

What is History and Why Study It?

“Why Use Biography to Study History? –Fred and Peter

Thursday, November 4, 2004

I. What is history?

- A. Recollection, analysis, study of all aspects of the past.
- B. Analysis based mostly on written documents, ranging from peace treaties to diaries, from wills to newspaper articles.
- C. Includes physical objects.

II. What are the limitations of historical knowledge?

- A. Historical knowledge is fragmentary and incomplete because most human beings and many civilizations do not leave behind records.
- B. Our fragmentary historical record is limited by bias.

III. Why is the study of history subjective?

- A. The record is incomplete.
- B. The human mind is limited.
- C. We bring to the past our individual personality and temperament.
- D. The times and our values change.

IV. How has the nature of history changes?

- A. Now encompasses all aspects of human existence and activity.
- B. Includes more topics and a larger cast of characters.

V. Why Study History?

- A. Because it is fascinating.
- B. To learn facts, which precede deep thinking and critical inquiry.
- C. To imaginatively project ourselves into lost worlds and vanished times, to get a feeling for the texture of everyday life, to understand the “taken for granted.”
- D. To understand fundamental assumptions and values—often very different from our own.
- E. To reach out to our ancestors and discover our common humanity.
- F. History offers difficult choices and moral dilemmas.
- G. To increase empathy and diminish self-pity.
- H. To appreciate progress and be grateful to our ancestors.
- I. To understand the present.
- J. To understand the ways the past can mislead and be used as a weapon.
- K. To understand policy.
- L. To understand that the way things turned out was not inevitable.
- M. To understand the role of contingency.
- N. To understand the appreciate democracy (civic literacy).
- O. To encourage an “informed patriotism” and a “moderate triumphalism.”
- P. To introduce students to greatness.