

Abstract

Why Study History?

The reason history should be studied is because it offers a plethora of information about how individuals and civilizations interact with one another. It is commonly believed that knowledge of the past helps us to understand the present and prepare for the future. Malcolm X was correct when he said “Armed with the knowledge of our past we can with confidence charter a course for our future.”¹ When history is taught correctly, it will enable the student to understand their presence in society and why people think the way they do. It will inform them of who they are in addition to their ancestors and the many sacrifices they have made. Berg & Christou (2017) have stated, “Within the American context, the prevailing literature on why one should study history can be traced back to the 1930s, often, following national crises, such as the post-Depression, World War II, and the Vietnam War.”²

Unfortunately, many students today (especially minority students) do not possess a genuine interest in the discipline of history or historical investigation. Part of the reason for a lack of attentiveness in history could very well be found in the way it is presented and who is presenting it. This is especially true when it comes to ethnographic research and cultural historical studies. For example, Frederick Jackson Turner a Progressive historian intentionally omits any historical contributions made by minorities towards American success in his celebrated “*Frontier Thesis*.” In the perception of Turner, English speaking white men were the stars of his story. Hispanics, Native Americans, French Canadians, Asians, and African Americans, were at best supporting actors and at worst invisible.

Another example can be found in a five-volume work published in 1901 by Woodrow Wilson entitled, “*A History of American People*.” Wilson at one point was a historian at Princeton University, governor of New Jersey, and in 1913 he became President of the United States. For Wilson, history was to teach everyone their place. He argued that Blacks contributed little to the national saga. Wilson attacked Reconstruction on the grounds that “the dominance of an ignorant and inferior race was justly dreaded.”³ He was strongly against black suffrage: “It was a menace to society itself that the negroes should thus of a sudden be set free and left without tutelage or restraint.”⁴

He praised those freed slaves who “stayed very quietly by their old masters and gave no trouble” but bemoaned that they were the exception, the being “vagrants, looking for pleasure and gratuitous fortune” who inevitably “turned thieves or importunate beggars. The tasks of ordinary labor stood untouched; the idlers grew insolent; dangerous nights went anxiously by, for fear of riot and incendiary fire.” In an 1881 article that went unpublished, Wilson defended the South's suppression of black voters, saying that they were being denied the vote not because their skin was dark but because their minds were dark.⁵

During the Civil War, Wilson referred to Blacks as a “dusky host of political refugees.”⁶ Wilson deals very little with other people beyond elite whites. In his 5 volumes of American history, Native Americans are rarely mentioned, women are barely mentioned, and Blacks are rarely mentioned except from the quote just given. His story then is the triumph of elite white males in American society. As President of the United States, Wilson oversaw unprecedented segregation in federal offices. It's a shameful side to his legacy that came to a head one fall afternoon in 1914 when he threw the civil-rights leader William Monroe Trotter out of the Oval Office.⁷

Furthermore, most psychologists and historians trained in Western academia use compasses that point in the direction of Greece for the origin of the historical lineage of ideas.⁸ However, truth will reveal that several Greek philosophers including Pythagoras and Plato acknowledged the philosophers of Egypt for their wisdom, knowledge and ideas. Plato himself spent 13 years in ancient Egypt at Heliopolis with Egyptian priests learning the rudiments of science, geography, economics, mathematics and philosophy before returning back to Greece. African Americans are taught early on to admire the contributions of Greeks, Romans, and the British towards society while believing the contributions of Blacks are of a lower quality or of lower intellect.

History when studied should be recorded and conveyed accurately without prejudices or biases from the historian's point of view. This is because historical research provides the only extensive materials available to study the human condition and "history is the compass that we use to locate ourselves on the map of human geography."⁹ It also focuses attention on the complex processes of social change, including the factors that are causing change around us today. History should be studied because history is knowledge, identity and power. It is knowledge because it is a practical perspective and a practical orientation. It orders and organizes our world and valorizes our projects. "Exploring what historians sometimes call the 'pastness of the past'—the ways people in distant ages constructed their lives—involves a sense of beauty and excitement, and ultimately another perspective on human life and society."¹⁰

Unfortunately, some are skeptical about the practical importance of history. Some question the value and usefulness of studying events that have transpired long ago. In addition, there are some who believe history has little or no bearing on their lives or on the world today. True enough, history can be a complex discipline. It requires a great deal of research investigation, analytical thought and systematic pin-pointing. "As historians locate information and evidence, they begin to build up an understanding and a 'picture' of the people, event or society being studied."¹¹

A true study and factual investigation of history in education is fundamentally imperative for the holistic development of all people. It is the learning of contributions and achievements made by every ethnic group through personal and communal avenues. Notwithstanding, history is indeed a powerful weapon that can be used to misguide, mislead and misinform the world. Regrettably, as textbooks show through omissions, downright errors, and specious interpretations, particularly in matters of racial issues, not everyone enjoys the perks of civic belonging or gets a fair shake in historical accounts.

¹"Malcolm X Speech at the Founding of the Organization of Afro-American Unity 1964," New York City: NY (1964). www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1964-malcolm-x-s-speech-founding-rally-organization-afro-american-unity/

²Christopher Berg & Theodore Christou. "History and the public good: American Historical Association presidential addresses and the evolving understanding of history education." *Curriculum History*, (2017), 17(1), 37-55. Retrieved from: www.researchgate.net/publication/335224815_Why_study_history

³Dylan Matthews. “Woodrow Wilson was Extremely Racist – Even by the Standards of His Time,” (2015). Retrieved from: www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2015/11/20/9766896/woodrow-wilson-racist

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Peter Charles Hoffer. *Zombie History: Lies About Our Past that Refuse to Die*. Lansing, MI: University of Michigan Press, (2020). Retrieved from: <https://books.google.com/books?id=pBnGDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA90&lpg=PA90&dq=what+did+woodrow+wilson+say+about+blacks+in+his+five+volume+work+a+history+of+the+american+people&source=bl&ots=ouwOIU4NqQ&sig=ACfU3U1RsLmq-J3XBHKSndYs2nuO8Llpw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiUoPaR1L3pAhUBQq0KHY5aAFo4ChDoATAAegQIBhAB#v=onepage&q=what%20did%20woodrow%20wilson%20say%20about%20blacks%20in%20his%20five%20volume%20work%20a%20history%20of%20the%20american%20people&f=false>

⁷Dick Lehr. “The Racist Legacy of Woodrow Wilson.” *Atlantic*, (2015). Retrieved from: www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/11/wilson-legacy-racism/417549/

⁸Na'im Akbar. “I’m trying to get you free.” *The Journal of African American Studies*, (2012), vol. 31(2). Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/3046854/Im_Trying_To_Get_You_Free_Naim_Akbar_African_Psychology_and_the_Reconstruction_of_the_Collective_Black_Mind

⁹John Henrik Clarke. “Notes for an African Revolution: Africans at the Crossroads.” Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, (1991). Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/3046854/Im_Trying_To_Get_You_Free_Naim_Akbar_African_Psychology_and_the_Reconstruction_of_the_Collective_Black_Mind

¹⁰Peter Stearns. “Why Study History?” *American Historical Association*, (1998). Retrieved from: <http://www.historians.org/pubs/free/WhyStudyHistory.htm>

¹¹Jennifer Llewellyn & Steve Thompson. “Why Study History?” *Alpha History*, (2019). Retrieved from: <https://alphahistory.com/why-study-history/>