

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

The Importance of History

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It seems only proper on the occasion of this graduation of our latest and largest class of CMC graduates and my imminent retirement, to talk about a subject that is dear to my heart: history.

In an article he wrote for the *American Historical Association* in 1998, entitled "Why Study History?" Peter Stearns made the following observations:

People live in the present. They plan for and worry about the future. History, however, is the study of the past. Given all the demands that press in from living in the present and anticipating what is yet to come, why bother with what has been? Given all the desirable and available branches of knowledge, why insist—as most American [and, in this case, British] educational programs do—on a good bit of history? And why urge many students to study even more history than they are required to?¹

Since I first came across Stearns' article a number of years ago, I've often asked students in my classes to read the 12-page essay on the importance of history. Whether it's made any impression on them, or not, of course remains to be seen. Regardless, in all my lectures I try to impress on them that knowing the past is the best way to understand the present and to prepare for the future.



In his famous saying, so often misquoted as “History repeats itself,” which of course it can’t, because history can’t do anything, only people can, George Santayana wrote, “*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.*” And, the late scientist Carl Sagan wrote, “*You have to know the past to understand the present.*” And, so it is. We can find many similar statements and all too many examples of the truth of these statements in our own lives, which is why knowledge of history, the history of your country, your parents’ and grandparents’ lives and that of your *deen* is so important. But, what else can history help us with that makes it so important?

In his article, Stearns lists several areas where history plays an important part in all of our lives.

History Helps Us Understand People and Societies

History Helps Us Understand Change and How the Society We Live in Came to Be

The Importance of History in Our Own Lives

History Contributes to Moral Understanding

History Provides Identity

Studying History Is Essential for Good Citizenship

What Skills Does a Student of History Develop?

The Ability to Assess Evidence

The Ability to Assess Conflicting Interpretations

Experience in Assessing Past Examples of Change

History Is Useful in the World of Work

While I can speak on each of these, adding to Stearns’ comments in his essay, for the benefit of today’s graduates and because of time constraints I would like to focus on just one: the skills a student of history develops. This is because, as you’ve heard me say in class: “*Opinions are a dime a dozen and everyone has them; so as not to be thought ignorant or worse, make sure yours are informed ones. Otherwise, don’t open your mouth and remove all doubt.*”

As future leaders of the British *Ummah*, your opinions are important and will count, not just in matters of *fiqh*, *hadith*, or *sirat*, but also in other areas as well, in less scholarly matters for those who come to you for advice. So, if you take nothing else away from my classes at CMC I hope you learned what I believe is one of the most important skills history can teach, as it is *the* ultimate and basic data management tool that will help you find your way in the world and be better able to lead others.

The Ability to Assess Evidence. The study of history builds experience in dealing with and assessing various kinds of evidence—the sorts of evidence historians use in shaping the most accurate pictures of the past that they can. Learning how to interpret the statements of past political leaders, for example, helps develop the capacity to distinguish between the truth and falsehood of statements made by today’s political leaders. Learning how to combine different kinds of evidence—public statements, private records, numerical data, visual materials—develops the ability to make coherent arguments based on a variety of data, all of which will help you when faced with challenges in the media and having to counter arguments, either publicly in the mosque, in the media, or in the classroom. As such, it develops an important skill that can be applied in everyday life.



The Ability to Assess Conflicting Interpretations. Learning history means gaining some skill in sorting through diverse, often conflicting interpretations in today's increasingly confusing and complex world of information overload. For example, understanding how societies work—the central goal of historical study—is inherently imprecise, and the same certainly holds true for understanding what is going on in the present day, whether it be in the UK, or on the world stage. So, learning how to identify and evaluate conflicting interpretations is an essential citizenship skill for which history, as the accumulation of human experience and knowledge, provides essential training.

However, this is one area in which the full benefits of historical study sometimes clashes with the narrower uses of the past. So, experience in examining past situations provides a critical ability that can be applied to partisan claims about the glories of national or group identity. The study of history in no sense undermines loyalty or commitment, but it does teach the *need* for assessing arguments, and it provides opportunities to engage in debate and achieve perspective.

Experience in Assessing Past Examples of Change. Experience in assessing past examples of change is vital to understanding change in society today. It's an essential skill in what we are regularly told is our "ever-changing world." Analysis of change means developing some capacity for determining the magnitude and significance of that change, for some changes are more fundamental and important than others. Comparing particular changes to relevant examples from the past helps students of history to develop this capacity, and leaders to show the way to those who rely on their insight and guidance.

The ability to identify the continuities that always accompany even the most dramatic changes also comes from studying history, as does the skill to determine probable causes of change. Learning history helps one figure out, for example, if one main factor—such as a technological innovation or some deliberate new policy—accounts for a change or whether, as is more commonly the case, a number of factors combine to generate the actual change that occurs.

Historical study, in sum, is crucial to the promotion of that elusive creature, the well-informed citizen. It provides basic factual information about the background of our political institutions and about the values and problems that affect our social well-being. It also contributes to our capacity to use evidence, assess interpretations, and analyze change and continuities. No one can ever quite deal with the present as the historian deals with the past—we lack the perspective for this feat; but we can move in this direction by applying *historical habits of mind*, and we will function as better citizens in the processⁱⁱ. This is what I hope you have learned while at CMC: a respect for history as a tool to make your lives and jobs easier in today's hurly-burly world.

SUMMARY:

So, why study history? The answer is because we must, to gain access to the full wealth of human experience. When we study it reasonably well, and by doing so acquire some usable habits of mind, as well as some basic data about the forces that affect our own lives, we emerge with relevant skills and an enhanced capacity for informed citizenship, critical thinking, and simple awareness.

The Importance of History



The uses of history are varied. Studying it can help us develop some literally "saleable" skills, but its study must not be pinned down to just its usefulness. Some history—personal recollections about changes and continuities in the immediate environment—is essential to function beyond childhood. Some history depends on personal taste, where one finds beauty, the joy of discovery, or intellectual challenge. Between the inescapable minimum and the pleasure of deep commitment comes the history that, through cumulative skill in interpreting the unfolding human record, provides a real grasp of how the world works.ⁱⁱⁱ

As Winston Churchill once said, "A nation that forgets its past has no future."^{iv} So, pay heed, my brothers and sisters, and learn your history well.

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- i. "Why Study History?" *The American Historical Association*, 1998 (<http://www.historians.org/pubs/free/WhyStudyHistory.htm>).
- ii. Ibid.
- iii. Ibid.
- iv. Dominique Enright, ed., *The Wicked Wit of Winston Churchill* (London: Michael O'Mara Books Limited, 2001), 146.