



The Study of History

History tells who we are and about our connections to the past. Those connections tie us together today with a common identity.

“Once a Marine, Always a Marine” is not a title. It is a shared experience that all Marines have been through. Part of the Marine boot camp is the learning of the traditions and history of the Marine Corps. It is that shared experience of the past that connects all Marines together today. This is one example of the value of history.

The study of history has changed over the last half-century in American schools. Rather than focusing on the values of the American ideal, the focus has been to address the negative and to separate historical events. The “melting pot” has been replaced by the “quilted patchwork.” This new identification shifted the idea that new groups no longer need to be integrated into the American ideal framework of a common culture.

People come to this country, or any country, for opportunity. That opportunity might be for the “three G’s”—god, gold and glory—but behind each of these are the desire for and the opportunity to practice religion, become rich, or obtain fame. The English colonies provided a fertile region for the opportunities to grow. The colonies threw off the past and created a new culture that has grown into the ideals that were stated in the Declaration of Independence.

Each new immigrant group was met with hostility. Germans were called “clodhoppers” and depicted as apes. Other groups met with the same reactions and name calling as Germans immigrants faced. Assimilation took time, and within four to five generations, the original language was forgotten along with many cultural traits.

Today, most individuals whose ancestors came here from Europe four or five generations ago cannot tell what their nation of origin was without mentioning more than one country. The melting pot normally took four or five generations to assimilate. Africans, Asians and Native Americans were excluded from the basic ideals of the Declaration of Independence at the time. Yet that document had the seeds to change over time. Looking at the South Carolina State Legislature debate on public education during reconstruction after the Civil War, one sees that former slaves and freed men and women were making the same arguments that the founding fathers made in 1775 about individual rights. They often quoted the founding fathers. They did not come to these ideas independently but through the study of history.

Today, the focus on history is on the horrors of slavery and treatment of immigrants. History seems to ignore the part played in the emancipation and freedoms gained by those groups using the Declaration of Independence and United States Constitution to gain those rights. For example, most high school students of American history never hear that slaves did go to court to win their freedom before the famous Dred Scott case. Slaves going to court won their cases about 50% of the time before Dred Scott. Bridget “Biddy” Mason won her case (Mason v. Smith 1856) in California and became a wealthy person selling real estate in Los Angeles. She helped start the AME Church.

All Americans today are better off under the U.S. Constitution than they were in the past. Yet there appears to be a strong belief that the nation is worse off under the Constitution. The negative focus on history reinforces this belief in spite of the facts. One study suggests that Hispanic assimilation was taking place within two to three generations. Many third-generation children of immigrants have lost most of their native Spanish language.

Replacing the melting pot with the quilt created the shift from assimilation into one common culture to separate cultures living side by side with little in common. Before the 1960s, everyone read the Dick and Jane Books in their early years whether they were in New York or California. Foreign languages were an academic requirement to broaden the learning experience—Latin, German, French and Spanish. Today, foreign language is offered more for social engineering to preserve a cultural identity.

Social engineering has divided the study of history into specific groups that isolate historical understanding of events: black history, Hispanic history, women’s history, and recently, gender-identification history. Yet if you walk into any of these classes, you will not see a broad cross-section of groups. The students that sit in the class are there because they identify or they have been required to take the class as a graduation requirement. The same could be said of a history class.

However, a history class has a larger goal than to reinforce a cultural identity. A United States history class is an attempt to mold individuals into American citizens with a common history using the same pattern that the Marine Corps employs to individuals from every walk of life and cultures into U.S. Marines.

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