

How Historical Illiteracy Fuels Political Polarization

Greater knowledge of the past would help improve America's public discourse.

Once again, President's Day has come and gone and Americans spent little time reflecting on their past leaders—in part, because Americans know so little history at all, even about the country's most well-known Founding Fathers. For example, in a 2012 [survey](#) commissioned by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), fewer than half (48%) of college graduates knew that George Washington was the American general at Yorktown; only 20% knew that James Madison was the “Father of the Constitution” (half thought it was Thomas Jefferson); only 17% knew what Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation actually said; and only 17% knew that the phrase “Government of the people, by the people, for the people” came from the Gettysburg Address (76% thought it came from either the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution).

Those numbers signify a broader dearth of historical, constitutional, and civic knowledge. In the same survey, only 42% of college graduates knew that the Battle of the Bulge occurred during World War II (half thought it occurred during the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, or World War I), and only 38% knew that U.S. senators serve six-year terms while House members serve two-year terms. In a more recent ACTA-commissioned [survey](#), conducted in 2015, fewer than half (48.7%) of college graduates knew that presidential impeachment trials take place before the Senate, and even fewer (41.6 %) knew that proposed constitutional amendments must be ratified by three-quarters of the states to become law.

Does any of this really matter? After all, you can easily

forge a successful and lucrative career without ever having to discuss James Madison, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Battle of the Bulge, or the constitutional-amendment process as part of your job.

But that's not the point. Regardless of whether a proper understanding of history and government is essential to one's vocation, it is absolutely essential to the future of our republic. A citizenry that fails to learn about or appreciate its cultural and political inheritance is far more likely to squander that inheritance.

As Manhattan Institute scholar Heather Mac Donald has [observed](#):

The American Founders drew on an astonishingly wide range of historical sources and an appropriately jaundiced view of human nature to craft the world's most stable and free republic. They invoked lessons learned from the Greek city-states, the Carolingian Dynasty, and the Ottoman Empire in the Constitution's defense. And they assumed that the new nation's citizens would themselves be versed in history and political philosophy. Indeed, a closer knowledge among the electorate of Hobbes and the fragility of social order might have prevented the more brazen social experiments that we've undergone in recent years. Ignorance of the intellectual trajectory that led to the rule of law and the West's astounding prosperity puts those achievements at risk.

Mac Donald is correct. The stability and affluence of modern Western societies should never be taken for granted. It did not emerge by chance or by accident. Rather, it can be traced back to a very specific cultural and ideological mix—a mix that produced free speech, free markets, individual liberty, property rights, the rule of law, social trust, scientific inquiry, and technological innovation.

Alas, it's no longer fashionable to deliver that message in

many U.S. (and European) schools. This helps explain why, in a 2016 Harvard Institute of Politics [survey](#), a majority (51 %) of American millennials aged eighteen to twenty-nine said they did not support capitalism, while a third said they *did* support socialism.

That gets to another problem with historical illiteracy: It fuels the political and cultural polarization that is tearing our country apart.

To make sense of contemporary policy debates, you need a certain amount of perspective. If you lack that perspective, you can be more susceptible to overreaction and partisan hysteria.

Take the issue of executive power and national security. If you don't know what Lincoln did during the Civil War (suspend habeas corpus), what Woodrow Wilson did during World War I (severely restrict civil liberties), or what Franklin Roosevelt did during World War II (put Japanese Americans in internment camps), it's hard to have any real perspective on the actions that George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and now Donald Trump have taken in the war against Islamic terrorism.

Likewise, if you don't know the history of [federal immigration law](#), and if you aren't aware of what Jimmy Carter did during the Iranian hostage crisis ("[invalidate all visas issued to Iranian citizens for future entry into the United States](#)"), it's hard to have any real perspective on Trump's push for a temporary travel ban from several countries in the Greater Middle East.

Similarly, if you don't know just how much America's violent-crime rate skyrocketed between the early 1960s and the early 1990s (the increase from 1961 to 1991 was a staggering [380 %](#)), and if you don't know just how [devastating](#) the crack-cocaine epidemic was to inner-city communities, it's hard to have any real perspective on "mass incarceration."

Finally, if you don't know the full history of race and race relations in our society, and if you don't know how that history compares with the experiences of other countries around the world, it's hard to have any real perspective on the progress America has made in reducing racial inequality.

In each case, greater historical knowledge would go a long way toward improving our public discourse. Would it resolve all the underlying issues and disputes that have made America so polarized? Of course not. But at least it would be a step in the right direction.

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