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President's Comment

Joseph Baldacchino

NHI's Multimedia Constitutional History Curriculum Underway

Can this patient be saved? That question—concerning the future of peace and liberty in the United States, no less—is being asked with increasing urgency as Americans contemplate the rapid social disintegration that has overtaken our country. NHI remains confident that resuscitation is possible—but only if Americans, particularly in the rising generation, acquire new knowledge and respect for the Constitution and the moral and cultural values necessary to sustain it.



Sadly, most Americans are taught little constitutional history. Worse, much of what they are taught isn't true. To help overcome this situation, the Institute has launched a major project to create a constitutional history curriculum entitled, *Who We Are: The Story of America's Constitution*.

The curriculum will consist of main lessons on a computer program, together with books containing suggested readings and important documents that should be known and appreciated by every educated American. The multimedia format, which will include music and illustrations that take advantage of the latest computer technology, is intended for use by individuals and home-schoolers, as well as classroom teachers at the high school and college levels. Our goal, in launching this project, is to reach a much wider audience than the professorial and graduate-level readers who remain the prime target of most NHI programs.

NHI is seeking corporate and foundation support for this project, but, as always, we are most dependent on the generosity of our individual contributors.

What Happened to the Constitution Why History Matters

The following is adapted from a draft of the introductory, or overview, lesson of Who We Are: The Story of America's Constitution, a multimedia history curriculum being developed by the National Humanities Institute:

Wherever you turn nowadays, you get the sense that America is in crisis. There is widespread resentment toward the federal government. There are repeated calls for a return of power to the state and local governments and the people themselves. Most politicians run on pledges to reduce the size of the federal government. Yet there is a widespread belief out in the states that the citizenry and their leaders in Washington live in two different worlds. What is going on? Has America lost its way?

To understand the present situation and to have any hope of making the future better, we Americans need a strong understanding of our own past and the innumerable steps that have led to the present impasse. To know where we are, we first must know where we have been. That is why, with an emphasis on the constitutional history of the United States, we shall take an exciting journey—intellectually and imaginatively—into our own past. For reasons which will become apparent, the evolution of American constitutionalism serves as an excellent barometer of the moral, cultural, and political health of our country.

Before embarking on our journey, a few preparations are necessary. First, we need to answer the more fundamental questions: What is history, and why study it at all?

What is history?

Someone once defined history as "one damn thing after another." There is an element of truth in this. History in the broadest sense is the sum total of all that men and women have ever done, said, or written, whether thousands of years ago or in the last moment.

But, in this broadest sense, history is rather meaningless. Nobody can keep track of an infinite jumble of names, dates, and places. Even if it could be done, why should anyone bother? Rest assured. In *Who We Are*, no one will demand—or even suggest—that you memorize useless information.

Who We Are

*The Story of America's Constitution
A History Curriculum*

Lesson One:

What Happened to the Constitution
Why History Matters

Lesson Two:

People of the Covenant
The Colonial Period

Lesson Three:

Preserving a Heritage
The Revolutionary Period

Lesson Four:

Federalists and Anti-Federalists
Confederation and Constitution

Lesson Five:

The Constitution in Practice
Facing Early Controversies

Lesson Six:

The Constitution in Crisis
Civil War and Reconstruction

Lesson Seven:

Federal Expansion Progresses
State Control of Commerce Eroded

Lesson Seven:

The Fading of the Constitution
Unrestraint Becomes the Norm

Lesson Eight:

Historical Countercurrents
Can the Constitution Be Revitalized?

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For history to be meaningful, it is necessary to be selective. Though all human actions are part of history, some actions are more important than others. That is because some actions have little effect and are soon forgotten, even by those directly involved, while others may change the course and quality of life for millions of people over many years.

Those who write or think about history must make judgments. They must choose or discriminate among countless events. They must decide which actions are very important, which are less so, and which can be ignored altogether.

What results from those decisions is a historical narrative. Depending upon the quality of the judgments that comprise it, a historical narrative may provide a true account of human experience or it may provide a very misleading account. In the latter event, the narrative is not history in the strict sense at all.

To summarize the foregoing: History is an account of past actions or events that have significantly affected people's lives. Some narratives—which might be called bad history—are not truthful, but bad history also can significantly affect people's lives.

Does history matter?

Even if history does significantly affect me, what difference does it make whether I am historically knowledgeable or ignorant? To use a phrase heard far too often these days in another context, "Do I care?" You should care. Because, when it comes to history, what you don't know can and does hurt you. Gravely.

All that you are as an individual and all that you aspire to be are shaped by your experience of the world around you. Part of this experience is direct, stemming from your own interactions with the human and natural worlds. But a far larger part of what you know, or think you know, is indirect—gleaned from the rich record of what mankind has done and learned through the ages, as conveyed in artistic works, speech, and the written word.

Every person is born into a complex web of historical experience imparted by family, community, religion, and culture. Without the historical knowledge acquired from these and other overlapping sources the individual would have no beliefs, no knowledge, no desires, no purpose. In a very real sense, apart from history the individual would lack being;

he or she would not exist.

Both who you are and who you will become are molded by your own personal store of historical experience. Importantly, that store is not something that develops willy-nilly. Far from a passive observer or bystander, you are an active participant in, and a co-creator of, the world in which you will live.

It is by engaging with history, both actively and imaginatively, that you are constantly augmenting and refining your sense of life's possibilities—of the good, the beautiful, the true, and the effective.

Indeed, this sense of the historically possible constitutes what might be called your "reality principle." It is the yardstick by which you judge what makes sense and what is nonsensical, what is real and what is illusory. It is a key determinant of how you perceive the world and your purpose in it, as well as how you will act in various situations.

These predispositions, in turn, are ultra-significant, for they will determine whether your life, over the long haul, is meaningful and happy—or meaningless and miserable.

But why meaningless? Why miserable? As discussed earlier, not all accounts that purport to be "historical" are true to the reality of human existence. The reason is that many aspects of life are hard to accept. It is hard to do what is right by your neighbor. It is hard to study, to work, to be honest and faithful, to save for a rainy day. Yet experience teaches that the deepest and most abiding satisfaction comes from practicing these virtues.

Yet man is torn between higher and lower inclinations. It is tempting to procrastinate, to cheat, and to blame others for one's own failings: to pursue short-term pleasures regardless of long-term consequences. But the individual who follows this path eventually experiences unhappiness and despair—a deep-down sense that life is meaningless.

Many people do not want to face these hard realities and the work of self-discipline needed to handle them. There is a tendency, more pronounced in some than in others, to create false visions of life—to view morality as easy, requiring little effort by the individual.

Seeking to evade the personal responsibilities that are an inescapable part of man's historical existence, many refuse to see life as it really is. They construct elaborate dream worlds in which people are naturally good and only have to act according to their "feelings"—to follow their first impulse—in or-

der for all to be well.

An important thinker associated with this notion of morality as bound up with how one feels rather than with what one does was the eighteenth-century French writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Instead of the hard work of personal character building required by traditional morality, Rousseau portrays morality as an emotional "caring" for groups that are "down-trodden" or "disadvantaged" in some way. He ignores the degree to which the behavior of these groups may have contributed to their own failures.

Rousseau was not the first or only person to define morality in terms of emotions, but he did much through the vividness of his writings to popularize this new understanding and make it whet the imagination of generations to follow.

The morality of feelings is appealing because it is easier than traditional morality. If you are "concerned" about the plight of the poor in Bangladesh or the plight of women or—fill in the blank—you can pat yourself on the back for being a good person, and it does not require any change in your own behavior toward the individuals you deal with "up close" in your daily life.

Similarly, the morality of sentimental virtue does not require you to work harder, to question your own motives, or to cultivate any of the personal virtues. Rousseau, for example, prided himself on being a great moralist because of his exquisite sensitivity to the feelings of the least little insect, yet in his own life he fathered five children by a woman he refused to marry and shamelessly abandoned every one of them to a foundling home.

Sometimes whole societies become caught up in distorted or unbalanced visions of life. Writers, historians, teachers, and journalists, as well as films, novels, and other art forms, exaggerate some aspects of human reality while ignoring or downplaying others that are crucial to the good life and community.

Our own society—including even the churches—has become heavily influenced by the emotional moralism exemplified by Rousseau. The historical consequences have been devastating: family and community

breakdown, rising poverty, violence, and criminality, and a general distrust of government and other institutions.

The way to overcome the negative effects of bad historical narrative—"history" that is distorted by the popular illusions of the moment—is to look beyond our own time and place to the hard-won lessons of the past. As the German writer Goethe (1749-1832) observes, we should seek to oppose to the aberrations of the hour "the masses of universal history."

An important reminder: It is not enough, after studying history, merely to imitate even the most noble and fruitful achievements of the past. Instead, we should act *in the spirit* of the best that the past has to offer to create new examples of goodness and nobility in the unique circumstances of our own time.

Why American history?

There are treasures to be found in the history of all places and cultures. Still, as Americans, we are well-advised to begin our quest with the history of our own society. The reason is that history is intimately related to the concrete world of actions and their real-world consequences. And actions do not occur in a vacuum but in a particular place among particular people.

As discussed earlier, every person is born into a complex web of historical experience imparted by family, community, religion, and culture. It is from our experience within these and other groups that we come to love people and institutions beyond ourselves. It is not family in the abstract that we first come to appreciate but our own particular family. And the same is true of community, nation, and culture.

As Edmund Burke writes, "To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and a love to mankind."

A major part of becoming civilized is to

learn what we can expect from those around us and what they legitimately expect from us. Inevitably, those expectations are shaped by our common history as a people. They will vary—and should—from the shared expectations in other societies that are the product of different needs and traditions.

Indeed, it is the unique institutions, values, and traditions that we as Americans hold dear because of our shared historical experience that make us a nation. Without shared traditions, our society will break down and we will move toward a precivilized state resembling what the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) describes as the war of all against all.

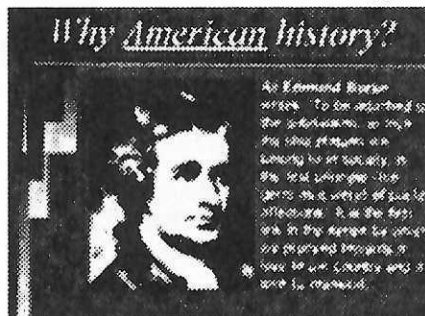
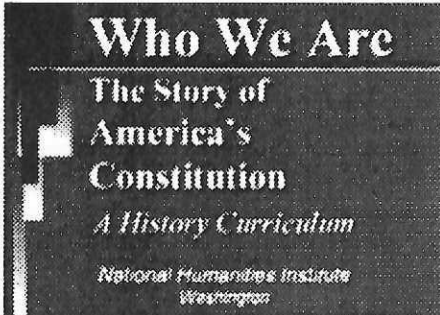
A case can be made that, because of growing historical ignorance compounded by the illusions fostered by bad history, America is already moving rapidly toward the unhealthy state described by Hobbes. As a result, our freedom, our welfare, and even our physical safety are threatened.

For America to recover and be inspired by the unique heritage that for nearly two centuries made it renowned as the "land of the free," its children must look to its history with renewed intensity and purpose. Citing the indispensability of history, Robert Burton (1577-1640) wrote that a "dwarf standing on the shoulders of a giant can see farther than a giant himself." We Americans have been especially fortunate that an uncommon proportion of the Founders of the United States were the kind of giants that Burton must have had in mind.

Yet growing numbers of Americans have failed to appreciate the advantage thus bequeathed us. Having slackened and fallen from the lofty heights that were our birthright, we have lost our way. But the American hour need not be over. If we will look to our history with freshly awakened eyes, our forefathers the giants will extend their mighty arms and pull us upwards.

Why constitutional history?

If American history is to enjoy a renaissance, there is no better place to begin than by pursuing deepened insight into the United States Constitution. Though as a separate country the United States is little more than two hundred years old, it has the distinction of having the world's oldest written constitution.



Unlike citizens of other lands who swore allegiance to a king or a queen, Americans, as citizens of a republic, have promised their ultimate civil allegiance to the Constitution. The President, as well as members of Congress, the Supreme Court, and the United States armed forces, as well as officials of the several states, pledge in their oaths of office to defend not the government but the "Constitution of the United States."

Under American legal theory the Constitution is the source of legitimacy for all laws and actions of the national government. When government at any level, or any branch or official thereof, takes any actions that violate the Constitution, those actions are considered null and void. The restraints on government imposed by the Constitution gained the United States high respect for its liberties.

Yet in America today thousands upon thousands of government officials, who owe such authority as they have to the Constitution and ostensibly operate under its restraints, have not so much as read the document. Fewer still have studied the *Federalist* papers and other materials that throw light on the Constitution's meaning, history, and purpose.

When considering potential actions the President and Congress, despite their solemn oaths, give hardly a passing glance toward the Constitution. Instead, they proceed on the assumption that all is permitted, regardless of the plain wording of the Constitution, unless the Supreme Court rules otherwise. The Supreme Court, meanwhile, has for many years ignored its obligation to

interpret the Constitution and has asserted that the Constitution means whatever a majority of the Court says it means.

By any objective standard, the written Constitution of the United States has fallen into progressively greater disuse—a development that has been accompanied, not coincidentally, by social disintegration, economic difficulties, and the collapse of civil discourse.

The diminution of constitutional effectiveness could have been predicted. In fact, it was predicted by a number of scholars early in this century, among them the Harvard professor Irving Babbitt (1865-1933).

These scholars stressed that a written constitution is nothing but a scrap of paper unless it is the expression of an underlying "unwritten constitution." That is to say, the written constitution, to be viable, must be based on an intricate network of shared beliefs, principles, values, and traditions that the people as a body hold sacred and will not violate lightly.

Most especially, our main guiding political document makes assumptions about our moral and religious purpose as human beings. These assumptions—and, most notably, the ever-present war within the human breast between higher and lower qualities of will—were taken for granted because based on the experience, rooted deeply in Western civilization, of those who launched the American Republic.

"Just as man has a higher self that acts restrictively on his ordinary self," Babbitt explains, "so . . . the state should have a

higher or permanent self, appropriately embodied in institutions, that should set bounds to its ordinary self as expressed by the popular will at any particular moment." The constitution, written and unwritten, is the means by which the nation puts restraints on its temporary impulses in the service of its highest, most lasting aspirations.

America's written Constitution, to put the matter another way, is the logical outgrowth of its unwritten constitution, of which a central element is the traditional morality of self-restraint. To the extent that this older conception of morality has been obscured over the years by illusory visions of easy virtue based on feeling and impulse, the very purpose of the Constitution—to embody constitutional morality—has been lost.

Small wonder, then, that the Constitution has lost its power as a unifying force. Small wonder, too, that the nation has been unraveling into a tangle of warring factions having little in common except the desire to get all that they can—if necessary, at the expense of everyone else.

If that disintegration is to be arrested and American civilization reinvigorated, the United States Constitution—and especially the moral, cultural, and intellectual beliefs of the unwritten constitution that alone can animate it—must be revived. But, for that to happen, we as Americans must penetrate the mists of "historical" illusion and rediscover the lessons of the ages that are incorporated in the story of our constitution. It is a journey well worth the effort.

Onward!

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