

The Importance of History



Why so much interest in history at the Cato Institute? The lead article in this publication examines whether Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal got America out of the Great Depression. A few issues back, Michael Chapman looked at FDR's cousin Theodore and declared him "no friend of the Constitution." Recently Cato has hosted authors Anne Applebaum talking about the Gulag and Thomas Fleming discussing Woodrow Wilson and World War I.

Why all this history? Why not just stick to current policy issues? There are three reasons.

First, we study topics such as the Gulag for the same reason that there's a Holocaust Memorial Museum on the Mall in Washington: to remind ourselves, Never again. Never again must such things happen. (Though Applebaum writes, sadly, "This book was not written 'so that it will not happen again,' as the cliché would have it. This book was written because it almost certainly will happen again.")

Second, as the American Founders understood, the study of history is our best guide to the present and the future. In his great "liberty or death" speech, Patrick Henry proclaimed: "I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging the future but by the past." The authors of the *Federalist Papers* wrote of history as "the oracle of truth" and "the least fallible guide of human opinions." The American revolutionaries were close students of the ancient republics and the history of England. They traced their own demands to the "ancient and undoubted rights of Englishmen" and beyond that to the common law, Magna Carta, and the popular assemblies of the early English peoples. The first publication of the Declaration of Independence in book form in 1776 combined the document with lengthy excerpts from the influential *Historical Essay on the English Constitution*. As historian H. Trevor Colbourn wrote, "The history made by the American Revolutionaries was in part the product of the history they read."

The Founders understood that freedom is best defended when a philosophical claim is supported by a historical claim. From their study of history they learned of the ancient rights of Englishmen, the importance of individual virtue in preserving freedom, and the dangers of power and thus the necessity of constraining and dividing it. Consider Hamilton's warning in *Federalist 75* about the powers of the president in foreign affairs, a warning of particular relevance today: "The history of human conduct does not warrant that exalted opinion of human virtue which would make it wise in a nation to commit interests of so delicate and momentous a kind,

as those which concern its intercourse with the rest of the world, to the sole disposal of a magistrate created and circumstanced as would be a President of the United States." (I copied that text from www.speaker.house.gov, where it is accompanied by a picture of Speaker Dennis Hastert; I hope he has read the essay.)

History helps us to understand the development of our civilization, including the ideas that shape it. Often the ideas that we now regard as universal principles arose in response to particular circumstances. Magna Carta and similar medieval charters reflect the struggle to constrain the power of kings. From such guarantees of specific liberties, eventually liberty developed. The rights guaranteed in the Bill of Rights reflected particular historical experiences: with religious wars, censorship, confiscation of property, the Star Chamber, and the constant tendency of government to seek more power.

Third, people get much of their understanding of government and policy from history. The way we view the Constitution, the industrial revolution, the robber barons, the New Deal, and other historical events shapes our view of the present. Far too often these days our public institutions such as schools and universities

fail to give students a proper appreciation for the great achievement of the Founders in creating a society in which government is constrained by law. Instead, we get revisionist accounts of Washington and Jefferson and hagiographic treatment of the Roosevelts, all of it accompanied by calls for more power to be entrusted to Washington.

American students need to learn about the greatness of America. But that requires an understanding of what makes a nation great. Is America great because we put a man on the moon or defeated Saddam Hussein? Or is America

great because it's the country that has offered more freedom to more people to pursue their own happiness than any other nation on earth?

Some people think that a great nation must be governed by great men wielding great power. History suggests otherwise. Right after he wrote, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely," the historian Lord Acton went on to say, "Great men are almost always bad men." And great men with great powers are no substitute for our Constitution. The truly great men are the ones who have fought for liberty, who have walked away from power, who have helped to bring power under the rule of law. Limited government is a great achievement, a recent achievement in the sweep of history, and history teaches us that it can be lost. Appreciating where it came from and how rare and fragile it is will help us to preserve it.

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—David Boaz