
A HISTORY OF US

The Cause of America is in a great Measure
the Cause of all Mankind.

—TOM PAINE,
AUTHOR OF *COMMON SENSE*

I have had the fortune to participate in an
astonishing American effort to adjust life,
as it is lived, to the ideals proclaimed by
the founders. While the transformation is
far from complete, the change has never-
theless been so dramatic that my belief in
American possibilities remains profound.

—ROGER WILKINS,
AUTHOR, JOURNALIST, PROFESSOR

All other nations have come into being
among people whose families had lived for
time out of mind on the same land where
they were born. Englishmen are English,
Frenchmen are French, Chinese are Chi-
nese, while their governments come and
go; their national states can be torn apart
and remade without losing their nation-
hood. But Americans are a nation born of
an idea; not the place, but the idea,
created the United States Government.

—THEODORE H. WHITE,
AMERICAN HISTORIAN



1 History? Why?



The ancient Greeks believed in nine goddesses called *muses*, who inspired the arts—things like dancing, music, and poetry. This is Clio, the muse of history, in the Capitol, Washington, D.C.

What's the point of studying history? Who cares what happened long ago? After all, aren't the people in history books dead?

Those are good questions. They bother a lot of people. They bother some people so much that they never study history. That's too bad, because those people miss out on something very important: their own story.

History is the story of US. It tells who we are and where we have been. Sometimes it is so surprising it jolts your mind. Here are a few answers to the questions about studying history:

History is full of stories—true stories—the best ever. Those stories have real heroes and real villains. When you read history, you are reading about real-life adventures.

History is a mystery. No one knows what happened in the past—at least we don't know the whole story. We weren't there. Have you ever put a jigsaw puzzle together? That's what learning history is like. You gather pieces of information and try to discover how they fit. Suddenly, when you have enough pieces in place, you begin to see the big picture. That's exciting, and so is studying history, because new pieces of the puzzle keep fitting in.

When we read about *the mistakes people made in the past*, we can try not to make them ourselves. Nations and people who don't study history sometimes repeat mistakes.

History, after all, is the memory of a nation.

—John F. Kennedy
35TH PRESIDENT
OF THE UNITED STATES

History is more or less bunk. (AND, AT ANOTHER TIME):
The farther you look back,
the farther you can see
ahead.

—Henry Ford
FOUNDER,
FORD MOTOR COMPANY

The first law for the historian is that he shall never dare utter an untruth. The second is that he shall suppress nothing that is true.

—Cicero
ANCIENT ROMAN STATESMAN

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It is one thing to write like a poet, and another thing to write like a historian. The poet can tell or sing of things not as they were but as they ought to have been, whereas the historian must describe them, not as they ought to have been, but as they were, without exaggerating or hiding the truth in any way.

—Miguel de Cervantes FROM HIS NOVEL *DON QUIXOTE*. CERVANTES DIED IN 1616, THE SAME YEAR AS SHAKESPEARE

A man without history is like a tree without roots.

—Marcus Garvey FOUNDER IN 1917 OF UNIVERSAL NEGRO IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

What experience and history teach is this—that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.

—G. W. F. Hegel 19TH-CENTURY GERMAN PHILOSOPHER

History is especially important for Americans. In many nations—Japan or Sweden, for instance—most citizens share a common background. They have a similar look. They may worship in the same church. That isn't true of us. Some of us were once Chinese, or Italian, or Turkish, or Ethiopian. Americans don't all look alike. Sometimes we don't think alike. But as Americans we do share something. It is our history. We Americans share a common heritage. If you are an American, then the Indians, the Vikings, the Pilgrims, and the slaves are all your ancestors. You will want to know their stories.

Before we were a nation, we were ruled by England. Many Americans wanted to be free. So they wrote a Declaration of Independence explaining their goals. It begins: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.* It also says that governments derive *their just powers from the consent of the governed.* (What does that mean?)

Consider those words about equality and happiness. In past times, governments didn't worry about things like that. Our Declaration changed ideas. It was written in 1776 and, since then, it has inspired people all over the world in battles for freedom and fairness.

Which brings me to this book's theme. It is this: *I believe the United States of America is the most remarkable nation that has ever existed. No other nation, in the history of the world, has ever provided so much freedom, so much justice, and so much opportunity to so many people.*

That is a big statement. You don't have to agree with it. Arguing with a book's theme is okay.

Some people will tell you of evil forces in the United States. They will tell of past horrors like slavery and war. They will tell of poverty and injustice today. They will be telling the truth.

The United States isn't perfect. Far from it. Being fair to everyone in a large nation is very difficult. (Do you treat everyone you know equally? How about people you don't like?) The U.S. government has made some terrible mistakes. It is still making mistakes. But usually this nation can, and does, correct its mistakes. That is because we are a democracy: power belongs to the people, not the rulers. We are also a nation governed by law, and that is very important. No one is above the law. Everyone—the president, congressmen, congresswomen, and you—lives by the same laws.

Our top—or supreme—law is the Constitution. Even bad presidents and congresses obey the Constitution. They have to. They can be impeached—which means “brought to trial”—if they don't.

The Constitution of the United States was the first national constitution written by ordinary people who intended to govern them-

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We the People

selves. It starts with, "We the People. . ." You are part of "the People."

The Constitution's writers knew they were human and that their work might need improving. They made sure the Constitution could be changed through amendments. Right away there were 10 amendments (called the Bill of Rights) that guarantee basic freedoms. The first amendment gives you the right to worship, or not, as you wish (not as the government tells you). It protects your right to say or write what you want. You can criticize the government and not worry about being thrown in jail. That isn't true in many countries. (Check those amendments to know your other rights.)

But the Constitution didn't protect all Americans. It allowed slavery. That was a horrible mistake. We had to fight an awful civil war before the 13th amendment—ending slavery—could be passed.

Justice is fairness. Having the same laws *for all* is fair.

In the United States you are free to do anything that anyone else can do. You can run for president, be an artist, write books, or build houses.

But being a citizen of a free nation isn't easy. Free citizens are expected to be informed and think for themselves. Having rights means having responsibilities. It means asking questions and learning so that you can vote intelligently. Nations are constantly tested by those who want to upset or criticize or conquer. A good way to handle those attacks is with history's information.

The more you study history, the more you will realize that all nations are not the same. Some are better than others.

Does that seem like an unfair thing to say? Maybe, but I believe it.

I don't believe that people in one nation are better than those in another. Every nation has a mixture of good and bad people.

So why, if people are the same, are nations different?

Ideas have a lot to do with it. Nations stand on their ideas. We're lucky. The architects who designed this nation had sound ideas. They were looking for liberty, justice, and opportunity when they came here. They made sure the United States provided them.

Then they did something never done before: they created a people's government. Some men and women in other parts of the world thought that was impossible. After all, it was an untried idea. But America's citizens proved that government by the people can work. How we did that is a fascinating story.

That's the story of US—the people of the United States—the story you're about to read. It's a story of hunters, explorers, pirates, slaves—the men and women and boys and girls who came to a strange land and made it their own. It's a story with heroes, and villains, and big ideas.

We're going to start that story way, way, way back in time, with some of the first Americans. Read on—there is much to tell.

Where there is history children have transferred to them the advantages of old men; where history is absent, old men are as children.

—Juan Vives

SPANISH PHILOSOPHER,
BORN 1492

History never repeats itself; at best it sometimes rhymes.

—Mark Twain

AUTHOR OF THE ADVENTURES
OF TOM SAWYER

The famous people quoted here don't agree about the importance or even the meaning of history. It would be boring if they did. But who should you agree with? And how do you come up with opinions of your own? Reading and listening will give you information to form your own ideas. Keeping an open mind will help make those opinions sound.