

Essay:

Our American Heritage and Our Responsibility for Preserving It

What does our past tell us about our future?

Why study history? The answer is simple; we must in order to gain access to the complete knowledge of the human experience. It is only through careful and critical study of our past that we can enhance our citizenship. An understanding of our own *American* history, is essential in comprehending the problems we face today, and preparing our nation for its place in the future.

Our past has shed light upon times of triumph, yet it also marks times of heartache and suffering. The Antebellum Era stands as a black mark on our history, a time when some Americans disregarded the significance of human equality. Yet it is vital that we are aware of this dark place in our past. We must learn that morality is easily obscured if we are not careful. Many Americans supported slavery because the institution supported a flourishing economy, failing to see the ethical dilemma at hand. Our past teaches us to look for another perspective, whether in our efforts in the Middle East or in immigration policy. Ethnic, religious and cultural diversity are major premises of American thought. Planning for our future, we must remember our past, refusing to let stereotypes and differences cloud our fundamental values.

We must also remember the role freedom plays in our history. The American Dream states that freedom includes opportunity for prosperity. America has nurtured generation after generation of these dreamers, from Abraham Lincoln to John D. Rockefeller to Steve Jobs. Studying the successes of these people, we are reminded to take advantage of opportunities before us. We may apply this to our current policies, celebrating a laissez-faire economy or even our growing public school system. As federal policy expands, some may lose sight of our origins. Yet we must guide the future of this nation to stay true to our philosophy for freedom in opportunity.

It is not only freedom of opportunity, but also freedom of speech and thought that distinguishes America's past and present from other nations. Perhaps this is the quality of American belief that has affected me most. In my sophomore year my editors on the school newspaper assigned me to investigate the "viral dissemination" of photographs following the alleged sexual assault of a classmate who later committed suicide. We ran an article daring to contradict the national press. Through careful journalism we had exposed the truth that only around 10 students saw the photos. Later when we were subpoenaed for information, we drew from student rights victories in the past, *Tinker v. Des Moines* and *New Jersey v. NO*, to plan our next steps. As we successfully resisted the subpoena, I can only hope that my story will set a precedent for future trails of freedom of speech and student rights.

Through this experience and the trials I have faced in my own life, I have come to understand the importance of preserving my past—History - in my eyes - is no longer a meaningless memorization of dates and battles; it has become a method of gaining access to invaluable ideas I can apply in my own life. Only by studying our past can we get a grasp of the place we hold in our nation. And only by knowing our place may we discover the ways to change our country for the better

Word Count: 550