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VIEWPOINT: In Support of Clio

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A knowledge of history can enable the student to avoid being misled by government officials, religious leaders, and others who twist, pervert, and misuse history. Policy-makers and leaders often attempt to provide their ideas with validity by turning to history. They often say, “history proves” as support for or against a particular idea, lifestyle, or government policy. However, the student who acquires a sound knowledge of history will be able to both identify a demagogue’s factual errors and understand that history proves nothing. There are no absolute laws or lessons from history. The discipline of history does not itself possess ready-made lessons of history; it is people who create the lessons. The lessons of history are always based on interpretations, human-made opinion, of historical facts. The student will realize that when someone says, “history proves,” the speaker is merely giving the speaker’s own interpretation, the speaker’s own valid or invalid opinion, of history; the speaker has disguised his or her opinion as a historical fact. The good student of history will learn to avoid thinking that “history proves” and will instead think in terms of human-made (and thus fallible) interpretations of history and will expect the interpreter (whether him/herself or someone else) to accept responsibility for his or her interpretations of history.

Historical study is of value because it enables the student to learn from past human errors and prior successes. As the individual can learn from the individual’s own past mistakes and successes, so too can one learn from one’s ancestors’ mistakes and successes. History is for society what memory is for the individual. Humans make intelligent decisions by reasoning based on experience; this experience, this history, is the ground from which sound generalizations grow.

The discipline of history provides students the opportunity to learn life-long thinking skills which can be applied to reading today’s newspaper, evaluating the arguments of contemporary political candidates, critically examining contemporary society, and to numerous other areas.

Through historical study students can see the concept of interdependence in action. They will discover that the fruits of civilization which they enjoy today are the result of international contributions. Also, knowledge of humanity’s common past is necessary for the development of international social cohesion. Through history the student can discover the essential unity and oneness of the human species.

Historical study can help the student develop a fuller understanding of the causes of contemporary social, political, and economic problems. Many of society’s ills will never be successfully cured without the necessary aid of the historical study of the causes of these troubles. The competent student of history realizes that history is not a recipe book of solutions to problems, but a sound knowledge of history is a prerequisite for understanding the causes of these problems.

Through the study of history the individual can discover his or her roots in the family of humankind. This search enables the individual to develop a sense of historical continuity and a reasoned appreciation of the contemporary generation’s predecessors.

The study of history increases the student’s sensitivity to people with different cultural backgrounds. Through historical study the student can discover reasons for the similarities and dissimilarities that tie and separate the various social, racial, ethnic, and religious groups. Thus knowledge can replace stereotypes and dangerous myths about people from different cultures. A thorough understanding of a culture from another time period helps the student transcend the beliefs and assumptions of his or her own time periods and culture and thus provides a needed sense of humility.

Through the study of history, the student can examine numerous role models. The student, through biographies and historical study, is provided with a multitude of role models to select from, many of them of truly noble character - some even inspirational.

Through the study of history students learn to expect change; they discover the inevitability of change. The student of history will avoid the common mistaken notion that life and society can be frozen and that time can be stopped. After all, the heart of the historical perspective is a sense for the flow of time.