

Back to the Past to Find Strength for the Future

In 1776, Thomas Paine wrote of the American Revolution, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” His words fit 2020-2021 like a glove.

As we all know, our country is in turmoil. We have battled a virus for almost a year, wearing masks and suffering lockdowns, with dubious results. Fraud and deceit marked our presidential election, and as a result America is in the middle of a constitutional crisis. Even worse, we have become a people bitterly divided by ideology.

In the face of this ordeal our reactions vary. One friend of mine rarely follows the news, contending she can do nothing to alter the bigger picture and seeking peace of mind by her evasion. On the other hand, a younger woman I know—a wife and mother—has taken an interest in politics for the first time in her life. She watches as much news as time allows, has sent small donations to support various causes, and has participated in two political rallies.

Sticking one’s head in the sand is undoubtedly a bad tactic, yet where can the rest of us who still keep up with current events find solace and help during these storm-battered days?

A visit to Clio, the muse of history, may help.

When we pause to examine the past rather than focusing exclusively on our messy present, we gain both knowledge and perspective. We learn of the tribulations endured by our ancestors and can take heart from their wisdom and their acts of heroism. When we compare our circumstances—the pandemic, a fraudulent election—to their trials, we put on a pair of glasses which allow us to understand more clearly the nature and scope of our own difficulties.

These explorations can also bring us certain comforts. When we visit with those who came before us, we often find our own troubles diminished in comparison. A trip to Europe in the middle of the 14th century, when the Black Death carried away a third of the population, sets in perspective our current pandemic. Many today are despondent about the recent election, but a familiarity with the darker moments of our country's history—the beginning of the American Revolution, the nation torn apart in 1861 by civil war, the bleak year of 1942 when the Japanese pounded our forces in the Pacific—can grant us the strength and fortitude to face our tribulations.

The importance of reading about the past and the lessons this engagement with history can bestow on the present is stressed in [*The Leader's Bookshelf*](#), by Admiral James Stavridis, USN (Retired) and R. Manning Ancell. One of the books they review is *The Last Lion—Winston Spencer Churchill: Defender of the Realm, 1940-1965*. Having read all three volumes of this extraordinary biography several years ago, I find hope in Churchill's extraordinary life and accomplishments. He faced all sorts of challenges and made mistakes, but he also became the British bulldog in the war against the Nazis. Let us recollect his words, as do Stavridis and Ancell: "We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be; we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

"We shall never surrender" should serve as our watchword in our current situation.

We began with Thomas Paine. Here are the two sentences following that first quotation:

The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we

have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.

Like hell or tyranny, fear and despair are not easily conquered, but if we look to the past and to the courageous among our ancestors, encourage one another as they did, and fight the good fight, we will acquit ourselves well in the battles certain to accompany this new year.

Stay strong.

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