

Opinion > op/ed

America's story

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WASHINGTON // Not too many people get doctorates in history at age 48, as I did this year.

At a time when business and technology careers are venerated, and more idealistic mid-life career-changers tend to gravitate to service professions such as theology, social work, government and teaching, U.S. history might seem like a particularly eccentric choice.

The experience impressed me, as an American, with the fundamental importance of knowing our nation's great and troubled, heroic and quirky story as almost a requisite for good citizenship.

The idea that good citizenship depends on a basic understanding of our nation's past does not mean that 300 million Americans should slog through a Ph.D. program. Yet at a time when the study of history, from universities to elementary schools, has dwindled, there is a strong case for reinvigorating our national knowledge and teaching of U.S. (and global) history.

There are many causes for the decline in interest, understanding and teaching of history.

The emphasis on math, science and English testing in schools has crowded out many worthy courses - from music and art to physical education and history or social studies.

The political correctness and narrow parochialism of many academic historians - who view our past through the quasi-Marxist or other radical lenses of oppression, or focus on seemingly absurd minutiae of American history - hardly have given the profession and its academic practice a good name.

Finally, the deep cynicism about government and our political class has rubbed off on the way that many Americans think about public life, today and in the past. As Voltaire said, it has led most of us to want to simply "tend our own gardens" and forget about the genius of our founders' achievement, the horrors of slavery or countless other developments that have made the United States what it is today.

In completing my doctorate in post-World War II history, I had to delve into the personally uncharted waters of Colonial and early American history. And I was richly rewarded. To understand the sheer brilliance, shining idealism and political acumen of figures such as Jefferson, Madison and Hamilton in crafting the most remarkably successful political and economic system in human history should be part of every Americans' intellectual capital and a source of enormous pride.

But the brutality and hypocrisy of 250 years of slavery and another 100 years of official racism are a moral blot on our national conscience that, as Elie Wiesel said of the Holocaust, we must never forget.

The heroism and successful global leadership that the United States provided in crushing the Nazis and defeating Communism, helping to liberate hundreds of millions of people, are achievements that every American should celebrate. So, too, are the achievements of industry, government, inventors and workers in creating the most prosperous economy the world has ever seen.

Yet as we cynically dismiss the corruption that seems to permeate Washington, and many states, today, it is important to remember the betrayal of African-Americans in our Constitution, by Andrew Johnson, Woodrow Wilson and so many others. And then there were the brazen illegalities perpetrated by Warren Harding, Richard Nixon and even presidents such as Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam and Ronald Reagan with Iran-contra.

America's story is neither the tale of woe told by bitter academics nor the Pollyanna narrative of glib patriots.

It is complex, rich and fascinatingly multitextured. It's rich enough that it might even make a good TV series, a Hollywood blockbuster and an engrossing computer game - not to mention a subject that should be taught and required in schools and colleges.

As a people, we are proud to be Americans. But shouldn't we at least know who we are and how we got that way?

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