

10 Things Everyone Should Know About American History

by Allen Guelzo





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Foreword by

Wilfred M. McClay

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Introduction

When a committee of the Harvard faculty recommended in 1945 that every student take courses in Western Civilization and the American Democracy, it articulated a rationale that resonates even more powerfully today. The aptly titled report, *General Education in a Free Society*, explained that universities are responsible to cultivate a shared sense of purpose in the citizenry. That means teaching citizens what they have in common: our history, the political principles our institutions were designed to perpetuate, and the challenges that remain for posterity to confront.

The breakdown in civic discourse so apparent today—no less than declining public confidence in American institutions—is the sad consequence of Americans’ vanishing historical memory. Every year brings new evidence to document the crisis. In 2019, an ACTA-commissioned National Opinion Research Center survey revealed that college-educated Americans barely outperform the general population. The questions were basic: Who is the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court? What are the term lengths of U.S. Senators and Representatives? Who is the “Father of the Constitution”?

In response to the last question, elemental to even a rudimentary understanding of the American Founding, only 18% of college graduates correctly identified “James Madison.” The grim reality is that our colleges and universities are failing to prepare graduates for responsible citizenship. Most scarcely bother to try. Today, only 18% of U.S. colleges and universities require students to complete a foundational course in U.S. government or history.

That is why ACTA convened a conference at Eastern University in April 2019 to discuss the state of civics education and steps trustees can take to improve the curricula at the institutions they lead. Dr. Allen Guelzo, one of the country’s leading historians, gave an inspiring keynote address,

“10 Things Everyone Should Know About American History,” which is reproduced in the pages that follow.

Seeing to it that every American undergraduate learns at least this much about her country’s history is the urgent first step toward a rebirth of civic literacy. Governing boards and state legislatures can lead by requiring students to take a course that explores the topics Dr. Guelzo’s essay overviews. That way, when fireworks light up the sky on July 4, 2026, Americans will understand why they are celebrating the Sestercentennial of the Declaration of Independence. Securing the blessings of liberty for our posterity, and a republican form of government for the next 250 years, depends on it.

Dr. Michael Poliakoff
President, ACTA

Foreword

by Wilfred M. McClay

Alzheimer's disease is perhaps the most dreaded affliction of our time. It is dreaded because, by robbing its victims of their memories, it also robs them of their fundamental identity, their very sense of who or what they are. Too many of us today have had the unsettling experience of looking into the eyes of a loved one afflicted with this awful disease and being unsure whether the person we once knew so well is still there behind the eyes, whether he is even capable of remembering who he is, or recognizing who we are, and the lifelong relationship that has subsisted between us. Without the capacity for memory, he soon slips away from himself, from us, and from our shared world, and finally vanishes into a fog of unknowing.

What is true for individuals is also true for nations and peoples. What memory is for individuals, history is for civilizations; and without the reference points provided by historical consciousness, we soon forget who we are, and we perish. A culture without memory will necessarily be barbarous and easily tyrannized, even if it is technologically advanced. The incessant waves of daily events occupy all our attention and defeat all our efforts to connect past, present, and future, thereby diverting us from an understanding of the human things that unfold in time, including the paths of our own lives. It is a different fog of unknowing, though one that sounds a lot like the mental state of children, or of all too many adults in the churning and distraction-filled world we have come to inhabit today.

Yet there is a crucial difference to be pointed out here. No one can be blamed for having contracted Alzheimer's disease, an organic condition whose causes we still do not yet understand. It is not a choice. But we the American people can be blamed if we choose to abandon the imperative requirement to know our own past, and if we fail to pass that knowledge

on to the rising generations. We cannot attribute such folly to the sinister effects of some disease. It will be strictly our own fault. We will be the ones responsible for our own decline. And our society has come dangerously close to that very state, having lost a general grasp on the larger trajectory of our own history. It is small wonder that so many young Americans now come into adulthood without a sense of membership in a society whose story is one of the greatest enterprises in human history. That this should be so is a tragedy. And it is also a crime.

As Allen Guelzo points out in the remarkable essay that follows, the fear that we Americans might lose our national soul by forgetting who we are and where we came from is not something new. Abraham Lincoln had the same fears, even as an unusually prescient young man. The possibility of such loss is in fact a perennial problem, arising anew in each new generation of our republic. In our own time, the problem takes the form of a strange paradox: While we “know” more and more about the American past, due to the labors of many battalions of specialized professional historians, we actually know less, because we lack a general grasp of the overarching meaning of our history, the kind of meaning that helps shape the way we live together. We lack an adequate perspective on our history, a perspective that allows us to see the great achievements of American history in their proper light, properly weighed against the admitted failings and shortcomings of that history. We lack a shared sense of the exceptional character of our pioneering experiment in self-rule—a reminder not only of our great good fortune in this land, but also of the great responsibilities that our good fortune entails.

So where to begin repairing the damage done by the neglect of our history, and to begin counteracting the misdeeds of commission and omission that have deprived us of our own legacy? The essay that follows is a marvelous place to start. One of our nation’s most distinguished and accomplished historians, Allen Guelzo also manages to wear his immense learning lightly, and never misses the forest for the trees. He has stepped out from behind the professor’s podium and spoken to us not only as a historian but as a wise fellow citizen.

The result is an immensely illuminating essay that both informs and delights, and may even change the lives of those who read it. Even those

who know little about American history will find it eminently accessible, a doorway into a fascinating subject, a subject in which their own lives are entwined. They will find in it an account of key aspects of the American past that render that past worthy of our gratitude and admiration. In short, this essay is a jewel. You will want to hang on to it and make it a part of your personal library. I've never seen better and more pithy explanations of the revolutionary character of Enlightenment ideas and Protestant evangelicalism, of the genius of the American Founding, of the influence of communications technology on American development, and of the beneficial influence of American foreign policy in the world, from the tide-turning effects of American involvement in the First World War to the American triumph in the Cold War.

We all need to know these things. We need to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, since they are necessary equipment for the task of being informed and constructive American citizens. And there is something more: We need to recover the idea that an education for citizenship is also, in certain respects, an education in love. Critical thinking is an important skill, but it cannot be the sole aim of education. The 10 things about America that Guelzo relates here are not merely interesting; they are admirable. The study of civics must be revived and revitalized, and must include the recognition that civic education directs us not merely toward understanding of our country but toward a warm and sincere attachment to it. We do not need to concoct a fairytale version of American history to have such feelings about it; the truth is perfectly sufficient to draw forth our gratitude.

Dr. Guelzo's essay provides us with 10 huge, foundational things to prize about America. Once having grasped them, the attentive reader may be able to think of many more, and may be able to start laying out a bigger picture of what this country has meant for the history of the world. But the most important thing for each of us to do is to begin, right now, to correct our inadequate educations. And the essay that follows is the perfect place to start.

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10 Things Everyone Should Know About American History

by Allen Guelzo

Abraham Lincoln was only 28 years old, but already he was worried about the loss of memory—not his own, but the nation’s memory of its Revolutionary founders. “I do not mean to say,” Lincoln declared in a speech to the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, in 1838, “that the scenes of the revolution are now or ever will be entirely forgotten; but that like everything else, they must fade upon the memory of the world, and grow more and more dim by the lapse of time.” As that happened, Lincoln fretted that the principles which guided the Revolutionary generation would also become dim and Americans would be tempted to follow the lure of some “Alexander, a Caesar, or a Napoleon.” Is it unreasonable, he asked, “to expect, that some man possessed of the loftiest genius, coupled with ambition sufficient to push it to its utmost stretch, will at some time, spring up among us?

“At such a time and under such circumstances, men of sufficient talent and ambition will not be wanting to seize the opportunity, strike the blow, and overturn that fair fabric, which for the last half century, has been the fondest hope, of the lovers of freedom, throughout the world.”¹

It may seem strange that Lincoln would be so concerned, especially since the Revolution had ended only 55 years before. The last survivor of the Constitutional Convention, James Madison, had only died 18

months before; and likewise, the last of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, had only passed on in 1832. But Lincoln's anxiety was not entirely misplaced. The median age of Americans in that day was approximately 17; of the nearly seven million inhabitants of the United States, less than 5% could have had any effective memory of the Revolution.² In the 25th Congress, which was in session far away in Washington even as Lincoln was speaking, the Speaker of the House, James Knox Polk, was only 43; 18 of the 25 members of Pennsylvania's delegation in the House were under 50; all three of the representatives from Lincoln's Illinois were under 45. The question of *what* was being remembered from the past, and *why*, was a very real one for young man Lincoln.

It's not any less important today, although for a very different set of reasons. In 2014, a report by the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that only 18% of American eighth graders could be considered "proficient" in U.S. history. Much of that deficiency had to do with the weight shifted to math and writing by over-anxious legislatures and school boards eager to comply with the mandates of No Child Left Behind. The Center on Education Policy found that, in the wake of NCLB, 71% of the nation's school districts scaled back instructional time devoted to history. As one Brooklyn teacher told the *New York Post's* Karol Markowicz in 2017, "All the pressure in lower grades is in math and English Language Arts because of the state tests and the weight that they carry."³ And it shows. In a 2019 survey by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, less than half the respondents in the 18-to-29-year-old bracket could identify the 19th Amendment as the instrument that extended voting rights to American women, or 1861 as the year the Civil War began. Only 18% in that age bracket correctly answered "What government action freed all the slaves in the United States?" with "the 13th Amendment." Worse still, only 10% of the 18-to-29-year-olds knew that James Madison was regarded as the "Father of the Constitution."⁴

Anxiety about political correctness plays another role in the vanishing of history. At the elementary and secondary levels, any teacher who attempts to discuss the Pilgrims at Thanksgiving, or remember the Alamo or the *Maine*

or Custer's Last Stand, is likely to risk angry cries of grievance from parents and watchdog groups, and so it becomes safer just to dodge history teaching entirely. At the college level, though, the threat to history learning grows more from worry about employability. The numbers of history majors in American colleges and universities has declined by a staggering 33% since 2011. According to Benjamin Schmidt, an assistant professor of history at Northeastern University who wrote a shocking examination of the decline for the American Historical Association, "Students and their parents seem to be thinking a lot more that they need to major in something practical, [something that is] likely to get them a job at the back end. Students think that history, humanities, English, and philosophy are not those practical majors."⁵

So, before we helplessly watch the teaching of history fade entirely from our screens, it might be a good idea to determine just what about American history we should be teaching, and knowing. Having spent my entire professional life teaching history—and mostly American history—I could give you quite a list of what I consider the essentials we cannot part with; but I will content myself, in the spirit of David Letterman, with proposing a Top Ten of what every American should know about the history of the United States.

Begin, like Lincoln, with the American Founding, and understanding
1 THAT THE FOUNDING WAS AN UNBELIEVABLY UNIQUE EVENT, AND STILL IS, IN HUMAN HISTORY. From time out of mind, human societies had been structured as hierarchies, with kings at the top of the political and social pyramid, ruling over nobles (or sometimes being overruled by them), and finally commoners. People were born with a certain status that identified them with one of those levels for life. The basic understanding which cemented such societies was *reciprocity*: Each level in the pyramid had an obligation to the other. But the center of political authority—or, sovereignty—remained at the top. There had been exceptions to this rule from time-to-time—the Athenian democracy, the Roman republic, the Florentine city-states of the Renaissance—but even they were still hierarchical in the most practical ways. And all of this was reinforced

by a philosophical and scientific consensus, captured and expressed best by Aristotle, that hierarchy was the pattern that ruled the physical world as well.

The Enlightenment of the 17th century—the century of Galileo and Newton—overturned that philosophical and scientific consensus, and in short order, European thinkers from John Locke to Adam Smith began questioning its value in politics and society, too. The American revolutionaries—Washington, Jefferson, Franklin—were very much men of the Enlightenment, and they set out to create an entirely new political order which abolished hierarchy entirely. Sovereignty, in their new order, would be lodged with the commoners; there would be no nobility or kings. They expressed this in the three triumphant words that begin the 1787 Constitution: *We the People*. What identified these people was not their status at birth, but the possession of certain natural rights—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—with which they were all equipped equally. Hence, any American citizens were capable of governing themselves; and any American individuals could make of themselves whatever their talents and opportunities allowed.

This was a phenomenally original achievement, and it excited first the laughter and then the enmity of the kings and monarchs of the world, who fully expected that such a contraption would surely collapse on itself. It didn't. Instead, the monarchies collapsed. And the reason was that the American Founding really had, for the first time, struck the fundamental vein of natural political truth about human society, as surely as Galileo and Newton had done in the physical world.

2 THAT THE GREAT AWAKENING WAS OUR GREATEST CULTURAL UPHEAVAL. The great problem which the Revolutionaries confronted in creating a republic of equals was that, as James Madison warned, human beings are not angels, and as Lincoln feared, the temptation of the super-talented to re-impose some form of tyranny might be too great to resist. The Revolutionaries hoped that this temptation could be restrained by appealing to the virtue of each citizen. “No free government, or the blessings of liberty, can be preserved to any people,” said the Virginia Declaration of Rights in 1776, “but by a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance,

frugality, and virtue, and by frequent recurrence to fundamental principles.” But how was this virtue to be taught to a people spread over 13 states, 864,000 square miles, and four million people?

The answer was religion, and that answer had already been offered even before the Revolution in the form of the religious revivals of the 1740s known as the Great Awakening. Richard Bushman once compared the Great Awakening to “the civil rights demonstrations, the campus disturbances, and the urban riots of the 1960s combined.”

Moreover, since these revivals were the product of evangelical Protestantism, they carried with them a vivid anti-authoritarianism which blended easily with the Revolution’s rebellion against British political authority. Once independence was achieved, the Awakening’s energies also provided the necessary directors of behavior for a republic.

Although the Constitution embodied no particular ethical theory, and the First Amendment to the Constitution forbade the federal government from sanctioning any particular religious denomination as a “national church,” George Washington warned that “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports.”⁶ It was the children of the Awakenings—Archibald Alexander, Francis Wayland, Mark Hopkins, Noah Porter—who devised a moral philosophy tradition that cast religious norms in widely-acceptable secular terminology. Those norms were then reinforced by successive waves of religious revival in the early decades of the republic, which became known as the “Second Great Awakening” (1810–1830). These awakenings provided the cultural substance that filled the interstices of Enlightenment politics. “Awakenings have been the shaping power of American culture from its inception,” wrote religious historian William McLoughlin, and at every crisis moment in our history, religious awakening has been the mechanism by which we confront and adapt to “basic social, ecological, psychological, and economic changes.”⁷

3 THAT POWER AND LIBERTY ARE ANTAGONISTIC TO EACH OTHER—AND THAT THE CONSTITUTION SHOWS THAT THEY ARE EQUALLY NECESSARY TO OUR FLOURISHING AS A NATION. In the hierarchical societies of the past, the only principle that mattered was power,

because power was all that kept disorder and anarchy at bay. Liberty was permitted only grudgingly, and with suspicion, for the havoc it was likely to play with an established order. The American Founders were the great apostles of liberty, but their experience both during and after the Revolution (under the Articles of Confederation) taught them that fears about the destabilizing power of liberty were not unfounded. Individual states used economic liberty to beggar their neighbors; judges in one state undermined legal obligations owed to citizens of other states; economically-stressed farmers with pitchforks and muskets shut down courthouses to prevent the collection of debts. “Our system is more perfect in theory than in practice,” Washington agonized, and he was worried that Americans would soon prove that they “are not competent to their own government without the means of coercion in the Sovereign.”⁸

So when a convention of the American states was called in 1787 to write a new instrument of government, its members—including Washington—were determined to surrender their experiment neither to power nor liberty entirely, but to set the two at work in tandem. They created a multi-part government—a legislature, a judiciary, an executive—and carefully separated their powers, placing them in competition with each other, so that no one part of the government would claim an overweening amount of power or liberty. Power and liberty would thus be domesticated—they would have to work out the patterns of government between themselves. “Our Constitution,” remarked James Russell Lowell, “invented a machine that would go of itself.” It would guarantee a slow and often maddeningly contradictory process of governing. But in recognizing clearly the evils and virtues of power and liberty, the Constitution would safeguard the new republic from the twin alternatives of anarchy and tyranny.⁹

4 THAT THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE WAS THE GREATEST LAND DEAL IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD—greater than Alaska in 1867, greater even than Manhattan in 1624. When the American Revolution ended in 1783, Britain abandoned its claims to its North American lands westward to the Mississippi, retaining only Canada. The problem was that, on the other side of the Mississippi, the territory was ruled by Spain, and the Spanish used the grip this gave them on the Mississippi River and the

great Gulf seaport of New Orleans to tempt Americans who settled beyond the Appalachians to detach themselves and join the Spanish empire, for their own economic well-being. The spine of the Appalachian Mountains, running the length of the republic from north to south, divided the country, physically and economically, and made everyone living west of the mountains dependent on the vast Mississippi river system. Attempts to strike bargains with the Spaniards got us little; in fact, the Jay–Gardoqui Treaty (named for its signers, John Jay and Diego de Gardoqui) of 1786 with Spain gave so little to American interests that Congress refused to ratify it.¹⁰

However, the Spanish themselves came-a-cropper of the ambitions of Napoleon Bonaparte and his French empire, and in 1800, Bonaparte bullied Spain into ceding to France the enormous stretch of Spain's New World possessions known as Louisiana—a vast triangle with one side on the Mississippi river, the other along the Canadian border, and the third in a long line stretching diagonally across the continent from New Orleans to the Pacific Northwest. But Napoleon soon lost interest in Louisiana and offered to sell it all—approximately 830,000 square miles—to the United States for \$15 million in spot cash in the spring of 1803. This Louisiana Purchase excited President Thomas Jefferson, but also made him uneasy that any action he took to approve it might exceed his constitutional powers as president. However, James Madison (serving as Jefferson's secretary of state) defended the Purchase as an exercise of the presidential authority to make treaties and argued that “the existence of the United States as a nation presupposes the power enjoyed by every nation of extending their territory by treaties.” Eventually, on October 20, 1803, the Senate ratified the agreement, applauding the acquisition as “a bargain now in our power, which, once missed, we never shall have again.” American officials took formal possession of Louisiana in ceremonies at New Orleans two months later.¹¹

What the Louisiana Purchase did was threefold: First, it secured New Orleans for the United States and thus removed any idea that Americans settling in the west would be tempted to transfer their allegiances to a foreign power in order to secure access to New Orleans, and through New

Orleans, to world markets; second, it opened the vista of Americans all the way to the Pacific, shifting Americans' sense of their place in the world from that of a minor seagoing nation on the fringe of the Atlantic world to a vast continental land power; and third, it unleashed the pent-up hunger of Americans for economic independence into a new field which would occupy American energies for another century. It would, unhappily, also have two unpleasant byproducts: It would sweep the indigenous tribes who populated the Purchase into near oblivion, and it would create a theatre for argument over the expansion of legalized slavery which would eventually erupt in civil war. Few decisions—much less purchases—have had more long-lasting consequences.

5 THAT THE CREATION OF THE ELECTRICAL TELEGRAPH SET THE STAGE FOR ALL SUBSEQUENT INNOVATIONS IN COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY. Americans have always been at war with time; but the great ally of time was distance, and American distances were huge. In 1800, news from New York City took two days to reach Philadelphia, four days to reach Boston, a week to reach Richmond or Pittsburgh, and four weeks to reach New Orleans. The invention of the Fulton steamboat in 1807, the furious digging of canals, and the introduction from Great Britain of the first railroad, the Baltimore & Ohio in 1827, whittled those distances down; news from New York now reached Pittsburgh in four days and New Orleans in two weeks. But the creation of the electric battery in 1800 by Alessandro Volta, and the electromagnet by William Sturgeon in 1824, allowed Samuel Finley Breese Morse to begin experimenting in sending electrical signals by wire as early as 1837. A grant from Congress in 1843 allowed Morse to establish an electromagnetic telegraph line between Washington and Baltimore, and in May 1844, Morse was able to communicate news of a political convention in Baltimore to onlookers in Washington a full hour and 15 minutes before a train arrived with the same news.¹²

More than any other invention, the telegraph annihilated distance, and with it, time. As Neil Postman wrote, the telegraph “erased state lines, collapsed regions, and by wrapping the continent in an information grid, created the possibility of a unified American discourse.”¹³ Information no longer had to be carried by hand; it could be reduced to electrical symbols

and communicated instantaneously. In 1858, it would make a regional politician named Lincoln into a national figure by transmitting the texts of his seven debates with Stephen A. Douglas; in the Civil War, it would direct the march of armies, as “hardly a day intervened when,” according to Union General William Tecumseh Sherman, his superior, Ulysses Grant “did not know the exact state of facts with me, more than fifteen hundred miles off, as the wires ran.”¹⁴ From the principle of the telegraph sprang the telephone, the radio, and television. Even the national grid of railroads in the 19th century would have been impossible to coordinate without the instant information network provided by electrical telegraphy. And, in the longest sense, even the digital communication of virtually everything which we enjoy through the personal computer and the World Wide Web are the descendants of Morse’s telegraph.

6 THAT ABRAHAM LINCOLN FREED THE SLAVES. Slavery was, so to speak, the birth defect of the American Republic. Although the Constitution carefully avoided any references to slaves, masters, owners, or anything that Madison believed promoted the idea that there could be “property in men,” it also did nothing actively to suppress slavery, despite the numbers of delegates at the Constitutional Convention who declared that they “never would concur in upholding domestic slavery,” because “the curse of heaven” was “on the States where it prevailed.”¹⁵ Britain’s Industrial Revolution fueled the explosion of slave-based cotton agriculture, and with it, demands for expanding legalized slavery into the territories acquired by the Louisiana Purchase. But opposition to slavery also confined that growth until, with the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1860, it was clear that legalized slavery would be allowed no further expansion. Promptly, 11 of the states that had slavery laws attempted to secede from the Union, and the Civil War ensued. But on January 1, 1863, Lincoln signed an Emancipation Proclamation which freed almost three-quarters of the slaves; and for that, he has long been known as the Great Emancipator.

But not without objections: Some ask why he didn’t free *all* of the slaves in 1863, rather than just those held in the breakaway states that composed the Southern Confederacy; others claim that Lincoln’s proclamation had nothing to do with slavery and everything to do with rallying political

opinion, at home and abroad, against the secessionists. Still others insist that the slaves freed themselves by using the confusion of the Civil War to run away. But none of these objections really describe the situation as it was in 1863. True, Lincoln freed only the slaves in the Confederacy and passed over the slaves held in the four slave states which remained loyal to the Union (Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, and Delaware). But he did this because the only legal weapon available to him for emancipating slaves was his “war powers” as the constitutional Commander-in-Chief; Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, and Delaware had not joined the Confederacy, and weren’t at war, and so Lincoln had no legal arm with which to reach their slaves. (That would require the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1865). As much as Lincoln personally loathed slavery, and believed that “if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong,” he had to employ a constitutional means for bringing it down.

Nor is there much evidence that the Emancipation Proclamation was merely a device to rally political support for his administration. The mid-term elections which followed the issuing of a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862 cost Lincoln over 30 seats in the House of Representatives, while abroad, the British government was so fearful that emancipation would trigger a race war that Lincoln’s proclamation generated *more*, rather than less, discussion about foreign intervention in the Confederacy’s favor. And as for freeing themselves, the numbers of slave runaways during the Civil War probably never amounted to more than 5% of the slave population. In the end, freeing the slaves was Lincoln’s work, and, as he described it, it was “the central act of my administration, and the great event of the nineteenth century.”¹⁶

7 THAT THE UNITED STATES SAVED THE ALLIES FROM DEFEAT IN WORLD WAR ONE. The word usually associated with World War One is *attrition*—the slow grinding-down of opposing armies by fruitless small-scale and large-scale fighting until one side simply bled out. That is not what the opposing nations—Britain, France, Italy, and Russia on the one side, the German and Austrian empires on the other—entered the war expecting, but from 1914 and 1915 onward, it’s what France, Britain, and Italy got;

only in Russia was there anything like the grand Napoleonic campaigns the empires had anticipated. The conventional European wisdom has long been that Britain and the Allies eventually succeeded in outproducing Germany in all kinds of war materials and that when the United States finally entered the war in April 1917, against Germany, its troops only barely managed to show up before the Germans and Austrians quit.¹⁷

The numbers, however, tell a different story: The Germans and Austrians proved to be extremely effective at winning battlefield victories, in Belgium, Serbia, northern Italy, and Russia, and inflicted far heavier casualties on their enemies than they themselves sustained—one-third of those suffered by the British, French, and Belgians in 1914, half those suffered by the British on the Somme, at Passchendaele, Arras, and Cambrai. As it was, much of the Allied war effort had been kept afloat by loans from the United States and by American production of war materials (despite its technical status as a neutral). But the collapse of Russia in 1917 and its withdrawal from the war seemed to put Germany on the edge of a crushing military superiority against the British and French, and when in March 1918, Germany launched its *Kaiserschlacht*, it rolled over two British armies and threatened to pin what remained against the English Channel, while the French prepared to abandon Paris. However, by the spring of 1918, the United States had managed to put almost half a million fresh troops of the American Expeditionary Force into France, and it was this advance force which blunted the *Kaiserschlacht* at Château-Thierry and the Belleau Wood. By the time the Germans renewed their offensive in July 1918, there were 900,000 Americans in position, and by August, the German high command was beginning to recommend breaking off the attacks and negotiating an armistice. When the AEF went on the offensive itself in September and broke through the Argonne Forest, the German chancellor recommended that the armistice become immediate, which followed on November 11, 1918.

Without the American intervention, it is entirely possible that Britain and France would have been forced into negotiations in which Germany would have had the upper hand, and which would have resulted in German

annexations in Belgium and France, allowing Germany to stand in a position of easy threat to Britain (the great balancer-of-power in Europe since the 18th century) and permitting the domination of the continental economy by German interests.¹⁸

8 THAT THE GREAT DEPRESSION ONLY ENDED WITH THE ONSET OF WORLD WAR TWO. For almost a century since the beginning of the Great Depression, people have debated what caused it, what sustained it for so long (fully a decade), and why it ended—or even *whether* it ended. As for its cause, the safest answer is to point to the dislocation of the world's economies by World War One—not only in terms of wiping out between nine and 10 million lives at the peak of both their economic productivity and consumption, but in how it deranged world banking and finance. The result was a worldwide depression whose force was spectacularly disastrous, beginning with the catastrophic collapse of the New York stock market in October 1929. Unemployment in the United States rocketed from 2.4% in 1923 to 8.7% in 1930 and finally 24.9% in 1933.¹⁹

The Golden Legend of the American 20th century is that Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal came to the rescue with his election to the presidency in 1932, and happy days were here again. It was by no means that simple: Roosevelt's luckless predecessor, Herbert Hoover, had already taken a number of aggressive federal steps to curb the Depression's impact, including the Smoot-Hawley Tariff of 1930 and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (which was intended to stabilize wobbling financial institutions). Little of it, however, trickled down to the unemployed, and Hoover's mishandling of the Bonus Expeditionary March—a march of 17,000 unemployed World War One veterans on Washington in the summer of 1932—made the election of Roosevelt and his promise of a New Deal almost a tidal wave.

But Roosevelt fared no better than Hoover in devising federal solutions to the Depression. Despite launching 30 new assistance programs—the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Works Progress Administration, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration—by January 1934, unemployment in the civilian labor force was still at 21.4%. In fact, unemployment ticked back upward to 23.2% later that year and was still stuck at 17.4% in 1938.

It was, in the end, the race in Europe to re-arm, led by Hitler's Germany, which restarted the American economy. In November 1939, Congress repealed most of the restrictions on arms sales imposed by the Neutrality Act of 1935, and industrial productivity promptly shot up by 20%; unemployment dropped to 14.6% in 1940, and then to just 9.9% in 1941 (the last year of peace for America). Even that disappeared once the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor catapulted us directly into the Second World War. And Franklin Roosevelt went (as he quipped) from being Dr. New Deal to Dr. Win-the-War.²⁰

9 THAT DROPPING THE ATOMIC BOMB ON HIROSHIMA IN 1945 WAS UNAVOIDABLE. Nazi Germany surrendered in May 1945. Defeating Germany's Pacific collaborator, Japan, was another matter: The Japanese were undermanned and under-resourced, but they had fought the steady encirclement of their home islands with fanatical fury, and they were prepared to defend those islands to the last burnt shrub. The alternative to launching an invasion of Japan was a secret new weapon of appalling force, developed by American scientists under the cover of what was known as the Manhattan Project—the atomic bomb.²¹

Use of such a weapon could hardly avoid inflicting staggering civilian casualties; and yet, what else would induce the Japanese to surrender without inflicting staggering *military* casualties on the American and Allied soldiers who would have to conduct an invasion of Japan? As British prime minister Winston Churchill would later write, “We had contemplated the desperate resistance of the Japanese fighting to the death with Samurai devotion, not only in pitched battles, but in every cave and dugout” across the Pacific. “To quell the Japanese resistance man by man and conquer the country yard by yard might well require the loss of a million American lives and half that number of British. . . .” And that would not even begin to account for the loss of Japanese lives.²²

Revulsion at the bomb's hideous power (and the suspicion that using it on Japan was really a gesture intended to intimidate our restless Soviet allies) has given rise to the legend that, when the atomic bomb was finally used on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, Japan was ready for surrender anyway and could have been talked into terms. But

the actual experience of the Pacific War gives no comfort to the idea that imperial Japan could be talked easily into capitulation: When 80,000 U.S. Marines stormed ashore on Iwo Jima (just 760 miles south of Tokyo) in February 1945, 21,000 Japanese soldiers, fighting to almost the last man, held them up for five weeks and inflicted over 25,000 casualties. On Okinawa, in April, 77,000 Japanese troops killed or wounded a third of the U.S. attacking force of 180,000. And, what is more telling, the Japanese had already suffered bombing losses from conventional B-29 attacks which would be far greater than those inflicted by a single atomic bomb. On March 9, 1945, 302 B-29s dropped 1,700 tons of incendiary bombs on Tokyo, killing 89,000 people and incinerating 16-and-a-half square miles of the city. These blows convinced the Japanese military leadership that the war was lost; the problem was that it did not also convince them to surrender.

What was needed was something infinitely more dramatic, and that was the atomic bomb. Within 12 hours of the second atomic bomb drop, on Nagasaki, the Japanese opened negotiations, and capitulated five days later. Even so, on August 14, a last-minute conspiracy of rebel Japanese army officers tried to seize power and prevent the surrender.²³

10 THAT THE COLD WAR ENDED IN AN AMERICAN VICTORY.

As the American and British armies spilled across Nazi Germany in the spring of 1945, Winston Churchill exhorted American General Dwight D. Eisenhower to “shake hands with the Russians as far to the east as possible.”²⁴ Churchill mistrusted the Soviet alliance, convinced that the Soviet Union would use victory over Germany as the basis for establishing a Marxist hegemony over all of Europe. He was not wrong: A Soviet-dominated interim government was installed in Poland in 1945; this was accompanied by similar actions in Romania and Yugoslavia in 1946, in Bulgaria and Hungary in 1947, and Czechoslovakia in 1948. And all of them together inaugurated police states that were fully as brutal, murderous, deceitful, and destructive as the Nazi regime. Beyond Europe, Soviet imperial ambitions overthrew the war-weakened Chinese government of Chiang Kai-Shek; and then, after Chinese Marxism grew suspicious of Soviet overlordship, the Soviets reached over their heads to destabilize Southeast Asia and then advance in the 1970s into the Asian subcontinent.

Independence movements that tore the world's colonial empires from the hands of their enfeebled European masters after the Second World War ironically dropped them one-by-one into the spheres of Soviet influence and consigned their peoples to tens of millions of deaths, not to mention economic and social stagnation.

The United States drew as many lines against Soviet aggression as it could afford, starting with the Marshall Plan, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Europe, and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization to protect Indochina and the Malay Peninsula. But the best we could hope for—and especially after the Soviets purloined the secrets of the atomic bomb for themselves—was what diplomat George F. Kennan called “containment”—an uneasy stand-off known as the “Cold War” in which advantages could be won only by small increments and in small places.

We did not win many of them: A gatekeeper regime installed in South Vietnam embroiled the United States in a vicious ground war for 10 years that cost 58,000 killed and ended in the humiliating conquest of South Vietnam by its Soviet-proxy opponent, North Vietnam, in 1975. Anti-Soviet uprisings in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in Poland in 1980 were suppressed, as the United States and NATO looked helplessly on. And there were many voices which counseled appeasement and détente with the Soviets, either out of fear or, in some cases, out of ideological disenchantment with democracy itself.

But the Soviet Union was a weaker sister than it appeared. Its rigidly socialistic internal economy was primitive, and its fiscal strength rested on its oil revenues. So long as the price of oil skyrocketed through the 1970s, the Soviets undertook still more imperial adventures, including a high-risk invasion of Afghanistan in 1979–80. But after 1980, world oil prices spiraled into decline, and with it, so did the stability of the Soviet economy. This instability was hastened when Ronald Reagan became president in 1981, frankly advocating confrontation and rollback of the Soviets as an “evil empire.” Reagan’s determination to confront the Soviets—first in the Caribbean, then in Europe itself—rather than merely “contain” them opened up still more cracks in the Soviet façade. Soviet self-confidence was still further eroded by the humiliating collapse of their Afghanistan

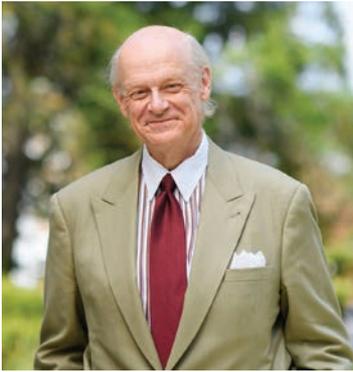
adventure in the face of U.S.-backed *mujahideen*, by the voices of their own dissidents (especially Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn), and by the spectacular mishandling of a nuclear reactor disaster at Chernobyl in 1986. Eventually, by 1989, the entire Soviet world was shuddering under the strain. The Soviet premier, Mikhail Gorbachev, began to talk about *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) in the Soviet Union. As he did, parts of the Soviet empire began to break away, one-by-one, until finally the entire Soviet Union simply came apart. After 40 years of “containment,” the United States had called the Soviets’ bluff—and they had folded, and folded in the most sensational and yet peaceful folding of an empire that had ever occurred.²⁵

These are the moments every American should know and understand—partly because they are remarkable achievements, but even more because each one of them represents a constituent part of our identity as Americans. (If I had an eleventh or a twelfth, they would probably go to Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement, or the G.I. Bill—but I promised to stick with *10*). These are not just events that *happened*; they are the events which shape our present and guide our assumptions and attitudes about the world. We are, to begin with, an Enlightenment nation, built upon a certain proposition, “that all men are created equal.” But we are also a profoundly and creatively religious nation, and our religious and philosophical commitments are what lead us to understand the intricate dance of power and liberty. We are an inventive people who invented ways to escape restraint, whether the restraint was time and distance or slave labor. We are an idealistic people, willing to make sacrifices that save others; but a practical people, who count the costs of how to do that saving.

These 10 lessons from our history help to teach us who we are. They do not teach us that we have always been perfect, or deployed our principles perfectly, for we have not. Still, the wonder is that “any nation, so conceived and so dedicated” to such principles ever managed to implement them as well as we have done.

But these discoveries of who we *are* arise from understanding who we have *been*. Lincoln was right to be worried in 1838: To lose our history is to lose ourselves.





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Together with Patrick Allitt and Gary W. Gallagher, Dr. Guelzo team-taught The Teaching Company's American History series, as well as courses on Abraham Lincoln, American intellectual history, the American Revolution, and the Founders.

He lives in Paoli and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Debra. They have three children—Jerusha Mast, Alexandra Fanucci, and Capt. Jonathan Guelzo (U.S.A.)—and seven grandchildren.

End Notes

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An 11th thing everyone should know about American history is that this is a golden age for the writing of it, by academic historians such as Allen Guelzo and others, in and outside of academia. Of course there is a surfeit of writings by people whose cramped vision miniaturizes our great national project. Yes, many historians lack the civilized talent for praising the many praiseworthy parts of our national project. But, then, excellence is always a minority achievement. And the best scholarship is finding a vast readership in the general public. When history departments in colleges and universities notice this, and adjust accordingly, we can expect a surge of interest among students. They might not realize it, but they hunger for a patriotic engagement with the sort of large subjects that Allen Guelzo identifies as mind-opening chapters in a luminous national story that is still being written.

George F. Will, Author and Columnist, *Washington Post*

With brilliant brevity, Guelzo shows us that American history matters, not just to Americans but to the world.

Gordon S. Wood, Alva O. Way University Professor and Professor of History Emeritus, Brown University

With Allen Guelzo's beautifully-written essay in hand, every American has a definitive reference for the essentials of U.S. history. The essay is conveniently arranged in chronological order according to critical historical moments and game-changing leaders, with significant dates identified. In other words, this essay is a concise American history *raisonné* which should set to rest debates around why knowing history matters. Congratulations to ACTA for making Professor Guelzo's work available to us.

Louise Mirrer, President and CEO, New-York Historical Society

If we want a better future, then we need to understand our past. I hope every higher education leader will take Professor Guelzo's essay to heart and that our universities will make certain that our graduates are fully ready for engaged and informed citizenship.

**The Honorable Hank Brown, U.S. Senator from Colorado, 1991-1997
Past President, University of Colorado**



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