

Encounter at 10: The Power of Ideas

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COMMISSIONED ESSAY:

Memory and Civic Education: The Perils of Cultural Amnesia

by Victor Davis Hanson

THE TRADITIONAL—and classical—definition of civic education rested on the assumption of a people’s collective memory. Citizens in constitutional governments had to be reminded, taught—even indoctrinated—about the great deeds of their own past if they were to have any notion of their own present privilege or the obligations that accompanied their citizenship and maintained it. The second-century A.D. biographer Plutarch—late in the classical tradition—simply reflected a long-standing ancient interest in offering moral exemplars from the past. Contemporary Roman generations could measure their own worth by studying the biography of a Demosthenes or the Gracchi, and thereby learn to be better citizens by both emulation and critique of the mistakes of “illustratious Greeks and Romans.”

The Funeral Oration of Pericles, as recorded in the second book of Thucydides’ history, is the *locus classicus* of civic memory with the statesman’s famous pronouncement, “I shall begin with our ancestors.” Pericles then goes on to make several points. The first is to remind the Athenians that they were simply born lucky: the imperial grandeur that they enjoyed was due to their fathers and grandfathers, who “handed it down free to the present time by their valor.”

Such gratitude and humility in the moral sense are, of course, important for a free people, likely to think their present success is all their own, and therefore, in their self-congratulation, prone to hubris and a lack of reflection. Recitation of the accomplishments of earlier others also reminds Athenians that they are a mere link in a larger chain. And therefore they carry obligations to their children not to squander what the sacrifices of their parents achieved. The desired aim is to accept delayed gratification; that is, to warn the present generation not to expend capital bequeathed from others, and thereby rob their own children of a collective and rightful inheritance—and therein forfeit the continuance of democratic society.

Finally, Pericles assumes that appreciation of this enormous responsibility will serve as a moral guide to Athenians, in the same manner in which religion, the family or community reputation can all curb our dangerous appetites. Athenians must take on the responsibilities of citizens not

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just in regard for the advantages of the present, but also to avoid shaming those now dead by becoming lesser folks than were their fathers.

How odd it would be today for a contemporary statesman to remind us that we as Americans were born lucky, given our ancestry and the gifts we inherited from others. Just as rare would be to hear that the citizen should not damage the public good—by slandering his country or avoiding his taxes—in fear that he might break faith will all those beneath the white crosses of our national cemeteries who died in god-awful places like Shiloh, Tarawa, and Chosun for the continuance of the freedom and material options that we now take for granted.

Unless we have an active memory of, and feel a certain awe for, those now dead and too often forgotten—who built our universities, erected our majestic buildings, crafted the protocols of our government, and won our wars—then we become dead souls of a sort, who drift among the infrastructure they left behind, which at best we take for granted but otherwise know nothing about, and, at worst, convince ourselves that we in fact built it.

I. THE DRUDGERY OF THE PAST

Of all the damage that political correctness has wrought, none has been worse than this cultural amnesia about, and disdain for, our own American past. Americans seem to have lost any empathy for what our ancestors suffered in the most basic physical sense. The history of the Western frontier expansion, for example, has become reduced often either to the atrocities at Wounded Knee or the Trail of Tears, as mountain men, cowboys, and pioneer women all become cardboard representations of environmental exploiters and criminals involved in premeditated genocide of the native Americans.

But lost in this melodrama is tragedy. We make no allowance for the horrific frontier experiences of millions of poor immigrants of all races, whose real enemies were not always each other, Native Americans, or the “system”—the nebulous “they” who do all sorts of injustices in the mind of the present generation—but rather the physical world itself. In pre-industrial times, how did people head westward without good maps, with only horse-powered wagons, when a strep throat, a pregnancy, or an infected small cut could mean a painful death? If today’s American is inconvenienced after a few days of camping in the rough, how did families of fifteen in tiny cabins address problems of clean water, sewage, and food preparation without modern science and technology? Would appreciation of that material adversity in some way mitigate common condemnation of our ancestors as somehow less liberal than us, if, for example, we remember that they had neither toilet paper nor antibiotics?

Politically-correct history forgets that the enemy of liberalism is drudgery. Those who spent hours cooking meals were a harvest away from starvation. They assumed that a fourteen-hour work day was a requisite for survival, and that they often had too little time to speculate about radical changes in the material world about them, accepting that change could come safely only

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in small increments. In that sense of having no margin of error, reactionary rote was safer than liberal experimentation.

All that appreciation of past ordeal is lost in the present practice of tabulating in the abstract the various racial, class, and gender transgressions of a dominant culture. Yet in some sense, there was not so much a dominant culture in eighteenth- or nineteenth-century America as instead millions of victims subject alike to nature's awful whim. I say victims, but, of course, nineteenth-century Americans triumphed over nature and thus the roads, schools, airports, and prosperous cities of the modern West only emerged once our forefathers settled the countryside and established a template for what followed.

In this regard, I think of my grandmother, born in 1890, as a typical turn-of-the-century pioneer. Georgia Davis reached my present grandfather's farm in central California after a rough childhood on the New Mexican frontier in which her twelve-year-old brother was gunned down while sweeping a saloon and her sister perished from diphtheria. She was later to spend a year near death, without antibiotics, from a ruptured appendix that was never removed. I imagine that she developed prejudices, but they seemed incidental in comparison to the sheer exuberance she displayed by surviving to ninety-three and knowing that the progress, both moral and material, of her country between 1890 and 1983 was simply a collective reflection of her own odyssey.

II. WHAT WAS IMPORTANT?

A second legacy of our collective amnesia about the past—due to the nature of history instruction in our schools and the bridles of political correctness—is the complete loss of any notion of magnitude. Quite simply, how do we determine what is important in the past? How do we distinguish between what was merely significant and what were landmark occurrences that changed the lives of tens of thousands and the future of hundreds of thousands more? And if we can't ascertain what of importance happened in our past, how then can we have any fair guide to our present ordeal?

In our school history texts, when students arrive at the Civil War, the noble Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth often merit more notice than William Tecumseh Sherman, who split the Confederacy, took Atlanta, saved the 1864 election for Abraham Lincoln, and helped General Grant destroy the Confederate resistance. Why? Not because the work of Tubman and Truth to end slavery was more seminal than preserving the Union that alone could stop slavery in America, but because, as women of color, they far better serve as valuable milestones in the narrative of American pathology, while offering racial and gender role models for the present.

Note that most of our children know of Hiroshima and the Japanese internment—as the now infamous Reverend Wright apparently evoked repeatedly in his sermons—as proof of American malevolence during World War II. But they have little clue about Guadalcanal or Okinawa, where at great cost imperial Japanese expansion was checked and then defeated. Why again? Because the story of American violence and racism resonates more than the narrative of

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Americans sacrificing to stop a racist imperialist Japan doing to the United States what it systematically had done to China and most of the eastern Pacific. The Vietnam War is usually the story of student protests and My Lai, not amazing American victories at Tet and Hue that for a time saved South Vietnam from a cruel Stalinist tyranny. Why? Because the war is useful in reminding Americans not of the need to protect others from communism, but rather in emphasizing our own amorality.

The loss of a proper notion of magnitude about the past not only means we elevate the less important over the seminal, but also lose any yardstick of the past by which to measure the present. Today we speak of the 4,000 American dead in an ongoing war for a democratic Iraq as part of the “worst” decision in American diplomatic or military history. But only a generation that was ignorant of the nearly 23,000 casualties suffered in a single day at Antietam, or the 81,000 dead and wounded lost at the Battle of Bulge, or the over 5,000 Americans killed in the first four years of the Philippines insurrection could employ such superlatives of their own experiences with war in Iraq.

If there is any measurement of what now warrants our attention and what does not, it is often what I would call oppression studies—to what degree does a past life or an incident serve the contemporary goal of victimology and further an equality of result. Recently Barack Obama called for more emphasis on the history of various racial, gender, and religious victims, arguing for more African-American history “as well as women’s struggle for equality, the history of unions, the role of Hispanics in the U.S. and other matters that aren’t given enough attention. I want us to have a broad-based history even including more of the Holocaust as well as other issues of oppression around the world.” Note how “broad-based history” is seen as equivalent to “issues of oppression around the world.”

We elevate the individual narratives of particular Native Americans, African-Americans, and women over the collective achievement of prior generations of Americans, because thereby we serve the noble aim of racial inclusiveness in the present—but also the ignoble goal of alleviating our own present guilt about the past by demonizing or ignoring those others who left us the very prosperity and tradition of free speech that has allowed us to caricature them.

III. BAD OR WORSE?

Another result of our cultural amnesia is the inability to understand dilemmas, or the need to accept a bad choice when the alternative is far worse. For example, we hear the constant refrain that the United States gave intelligence information to Saddam Hussein when he was fighting the Iranian theocracy that had stormed our embassy and taken our diplomats hostage. We are remonstrated that in Anbar province in Iraq we recruited ex-insurgents to turn on their former allies, the far worse al-Qaeda terrorists. We fault ourselves for disbanding the Baathist-led army that left a security vacuum, as if keeping an authoritarian force of Saddamists would have posed no similar dilemmas.

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History is not melodramatic therapy, but rather tragedy. To defeat an horrific Nazi Germany America allied itself with an horrific Soviet Union in 1941, not much more than a mere decade after its mass annihilation of twenty million of its own. And then after successful completion of the war, the United States promptly refocused its effort against Soviet expansionary communism. The feeling of the cruel irony of it all was strong in 1945. General George Patton and others lamented that a war to keep Eastern Europe free and independent from Nazi aggrandizement in 1939 had ensured it would not be free from Soviet terrorism in 1945.

Yet a prior generation, understanding the value of a Soviet alliance to defeat Hitler, likewise understood the immediate need to resurrect Europe and Germany to defeat Soviet communism—rightly aware that we are mere humans, not gods, and cannot guarantee that today's ally won't be tomorrow's enemy, only hope that in such contortions the nature and aims of America as foes of totalitarianism remain constant. If we do not understand the sometimes bleak choices of history, then in the present and for the future we place upon ourselves such utopian burdens that almost any result will be caricatured and second-guessed. And the ultimate result will be a moral stasis, and the bankrupt notion that inaction is not an error of omission.

IV. PRESENT HYPOCRISY

Another symptom of our neglect, or denigration, of our past is hypocrisy. There are two subsets. The first is the implausibility of well-fed and secure scholars and teachers passing casual judgment on those whose deeds they themselves are simply incapable of emulating. By easily condemning the fire raids over Hamburg and Tokyo as amoral—in the luxury of peace once there is no longer an ascendant fascist German or Japanese empire to threaten our daily lives—we forget that few professors or teachers of history could climb in a blister gun turret and fly sixteen hours over the Pacific from the Marianas to Japan—three times a week, amid foul weather, hostile fire, and in often unreliable airplanes in the belief that they were one of the few tools available to Allies to stop Nazi barbarity.

It is easy now to sermonize about American racism in the island campaigns of World War II; but rather difficult to remain unbiased when engaged in hand-to-hand combat with those who routinely resorted to atrocity, and were willing to blow themselves up to kill. The point is not that the teacher of history is to suspend moral judgment, or that there is a not an abstract standard that can calibrate morality of the past across time and space. For example, we would make no moral exemption for the SS General Sepp Dietrich, who conducted a cruel war on both the Eastern and Western fronts that required physical endurance and strength beyond our own. Rather, the point is humility—that before we pass the judgment on the B-17 bombardier over Hamburg we understand physical and psychological dilemmas he endured.

Second, we earn a further charge of hypocrisy when we take for granted our present affluence and prosperity, while collectively condemning those in the past who were largely responsible for it. The neo-Marxist campus critic of capitalism assumes a prosperous economy and free markets to supply him with ample salary, tenure, legal protections, and the technology to fly to

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conferences, publish books, and be equipped with state-supplied computers and electronic appurtenances.

Yet given what we know of universities under totalitarian systems from the former Soviet Union, to North Korea to Cuba, such a comfortable campus embryo is simply impossible under communism. Almost all the present popular causes of the contemporary Left—the plight of the Palestinians, the egalitarianism of Cuban health care, the rape and pillage of the innocent in Darfur, or the callous treatment of the Tibetans—highlight these paradoxes. No one would choose to be operated on in Palestine in a Ramallah hospital rather than in Tel Aviv. The American tourist would not choose brain surgery in Havana. Only the U.S. military, not U.N. peacekeepers, could stop genocide in the Sudan. And the ability to voice concerns about the Dalai Lama's plight is simply not possible in China, but only in the West and its spheres of influence. At some point, even the most severe critics of American history must acknowledge that our present inherited bounty and freedom were derived in some part from a system not of our own generation's making—and not the product of canonized socialists, communists, and pacifists of the past.

V. THE WAGES OF HISTORICAL IGNORANCE

What are the ramifications of an amnesiac democratic society that either cannot or will not appreciate its past? The first dividend is sheer ignorance. History is a referent of the present, and there is no guarantee that each generation will maintain what was bequeathed by others without guidance of what has and has not worked. If we forget the lessons of the past, we lack any models to live by in the present. For example, today America suffers from a vast energy shortage. We claim that we cannot drill petroleum off our coasts or in Alaska. We insist that more coal plants and oil refineries are too dirty, and nuclear power is too dangerous. We turn to ethanol even as food prices skyrocket as land for food is diverted to fuel. We praise wind and solar power, even as they have not supplied much more than a fraction of our daily demands. We praise, and rightly so, conservation, but due to population growth consume more energy than ever before, and then are bewildered when all our options from drilling, farming fuel, importing Middle Eastern oil, and mining to developing nuclear power appear to us alone as novel dilemmas—and were not known to prior generations who nonetheless made decisions that bequeathed a prosperous nation.

Our forefathers—have we forgotten?—built hydroelectric dams, drilled wells, and mined coal, not because they enjoyed pollution, or were even careless and uncaring about the environment, but because their first allegiance was to feed, clothe, and provide for the citizenry, impossible in a modern age without accessible and inexpensive power. By thinking there are no difficult choices, we find ourselves as inactive as our ancestors were proactive—and are finding our food too expensive, energy too scarce, or self-righteousness all too common.

Second, historical revisionism can mask self-indulgence. Once a society damns its past and its benefactors as illiberal, it has provided the intellectual exegesis for its own conspicuous

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consumption. Our present generation has nearly bankrupt the social security system, accumulated trillions of dollars in national debt, lost a war in Vietnam, spent trillions of dollars in national wealth on cosmetic surgeries, and induced a crass popular culture of conspicuous consumption and self-indulgence—and yet has rewritten our public school history textbooks to emphasize the sins of our prior generations. The more we demonize the dead, the more we the living are then free to rewrite the rules of our own moral behavior.

Finally, there is the expectation even among critics of the United States that America is foreordained, nearly omnipotent in its exercise of its power. In fact, America is history's fragile aberration—a nation based on ideas and principles, not traditional unifiers such as race, religion, or identical ancestry. At numerous times in its brief history—the winter of 1776, the awful summer of 1864, the panic of 1929, the dark years of winter 1942, and the social chaos of 1968—its very existence as a democratic nation was in doubt. For this country to continue, a majority of its citizens each generation must believe not that it is perfect, but rather than it is far better than the alternative, and therefore worth investing one's loyalty and talents in its preservation.

But should collectively we come to see the history of America as largely the story of racial, gender and class oppressions, far worse than what was found elsewhere at the time, or simply have no idea at all about our own past or the ordeal of our ancestors, then history suggests that there would be no reason for the experiment to continue, at least as we have known the United States. And of course then it would not. The hard work of uniting diverse peoples under uniquely humane principles is the work of over two centuries; the easy task of ending it can be accomplished in a mere generation through our ignorance or hatred of ourselves and own past.

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