life.

Historical knowledge and historical understanding are two quite different things. As Novick well expressed it, one can speak of historical knowledge as “something accumulating on library shelves,” but historical understanding “is in the mind of a human being or it is nowhere.” The acquisition of a genuinely historical consciousness amounts to a kind of moral discipline of the soul. It means learning to appropriate into our own moral imaginations, and learning to be guided by, the distilled memories of others, the stories of events we never witnessed and times and places we never experienced. By an expansion of inward sympathy, we make those things our own, not merely by knowing about them, but by incorporating

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them into our awareness, looking at the world through their filter, learning to see the past as an immanent presence woven invisibly into the world that lies before us. By its very nature, historical consciousness can never be the exclusive province of a historical guild or priesthood, for it is meant to be the common possession of all.

A democratic nation needs a democratic history. There was a time not so long ago when this was assumed to mean that a genuinely democratic history should ignore politics and constitutions and intellectual elites and the like and insist upon viewing the past exclusively “from the bottom up,” through a study of the social history of nonelite groups. But that assumption now seems far less obvious. Indeed, there is a kind of unconscious scorn buried in it—as if political and intellectual history were beyond the common people’s means, and as if individuals could not be expected to take an interest in any aspect of history that did not involve them, or others exactly like them. There is every reason to believe that the United States can nurture a national culture in which a rich acquaintance with the great documents, debates, and events of the nation’s past becomes the common property of all citizens.

If that is ever to happen, the historical profession will have to take more seriously its role as a potential shaper of the public mind and public life. It’s not necessary to do so by justifying history as a source of public-policy initiatives. The historian can make a far greater contribution by playing the essentially conservative role—or is it a radical one?—of standing athwart the turbulence of modern life and insisting on the dignity of memory and the reality of the past. Historians should not forget, in the pressure to find “practical” justifications for what they do as historians, that they further an important public purpose simply by being what they are, and by preserving and furthering a certain kind of consciousness, a certain kind of memory—qualities of mind and soul, and features of our humanity, that a culture of ceaseless novelty and instant erasure has all but declared war upon.

As it happens, John Adams himself had something exemplary to say about all this. McCullough relates in the final pages of his book that Adams composed no epitaph for himself in anticipation of his death. In that respect, as in so many others, he was the opposite of Jefferson, who designed the very obelisk that was to mark his grave and specified the precise words that were to be inscribed on it. Yet Adams did compose an inscription for the sarcophagus lid of his ancestor Henry Adams, the first Massachusetts Adams, who had arrived in 1638. The inscription speaks volumes about how Adams conceived his place in history, and how he accepted the obligation to instruct the future by honoring the past:

This stone and several others have been placed in this yard by a great, great, grandson from a veneration of the piety, humility, simplicity, prudence, frugality, industry, and perseverance of his ancestors in hopes of recommending an affirmation of their virtues to their posterity.

In concluding his book with this marvelous inscription, McCullough means us to see yet another contrast between Adams and Jefferson. But we should not miss the even more instructive contrast: the one between Adams and us. □