(Illustration by Michelle Kondrich/The Washington Post)

Opinion
Letters to the Editor

13 students on what studying history taught them about the present

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From June 8 to June 12, thousands of middle and high school students from across the United States and around

the world will gather at the University of Maryland for the National History Day contest. These young people have spent a whole school year conducting original, primary-source research on subjects related to the theme "rights and responsibilities in history." We asked them: What has studying the past taught you about the present? These are some of the hundreds of answers we received.

— **Alyssa Rosenberg**, letters and community editor

We don't know everything

Even our most familiar stories have unknown elements that can teach us important things. I studied Mary Katharine Goddard, a printer and postmaster in the Revolutionary War era who printed the first fully signed official copy of the Declaration of Independence. Learning about her opened my eyes to the powerful role women played in our nation's founding and helped me understand that there is so much more complexity, in both the past and present, than we might assume.

Ada Allen, Craftsbury Common, Vermont

Not only was the incredibly successful Black American community of Greenwood, Oklahoma, often called Black Wall Street, violently destroyed by White mobs, but the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 was deliberately covered up and excluded from history books for decades. The survivors and their families have not received justice or reparations. This event was not only tragic — it was almost erased. Studying the Tulsa Race Massacre made me realize how some parts of history are hidden on purpose.

Tala Elnaggar, Metairie, Louisiana

The price of progress

Studying the past has taught us that progress often comes at a cost, and that history is more complex than the stories we were first told.

Take the 1890 establishment of Sequoia National Park. At first glance, it was a bold step by President Benjamin Harrison to protect the treasured giant sequoias from industrial logging and development and a major turning point in the U.S. government's efforts to value nature for itself.

But the creation of Sequoia National Park displaced indigenous people, including the Nyyhmy tribe, who had lived on and cared for the land for generations. Their deep spiritual and cultural ties to the land were destroyed in the name of "preservation."

We have to ask who benefits from progress? Who is included in decision-making and who is left out? Even major victories can hide significant injustice. We must not just build on the successes of history, but also avoid repeating past mistakes.

Brooklynn Lee and **Olive DeGiovanni**, Battle Ground, Washington

We can backslide

Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel, "The Jungle," became a rallying cry for factory workers and citizens to create safer working areas and processes that would produce meat that consumers knew was safe. Today, the Food and Drug Administration and the Agriculture Department still regulate the food we eat.

But the current administration is reevaluating the government's role

and has taken measures to reduce staff in positions it deems inefficient. Though a large-scale disaster has not yet resulted from the recent cuts, the food industry has the potential to shift toward the state that Sinclair reported and wrote about in "The Jungle," in which corporate greed outweighed human welfare and consumer safety.

History offers guidance, but it does not guarantee progress. Ignoring history and reducing safety regulations in the interest of efficiency can compromise the safeguards that took decades to establish. By forgetting our past, we risk repeating previous catastrophes in new ways.

Gia Cipriani, Bayonne, New Jersey

The present is shaped and sometimes haunted by the past. Lewis Hine's 1908 photograph of Pennsylvania's breaker boys, their faces smeared with coal dust, is echoed by a portrait of a 14-year-old whose arm was nearly torn off in 2022 while cleaning a machine at a Perdue Farms poultry plant in Virginia. Studying history taught me that progress can easily unravel without vigilance.

Kailey Amaya, Boca Raton, Florida

Standards change

We should never judge someone's worth or status based on the standards of our own time. Today, you are considered affluent in New England if you live in a house by the beach and can afford to eat lobster. But even until the 1800s, lobsters were a poor person's food. Living on the coast was a point of shame because it meant you couldn't afford the city. The criteria that our society uses to judge someone's importance and influence can change over time and does not define how they will be viewed by history.

Vivian Best, Barrington, New Hampshire

But not without effort

Studying South Africa's response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic made me realize the past is not a frozen moment but a site of competing possibilities: What could be done, what was allowed and what was punished. I assumed that states have the sovereign right to protect their populations during a public health crisis. But South Africa's decision to defy international patent protections to import affordable, generic antiretroviral drugs was actively resisted by international institutions and pharmaceutical consortia.

History is not only about the events that occurred, but also about the boundaries that defined what responses to those events were thinkable. Contemporary policies are always shaped by legal norms from earlier eras, commercial interests and institutional inertia. That doesn't mean they are illegitimate, but it does mean they are historically contingent. Many contemporary constraints, in health, in trade, in governance, are neither natural nor permanent. They are maintained by choice, and therefore open to challenge.

Yeonseo Shin, Apgujeong, South Korea

Pain doesn't always mean progress

Looking at history has shown me that just because people are hurt by government decisions, it doesn't mean anything will actually change. The government isn't always sympathetic, and policies don't always shift

— even when it seems obvious they should. For example, Yucca Mountain in my state of Nevada is still being considered for a nuclear waste repository, even though people here are still living with the consequences of decisions made in the Treaty of Ruby Valley more than 160 years ago. This treaty also contributed to the loss of Native American culture and land. In addition, if the government continues to disregard the treaty to proceed with the repository, it will put residents and the environment at risk of potential groundwater contamination and facility damage from possible earthquakes — risking harm to all Nevada citizens.

Because of this, I now pay much more attention to the details in laws and policies, since even small things can have a huge impact — especially on people whose voices often go unheard. I'm more aware of how a law's wording can shape real lives. It's made me more skeptical of what officials say and more likely to listen to people's actual experiences, instead of just trusting statistics or official documents.

Christina Zhakov, **Incline Village**, Nevada

But sometimes, it's possible

Learning how over 140 workers, mostly young women, died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire because the doors were locked and there were no proper safety rules really shocked me. It made me realize how

much people had to go through just to get basic protections at work.

Learning about this fire showed me that rights do not just appear. People had to fight for them. It also reminded me that with those rights comes the responsibility to protect these victories other people made sacrifices for to win.

Sarah Elsherbini, Windsor, Connecticut

We're all the media now

William Randolph Hearst's use of yellow journalism during the Spanish-American War showed me how powerful — and dangerous — the media can be when truth takes a back seat to profit or power. Today, the platforms are different, but the strategies are often the same: grab attention, shape opinion, push a narrative.

It's so easy to sway people when you control the story. And now, with social media, everyone controls a story. That's both empowering and risky. Even a single post, headline or comment can make a difference. You don't need a news empire to influence someone's thinking. That's a powerful responsibility — and one we don't always treat with care.

Stanley Lyons, Germantown, Tennessee

And we can all make history

For National History Day, I've studied the labor reform movement, the Korean War, the long shadows of 9/11 and, now, the Little Rock Nine. In my most recent research, I expected to find powerful stories about the past — but instead, I found a mirror reflecting the present. These students were my age. They weren't activists by design, but by necessity. They stepped into history not because they were ready, but because no one else would.

Studying history taught me how to research. And, more important, it taught me how to think, how to listen and how to recognize the quiet moments when the future is asking you to respond.

Maybe the real question history asks isn't "what happened?" but "what would you do if it happened again?"

Jay Lee, Wonju, South Korea

Have hope

From joint spaceflights to the first and only universally ratified U.N. treaty, the most important thing historical research has given me is a profound hope for humanity. Although our world is plagued by conflict, disease and war, studying these successes through history has shown me that we can overcome division to create something truly incredible. The success of the Montreal Protocol at battling ozone depletion shows that climate action is not impossible if we all work together.

Adah Goel, Bothell, Washington

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