

# 'Study History'—Defense Secretary's Advice to Anxious Americans

Last month, The Washington Post [accidentally leaked](#) Defense Secretary James Mattis' personal cellphone number.

Teddy Fischer—an enterprising 17-year-old journalist at Mercer Island High School (WA)—used the opportunity to text Mattis and request an interview for his high school newspaper.

Surprisingly, Mattis granted the request, and [the interview](#) was recently published on the school newspaper's website.

Most of the interview was devoted to the topic of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. But at various points, Mattis also made an important recommendation to today's students: "study history."

As many of you know, history education in America's schools has been in decline in recent decades. In [an interview this past April](#), historian David McCullough lamented, "We've been raising several generations of young Americans who are, by and large, historically illiterate." On [the most recent national test](#), only 12% of high school seniors were deemed "proficient" in the history of their own country.

This widespread historical ignorance is most likely a contributor to the fear and insecurity that afflicts many Americans today when confronted by the 24-hour news cycle: they simply lack any context for evaluating events in a mature and balanced way.

In the interview selections below, Mattis indicates that a thorough study of history is the best way to guard against this fear-born-of-ignorance:

**TEDDY:** What subject areas do you think students should be studying in high school and beyond to better prepare themselves to be politically active and aware adults?

**MATTIS:** Actually, I've thought a lot about that question. I would tell you that no matter what you're going to go into, whether it be business or politics or international relations or domestic politics, I don't think you can go wrong if you maintain an avid interest in history. The reason I say that is you'll find that really, there's nothing new under the sun, other than some of the technology we use.

The human condition, the aspirations, the dreams, the problems that are associated with being social animals, not being a hermit and living alone, but having to interact with others, whether it be your local school district, your community, your state, your county, your national, your international relations, history will show you not all the answers, but it'll tell you a lot of the questions to ask and furthermore, it will show you how other people have dealt successfully or unsuccessfully with similar type issues. I wish now looking back on it, if I'd known what waited for me in life, I would have put a lot more attention into history.

**TEDDY:** What advice would you give to a current high schooler that is scared about what they see on the news and concerned for the future of our country?

**MATTIS:** Probably the most important thing is to get involved. You'll gain courage when you get involved. You'll gain confidence, you'll link with people, some of whom will agree with you and some won't, and as a result, you'll broaden your perspective. If you do that, especially if you study history, you realize that our country has been through worse and here's how they've found their way through that.

*Here's what leaders did, here's what educators did, here's what business people did, here's what soldiers did, here's what politicians did, and you can sometimes see, by weaving together that tapestry, how to go forward. You lose your paralysis, you lose your, I would almost call it unproductive worry, and you replace it with productive action.*

**TEDDY:** *What will the nature of American warfare and conflict look like for my peers entering the military now and in the future?*

**MATTIS:** *There'll be two fundamental thrusts I think. One is, some things will endure. The fundamental nature of war, you go all the way back to Thucydides who wrote the first history and it was of a war and he said it's fear and honor and interest and those continue to this day. What he wrote over 2,000 years ago, 3,000 years ago, that still consumes people. That's what I meant about studying history.*

*But the technology and the way wars are fought, they're like chameleons, a dead German guy wrote, and it changes constantly...*

Mattis' final words reveal that the student of history can also avoid being a slave to media propaganda:

*"There'll be a lot of people who want to tell you what to think in this world. If you read a lot of history you'll thank them for their help but you won't be governed by what someone else has told you to think."*