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ABSTRACT

This document addresses the importance of teaching contemporary history. The failure to teach contemporary history leaves students ill equipped to deal with the present and the future, and also ensures that they will have little interest in the history of other times. Because memory is the central organizing principle in peoples minds, the prospect of the nation losing its collective memory is an appalling prospect. Teaching history is difficult because citizens live in a present-oriented culture that forces most history teachers to cram their subject into a present-oriented curriculum that allows it little room. The single greatest impediment to the effective teaching of history is the tendency on the part of teachers and textbooks to separate the past from the present. Until the late 19th century, most historians did not believe that the past had to be separated from the present. The idea of stopping history short of the present was the result of professionalization as academic historians sought to establish their field as an autonomous discipline. History is controversial, and fear of controversy is why history teachers shy away from relating the past to the present. But history can transmit acquired skills from one generation to another by: (1) overcoming ignorance and egocentrism; (2) enabling people to see the work of long term forces; (3) teaching about contingency; and (4) showing how human behavior, tectonic forces, and contingency can intersect one another. (DK)

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THE NATURE OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

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National Council for History Education, Inc.

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THE NATURE OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

One thing is absolutely certain about history: there is more and more of it all the time. Our students are certainly well aware of this. History is not like physics or mathematics or business administration, where students tend to learn about new advances only from their teachers. History happens to our students, as well as to everybody else, and it is up to us, as teachers of history, not so much to introduce them to it as to help them make sense of it. If we can't do that -- or if we choose not to do it -- then of course they're going to tune out what we say in our classes, and seek the necessary information elsewhere.

It's a sad commentary that the one thing most people remember from their high school history courses -- and too often from college courses as well -- is that they never got around to what the students most wanted to know about, which was the history of their own time. Our students see us as following a kind of professional code that requires us to spend vast amounts of class time on such things as the Halfway Covenant, the Articles of Confederation, or the Compromise of 1850, while saying little or nothing about the rise of rock culture, the history of epidemics like AIDS, or the end of the Cold War. I myself took a high school course from an elderly Presbyterian minister who assured us all solemnly that history had begun with the Beatitudes, about which he preached on Sunday mornings, and had ended with the Spanish-American War, in which he had fought.

The failure to teach the history of our own times not only leaves our students ill-equipped to deal with the present and the future; it also ensures that they will have little interest in, and therefore little knowledge of, the history of other times either. No wonder so few of our kids know which countries fought on which side in World War II, or what century Lincoln lived in, or what the American Revolution was a revolution against. The consequence is both simple and frightening: our nation is slowly but surely losing its collective memory. And that's pretty appalling, because memory is the central organizing principle in our minds: without it our individual lives

from a speech by John Lewis Gaddis
would be a series of meaningless and therefore terrifying impressions, rather like those of severely-afflicted amnesiacs. It's frightening to contemplate what this might imply for the life of the nation.

The problem, of course, is not all our fault. We live in a present-oriented culture, which means that most history teachers are forced to cram their subject into a present-oriented curriculum that allows it little room. The Bradley Commission and its successor, the National Council for History Education, have been in the vanguard of those seeking to change this situation, and the impending revision of the Ohio high school curriculum to allow more time for the teaching of 20th century American history shows that things are already slowly changing for the better.

But even if we are allotted more time for the teaching of history, that in itself won't make the history we teach relevant to the lives of our students. That part is going to be up to us, and that means that we need to take a good hard look at the way we ourselves have been trained to teach -- and therefore go about teaching -- history.

The single greatest impediment to the effective teaching of history, I think, is the tendency on the part of teachers and textbooks to separate the past from the present. The very expression, "that's history" is usually taken to mean that whatever's being referred to lies in the past; it's all too easy for our present-minded students to jump to the conclusion that, since it's there, they don't have to concern themselves with it. The result is that we leave the realm of the present and the future, by default, to economists, psychologists, sociologists, journalists, and even -- let us not forget a recent presidential administration in this country -- astrologers. No wonder things are in such bad shape.

Where did this idea that the past has to be separated from the present actually come from? It was definitely not the view, interestingly, of the great historians of the past: until the late 19th century, most historians would have greeted the idea that

history should stop short of the present with a mixture of incredulity and scorn. Consider the best example we have of contemporary history in any form, which also happens to be our most ancient example of serious history in any form. Thucydides wrote his great *History of the Peloponnesian War* some 2400 years ago, he tells us, because he was convinced that the events through which he had lived were as important as any that had happened in the past, and because he was certain that future generations would better understand their own times by knowing as much as possible about his own. "It will be enough for me," he wrote, "if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is), will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future."

That view of history as indissolubly linked to the present would be taken for granted for the next twenty-three centuries. Plutarch wrote his biographies of the noble Greeks and Romans to provide examples for his own time. St. Augustine used both sacred and secular history to explain a contemporary event -- the Christianization of the Roman Empire. "I have been unable to find anything I possess that I hold so dear or esteem so highly," Niccolo Machiavelli wrote in the introduction to *The Prince* in 1513, "as my knowledge of the actions of great men, learned from long experience in modern affairs and from constant reading of ancient ones."

The Founding Fathers of the United States drew their remarkable political sophistication from a self-conscious effort to relate what were, for them, current events to "lessons" of the past. It would be necessary, John Adams wrote in 1788, to "read the history of the ancient ages; contemplate the great examples of Greece and Rome; [and to] set before us the conduct of our own British ancestors, who have defended for us the inherent rights of mankind against foreign and domestic tyrants and usurpers." Patrick Henry, as usual, put it more succinctly: "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 idea that the writing and teaching of history should stop well short of the present arose only in the late 19th century, and as the result, I believe, of an odd juxtaposition of professionalization with bad translation. The professionalization I speak of was that of academic historians who were seeking to establish their field as an autonomous discipline. To set themselves apart from amateurs, quacks, and charlatans, they embraced the principle of "objectivity" as a standard for the evaluation of historical scholarship: the idea was that one was to write history "as it actually happened," and without reference to current controversies or present concerns. The modern historian's method, Edward P. Cheyney wrote in 1907, was to "look upon his subject as simply a body of facts, to be investigated and described for their own sake; not with a view of drawing a lesson from them, not with a view of praising or blaming any one, not with a view of so choosing and putting the facts as to give emotional pleasure to the reader -- not, in fact, with any ulterior purpose whatever; but simply to take human history as his object of study -- just as one might take any other group of phenomena."

And where did this idea of "just the facts" come from? That's where the bad translation comes in. The place to study in the late 19th century, if you wanted to become an academic historian in the United States, was Imperial Germany, and whole flocks of Americans went off to do graduate study there in the 1880s and 1890s. While there, they came under the influence of the great man of German historical studies, Leopold von Ranke, who had argued in one of his books that the task of the historian was not that "of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages," but rather "only to show what actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*)." Now, Ranke meant by this only that one should immerse one's self in the sources as the first stage in the writing of history; he certainly did not mean, and did not practice in his own writing, the principle that the past should be divorced from the present. But one of the problems with the German language is that it is, well, the German language, which is to say that Americans find it hard to understand. The Rankian idea of "objectivity" -- the idea of building a wall between the past and the present -- became a kind of cult with early 20th century American historians, reinforcing the way in which their own desire for professional credentials had pointed them in the same direction.

This left little room for treatments of controversial subjects in history, and that in

turn meant that "responsible" historians began to ~~shy~~ away from the recent past, where passions of the present might still hold sway. Further reinforcing this professional and intellectual impulse was the very practical advantage, for those who taught history, of not having to update their textbooks and lecture notes. The result was that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, history for the first time since Thucydides had come to be regarded as **only** that which had happened in the past; the more dangerous present, henceforth, was to be left to itself -- and hence to the economists, psychologists, sociologists, journalists, and astrologers.

History is still controversial, as anyone who has had to wrestle with such issues as multiculturalism, racism, feminism, or -- worst of all these days, Columbus -- will surely know. The fear of controversy, I think, is the single biggest reason why teachers of history -- and, far too often, authors of the textbooks teachers use -- shy away from the task of relating the past to the present. We want to teach history, we tell ourselves, without being controversial. And yet, a history stripped of controversy would be about as exciting as if we were to shift our students from reading books about Columbus to reading the Columbus telephone book. So we have a problem here.

The problem revolves largely around the question of when the present becomes the past, and therefore history. The logician would say right now: that the present is only an infinitesimal point separating the past from the future, and that the beginning of this sentence has become history long before I have gotten to the end of it. Certainly it is the case that everybody -- with the rare exception of amnesiacs -- has memories: these extend back from this instant to the earliest impressions of childhood. It was in this sense that a decidedly non-Rankean historian, Carl Becker, won fame for his argument (made back in 1931 when one could still with impunity use only the masculine pronoun) that "everyman" is his own historian. History, he asserted, is "an imaginative creation, a personal possession which each one of us . . . fashions out of his individual experience, adapts to his practical needs or emotional needs, and adorns as may be to suit his aesthetic tastes."

Surely there is something in this. All historians recapitulate -- but only incompletely recapitulate -- past events. As creatures of their own particular time and place, they must select those parts of the past they wish to study, for the very good reason that they cannot study them all: despite what some students tend to think, writing history involves more than just running a giant vacuum cleaner, scooping up all the sources in one's path. One has to

make sense of what one has seen, and the criteria by which historians do this inescapably reflect the particular "present" they inhabit. All history is, therefore, relativist history, in that the standards that cause one to choose a topic and that shape what one says about it relate to, and cannot be separated from, the particular time and place in which one is performing those actions.

But that approach to history also raises a problem, which is that if "everyperson" is "his (or her) own historian," what is to prevent us from writing history in such a way that it only confirms our existing preconceptions and prejudices? Who is to ensure impartial access to "what actually happened" as interpretations of it shift back and forth? What are "facts" in history anyway, and how does one keep them separate from "opinions"? As the fictional dictator Big Brother proclaimed in George Orwell's 1948 novel, 1984: "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past." If presentist concerns really determine what one thinks about the past, as people like Becker had argued, and if the past in turn shapes one's view of the present, as most people would acknowledge that it does, then what is to prevent the writing of history from becoming a gigantic feedback mechanism in which pasts are constantly reinvented to serve present needs?

"The historian," Herbert Butterfield (himself a historian) once warned, "can even deepen and magnify present-day prejudices by the mere fact that he so easily tends to throw them back and project them on to the canvas of all the centuries. And the more the historian seeks to please his generation or serve his government or support any cause save that of truth, the more he tends to confirm his contemporaries in whatever they happen to want to believe, the more he hardens his age in its favorable and fashionable errors." Or, as Orwell himself put it, all that was required was "an unending series of victories over your own memory."

"Victories" over memory can arise from Orwellian efforts to rewrite the past in the light of the present, to be sure. But they can also result from the Rankian "cult" of objectivity, from viewing history as "just the facts," if the effect of that doctrine is to wall off the past from the present, thereby making history so dull that our students lose interest in it in the first place. This raises the question, then: should we teach history by simply starting from some point in the past and working forward, granting that the teacher's position in the present will, to an extent, determine the subjects chosen, the research techniques employed, and the conclusions reached? Or should the history teacher acknowledge candidly that contemporary concerns are the starting

point, and that the use of the past to illuminate the present is just as important as the more traditional path of illumination that runs in the other direction?

Teachers of history, I think, should not be ambivalent on this point. If they are going to make history relevant to the concerns of their students -- and particularly if they are going to fit it into the limited amount of time they have to reach it -- they are going to have to be selective in what they teach, and they are going to have to let present concerns, to a large extent, determine those selections. They are going to have to be, in short, "presentist and proud of it." But they must also realize that there is a big difference -- a very big difference -- between the use of presentism in asking questions and in determining answers. It is one thing -- and a wholly acceptable thing -- to let contemporary concerns dictate the questions one asks about the past. It is quite another thing -- and a wholly unacceptable thing if we are serious in our commitment to teach history but also to learn from it -- to let presentist concerns determine the answers.

But just how can knowledge of the past enhance our understanding of the present? Perhaps because they are so conscious of the dangers that can come from using history to serve current causes, those who write and teach history are often reluctant to specify the reasons for studying it. Their readers and their students are normally left to discover these, if they ever do, on their own. An irreverent critic, David Hackett Fischer, has not exaggerated the situation by complaining of fellow historians who, "when asked to explain the nature of history, are apt to respond as Fats Waller (or maybe Louis Armstrong) did, when asked to explain the nature of jazz. 'Man,' he said, 'if you don't know what it is, don't mess with it.'"

The Fats Waller/Louis Armstrong approach does have its attractions: every historian becomes his (or her!) own methodologist, which certainly simplifies things. But the combination of enthusiasm and improvisation that works so well in jazz can lead one, in history, into positions as perilous as those that arise from absolute certitude. The past recedes behind us in infinite detail -- which is to say that, with energy and imagination on the part of the historian, it can provide an infinite number of justifications for an infinite number of positions on current and future issues. One can improvise in any direction, and with almost any result; but in the absence of some sense of what we expect historical consciousness to accomplish, this kind of experimentation -- because of its very aimlessness -- tends to get back, in the end, to letting the present determine answers as well as questions. It is important, therefore, for the teacher of history -- and indeed

for any historian -- to be as explicit as possible about what the purpose of studying history is, or should be.

I would put the matter in the simplest possible terms: history enlarges experience. Except for newborns, who are rarely called upon to make critical decisions in any event, none of us confronts the present without drawing upon past experience. We all have faced problems before, and unless we are forgetful in the extreme, we remember something about how successfully or unsuccessfully we dealt with them. We derive lessons from these recollections, and presumably (though not inevitably) become wiser as a result. The accumulation of experience, after all, leads to proficiency in basketball, ballet, and bridge; why should it not in human affairs generally?

It stands to reason, therefore, that if we can widen the range of that experience beyond what we as individuals have encountered, if we can draw on the experiences of others who have had to confront comparable situations in the past, then our chances of acting wisely should increase proportionately. The inheritance of acquired characteristics may not work in biology, E. H. Carr has pointed out, but historical consciousness makes the inheritance of accumulated experience work (albeit imperfectly) in our own lives: "Modern man is said to have no larger a brain, and no greater innate capacity for thought, than his ancestor 5,000 years ago. But the effectiveness of his thinking has been multiplied many times by learning and incorporating in his experience the experience of the intervening generations. . . . History is progress through the transmission of acquired skills from one generation to another."

How, though, does the study of history accomplish that transmission? It does so first, I believe, by helping to overcome the incongruous combination of ignorance and egocentrism with which each of us is born. Growing up is largely a matter of growing out of that condition: we soak in impressions, and as we do so we dethrone ourselves -- or at least most of us do -- from the center of the universe. The establishment of identity, paradoxically, requires recognizing our relative insignificance in time and space; historical consciousness leaves little room for doubt on that score. The historian G. R. Elton has observed that "the normal adolescent inclination is to relate the world to oneself instead of relating oneself to the world." History "acts as a powerful antidote to the conviction that all problems can be solved by the prejudices and preconceptions that seem so much like eternal verities to the newly self-conscious adolescent;" it teaches "those adjustments and insights which help the adolescent to

become adult, surely a worthy service in the education of youth."

But immaturity does not only afflict adolescents. Adults are fully capable of it even after rising to positions of responsibility; groups, nations, and even international organizations can combine ignorance with egocentrism at any age. And as the rate of change in the modern world accelerates, so too does the tendency toward self-centeredness and thus toward behavior in a correspondingly adolescent manner. "Every age thinks itself to be the most important age that ever occurred," George F. Kennan has pointed out. Only the study of history can compensate for the "Promethean ambitions and illusions" that grow out of the frenzied pace of modern life; only history "can expose the nature of man as revealed in simpler and more natural conditions, where that which was elemental was less concealed by artificialities."

A second way in which the knowledge of history can transmit acquired experience has to do with what we might call "tectonic" forces in world affairs. We have come to understand that the physical world is full of processes that lie outside our normal realm of perception. These processes may operate on a different time scale from the one to which we are accustomed, so that their effects occur too rapidly (like those in quantum physics), or too slowly (like natural selection), for us to notice them. They may take place too far above our heads (like those that determine the movements of weather systems) or too far beneath our feet (like those that produce continental drift). The temporal and spatial limits within which we operate are often inadequate to account for all that affects our lives: hence the frequency with which -- in the physical world at least -- we are surprised.

Things are not all that different in the world of human affairs. There are long-term forces at work that can affect our lives profoundly -- demographic trends, technological innovation, shifting patterns of social and political organization, changes in climate, even cycles of immunity and disease -- and yet because they happen on a scale that does not correspond with the course of day to day events, their consequences become apparent only in retrospect. "Men make their own history," a great analyst of tectonic forces, Karl Marx, once observed, "but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past." It is only through the study of long-term trends -- trends that go well beyond the lifespan of any single individual -- that one can get a sense of these developments, and of the way in which they may affect the present

and the future. The relevant past, therefore, is not just the recent past: it is, rather, whatever there is in the past -- however far back you have to go -- that is still affecting our lives.

A third way in which history transmits accumulated experience relates to the nature of contingency. For, despite the existence of tectonic forces, history is not simply the vector that results from calculating their combined effects. There are random -- and therefore unpredictable -- events in history, and an awareness of their existence provides a good corrective against the notion that there is only one path to the present, and that things could only have happened in the way that they did. No combination of tectonic forces could account for the fact that the driver of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand's car took a wrong turn in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, thus bringing it within range of a dejected assassin who had earlier missed his opportunity, and thereby setting in motion the series of events that led to World War I. Nor, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has pointed out, would even the most prescient pundit have predicted, in 1940, that the next three presidents of the United States would be "an obscure back bench senator from Missouri . . . ; an unknown lieutenant-colonel in the United States Army; and . . . a kid from college."

Theorists find it difficult to know what to do with contingency, precisely because it fits so poorly into grand schemes of analysis: one can never know when an accident, or a random occurrence, or the intersection of two otherwise unrelated trends, will produce unexpected results. But historians know that life is like that: we got to the present through a series of contingencies now frozen in time; that is not, however, the only way we could have got there (although it might have been a different present, and we might have been different ourselves.) The existence of unfrozen contingencies is what distinguishes the present and the future from the past; and anyone who ignores this fact -- anyone who tries to write chance and circumstance out of history -- not only distorts that subject, but leaves those who would learn from it ill-prepared to confront one of the major conditions of their own lives.

Finally, history transmits experience by showing how human behavior, tectonic forces, and contingency can intersect one another. As Marx himself was careful to point out (his followers have not always followed his example), individuals do make history: their lives are not wholly determined by tectonic forces, or by random circumstances. It is necessary, therefore, to have some sense of where human action can be effective and where it cannot be; to

distinguish what one can change from what one must accept. Freedom and determinism are ancient themes in history, and the very fact that historians so rarely resolve the tension between them makes that discipline the most realistic guide we have -- although, as always, it guarantees nothing -- when we must choose between taking action and resigning ourselves to not doing so.

From this perspective, the debates over "objectivism" and "relativism" that have dominated so many discussions on the teaching of history become largely irrelevant. For we are all objectivists -- or ought to be -- when it comes to historical events that we can measure in some form. We rarely disagree about the dates upon which great events took place, or about the number of years great individuals lived. We ought to be capable of accepting that the Black Death wiped out about a third of the population of 14th century Europe, that the weather was colder in the 16th through the 18th centuries than it has been since, that an industrial revolution took place, that it is possible to get from place to place faster than it used to be, and that military weapons produce greater destruction than they once did. All of these are either tectonic or chronological phenomena: they are things we can measure in one way or another according to standards that almost everyone would accept.

But we are all "relativists" -- if we are honest with ourselves -- when it comes to human particularity. Each individual is unique; each establishes identity in a different manner; each responds to contingency in ways that resist prediction ahead of time. There are no universally-accepted standards for assessing character, courage, cowardice, or even intelligence: "Human actions are . . . very delicate phenomena," the great medieval historian Marc Bloch once wrote, "many aspects of which elude mathematical measurement":

Where calculation is impossible we are obliged to employ suggestion. Between the expression of physical and of human realities there is as much difference as between the task of a drill operator and that of a lutemaker: both work down to the last millimeter, but the driller uses precision tools, while the lutemaker is guided primarily by his sensitivity to sound and touch. It would be unwise either for the driller to adopt the empirical methods of the lutemaker or for the lutemaker to imitate the driller.

Both drill operators and lutemakers have their place in the writing and teaching of history. If we can keep their respective functions separate while acknowledging their respective legitimacy, then we will have gone a long way toward settling the

sterile argument between the objectivists and the relativists, and hence toward creating a viable basis upon which to use the past to illuminate the present.

We should expect of the history we teach, therefore, that it should expand the range of experience our students can bring to bear in dealing with their own presents and in anticipating their own futures; that it should do this by transmitting the experiences of others in the past as they have wrestled with problems of identity, tectonics, contingency, and their interaction; that it should provide this information clearly, and with a view to its practical utility. It should do so without compromising standards of craftsmanship or logic; and it should avoid -- like the plague -- excessive pretensions, for the work of all historians is subject to revision, and that of recent historians particularly so.

At the same time, teachers of history should accept the principle that to try to wall off the past from the present is to drain history of what is most interesting and useful about it. After all, history is the only solid basis we have for making judgments about the present and the future. It offers our only means of moving beyond our own experiences to encompass those of other people at other times and in other places. It is the basis for memory, which is what separates us from animals: it is the means by which, unlike animals, we inherit acquired characteristics. And memory is the central organizing principle in our minds.

In his moving and poignant book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, the clinical neurologist Oliver Sacks tells the story of Jimmie G., a 49 year-old brain-damaged man whose memory of all events that had taken place beyond his 19th year extended back only about two minutes. If a person has lost a leg or an eye, Sacks notes, he or she is aware of that loss, and can learn to cope with it. But "what sort of a life (if any), what sort of a world, what sort of a self, can be preserved in a man who has lost the greater part of his memory and, with this, his past, and his moorings in time?" We might very well ask ourselves a similar question about our nation and our culture if we cannot begin to do a better job of accomplishing our common task in the profession we share, which is that of cultivating -- and ensuring the preservation of -- collective memory. ✓

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