

NOTABLE APPLIED HISTORY QUOTES

Our frequently updated collection of insightful quotations on the uses of history by noted historians, philosophers, writers, political leaders, and policymakers.

“If my history be judged useful by those who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to understanding the future—which in the course of human affairs must resemble if it does not reflect it—I shall be content.”

- Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (431 B.C.E.)

“It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.”

- Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (431 B.C.E.)

“The course of national policy is based upon a series of assumptions, with which statesmen have lived since their earliest years and which they regard as so axiomatic as hardly to be worth stating. It is the duty of the historian to clarify these assumptions and to trace their influence upon the course of every-day policy.”

- AJP Taylor, *The Italian Problem in European Diplomacy, 1847-1849* (1934)

“One is apt to perish in politics from too much memory.”

- Alexis de Tocqueville

“History teaches all things, including the future.”

- Alphonse de Lamartine, *History of the French Revolution of 1848* (1849)

“He who sees the past as surprise-free is bound to have a future full of surprises.”

- Amos Tversky, quoted in Michael Lewis, *The Undoing Project: A Friendship That Changed Our Minds* (2016)

“There can be no question that generalizations about the past, defective as they may be, are possible—and that they can strengthen the capacity of statesmen to deal with the future.”

- Arthur Schlesinger, *War and the American Presidency* (2004)

“He who lives to see two or three generations is like a man who sits some time in the conjurer’s booth at a fair, and witnesses the performance twice or thrice in succession. The tricks were meant to be seen only once.”

- Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer: Studies in Pessimism* (ed. 2004)

“Here we are on top of the world. We have arrived at this peak to stay there forever. There is, of course, this thing called history. But history is something unpleasant that happens to other people.”

- Arnold Toynbee, recalling the 1897 diamond jubilee celebration of Queen Victoria

“The dominant mental methodology of real policymakers is historical reasoning.”

- Ash Carter, “Shaping Disruptive Technological Change for Public Good,” adapted from the Ernest May Lecture given by the author to the Aspen Strategy Group, August 2018

“In the absence of dependable recurring circumstance, too much confidence cannot be placed on the lessons of history. There are lessons, of course, and when people speak of learning from them, they have in mind, I think, two ways of applying past experience: One is to enable us to avoid past mistakes and to manage better in similar circumstances next time; the other is to enable us to anticipate a future course of events...To manage better next time is within our means; to anticipate does not seem to be.”

- Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History: Selected Essays* (1981)

“Applied History views the past as a vast social laboratory in which experiments in politics and human welfare are daily being set and tested on a most elaborate scale. Moreover, in this human laboratory the conditions are real conditions, the factors are real men and women, and the varied relations and combinations or conditions and factors are always those of real life.”

- Benjamin F. Shambaugh, *Iowa Applied History Series Volume I* (1912)

“What I suspect is that memory of past and anticipation of future events work together, go hand in hand as it were in a friendly way, without disputing over priority and leadership.”

- Carl Becker, “Every Man his Own Historian,” Address to the American Historical Association (1931)

“Study the past if you would define the future.”

- Confucius

“My purpose is not to relate at length every motion, but only such as were conspicuous for excellence or notorious for infamy. This I regard as history’s highest function, to let no worthy action be un-commemorated, and to hold out the reprobation of posterity as a terror to evil words and deeds.”

- Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals*, Book 3, Chapter 65 (117 A.D.) [Church and Brodrigg, trans.]

“History is a guide to navigation in perilous times. History is who we are and why we are the way we are.”

- David McCullough, cited in Harold Klawans, *Life, Death and In Between* (1992)

“Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour. These records of wars, intrigues, factions, and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science, in the same manner as the physician or natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects, by the experiments which he forms concerning them.”

- David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748)

“[History helps us] foresee the Events of things, perceive their Causes, and by remembering those Evils that are past, provide Remedies against those which are coming upon us.”

- Degory Wheare, *Method and Order of Reading both Civil and Ecclesiastical Histories* (1635)

“In history a great volume is unrolled for our instruction, drawing the materials of future wisdom from the past errors and infirmities of mankind.”

- Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)

“History is past politics and politics are present history.”

- Edward Augustus Freeman, “The Practical Bearings of General European History” (1882)

“It is essential, above all, that in making history we do not forget to learn by history, to see our mistakes as well as our successes, our weaknesses as well as our strengths.”

- Eleanor Roosevelt, *Tomorrow Is Now: It Is Today That We Must Create The World Of The Future* (1963)

“Potentially, history is an enormously rich resource for people who govern.”

- Ernest May, *“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (1973)

“The future can never look exactly like the past. Usually, it should not. But past conditions can offer clues to future possibilities.”

- Ernest May and Richard Neustadt, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (1986)

“Histories make men wise; poets witty; the mathematics subtle; natural philosophy deep; moral grave; logic and rhetoric able to contend. Abuent studia in mores: studies pass into the characters.”

- Francis Bacon, “Of Studies” in *Bacon’s Essays* (ed. 1892)

“To bring together the records of the past and to house them in buildings where they will be preserved for the use of men and women in the future, a Nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgment in creating their own future.”

- Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Remarks at the Dedication of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park, New York, 1941*

“The antiquarian strives to bring back the past for the sake of the past; the historian strives to show the present to itself by revealing its origin from the past. The goal of the antiquarian is the dead past: the goal of the historian is the living present.”

- Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of History” (1891)

“The historian is a prophet looking backwards.”

- Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenäum*, Volume 1, Part 2 (1798-1800)

“History is not the accumulation of events of every kind which happened in the past. It is the science of human societies.”

- Fustel de Coulanges, lecture from 1862 quoted in *Revue de Synthèse historique* (1901)

“The very concept of history implies the scholar and the reader. Without a generation of civilized people to study history, to preserve records, to absorb its lessons and relate to our own problems, history, too, would lose its meaning.”

- George F. Kennan, WNET TV program, “US Soviet Relations, the first 50 years,” April 17, 1984.

“We do not lack for knowledge of what to do for our future security. The lessons of history provide plain guidance.”

- George Marshall, speech at Princeton University, 1947

“In order to take a full part in the life which is before you, I think you must in effect relive the past.”

- George Marshall, speech at Princeton University, 1947

“A deep understanding of history is necessary—not merely recent history which concerns itself with the trivia surrounding conspicuous men and events, but an understanding of that history which records the main currents of the past activities of men and which leads to an understanding of what has created and what has destroyed great civilizations.”

- George Marshall, speech at Princeton University, 1947

“One usually emerges from an intimate understanding of the past with its lessons and its wisdom, with convictions which put fire in the soul.”

- George Marshall, speech at Princeton University, 1947

“I doubt seriously whether a man can think with full wisdom and with deep convictions regarding certain of the basic international issues today who has not at least reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian War and the Fall of Athens.”

- George Marshall, speech at Princeton University, 1947

“Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.”

- George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)

“When experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

- George Santayana, *The Life of Reason* (1905)

“We ought not to look back, unless it is to derive useful lessons from past errors, and for the purpose of profiting by dear bought experience. To enveigh against things that are past and irremediable, is displeasing; but to steer clear of the shelves and rocks we have struck upon, is the part of wisdom.”

- George Washington, *Letter to John Armstrong, New Windsor (1781)*

“What experience and history teach is this—that nations and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted upon any lessons they might have drawn from it.”

- George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History (1832)* [Nisbet, trans.]

“The only thing new in the world is the history you don’t know.”

- Harry S. Truman, quoted in *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S Truman (1974)*

“I believe as a general proposition that the best preparation for government is to study philosophy or political theory and history because it trains your thinking and forces you to examine your assumptions.”

- Henry Kissinger, “A Conversation with Henry Kissinger,” Harvard University, April 11, 2012

“For nations, history plays the role that character confers on human beings.”

- Henry Kissinger, *World Order (2014)*

“History is philosophy teaching by example and also by warning.”

- Henry St John, 1st Viscount Lord Bolingbroke, “Letter II: Concerning the true use and advantages of it,” *Letters on the Study and the Use of History (1752)*

“Historians, I think, have to make a special effort and be unabashed about connecting historical knowledge and understanding to contemporary strategic and operational problems.”

- H.R. McMaster, “2016 FPI Forum: Strategy, Policy, and History,” Washington D.C., November 30, 2016

“Applying history to understand the problems of today and tomorrow is just as important for citizens as it is for diplomats and defense officials.”

- H.R. McMaster, “2016 FPI Forum: Strategy, Policy, and History,” Washington D.C., November 30, 2016

“History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.”

- James Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt,” *Ebony* (1965)

“Reading is an honor and a gift from a warrior or historian who—a decade or a thousand decades ago—set aside time to write. He distilled a lifetime of campaigning in order to have a ‘conversation’ with you.”

- General James Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos* (2019)

“By traveling into the past, I enhance my grasp of the present.”

- General James Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos* (2019)

“History teaches that we face nothing new under the sun.”

- General James Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos* (2019)

“If we need ‘new ideas’ to help us construct our plan, old books are full of them.”

- General James Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos* (2019)

“Living in history builds your own shock absorber, because you’ll learn that there are lots of old solutions to new problems.”

- General James Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos* (2019)

“Especially if you study history, you realize that our country has been through worse and here’s how they’ve found their way through that. Here’s what leaders did, here’s what educators did, here’s what business people did, here’s what soldiers did, here’s what politicians did, and you can sometimes see, by weaving together that tapestry, how to go forward.”

- General James Mattis, interview with *The Mercer Island High School Islander*, 2017

“No matter what you’re going to go into, whether it be business or politics or international relations or domestic politics, I don’t think you can go wrong if you maintain an avid interest in history.”

- General James Mattis, interview with *The Mercer Island High School Islander*, 2017

“There’ll be a lot of people who want to tell you what to think in this world. If you read a lot of history you’ll thank them for their help but you won’t be governed by what someone else has told you to think.”

- General James Mattis, interview with *The Mercer Island High School Islander*, 2017

“You go all the way back to Thucydides, who wrote the first history of a war, and he said it’s fear and honor and interest, and those continue to this day. What he wrote over 2,000 years ago, 3,000 years ago, that still consumes people.”

- General James Mattis, interview with *The Mercer Island High School Islander*, 2017

“History doesn’t give you a template of answers, but it does help you refine the questions you have to ask yourself. Further, you recognize there is nothing so unique that you’ve got to go to extraordinary lengths to deal with it.”

- General James Mattis, interview with *Military History*, 2015

“Thanks to my reading, I have never been caught flat-footed by any situation, never at a loss for how any problem has been addressed (successfully or unsuccessfully) before. It doesn’t give me all the answers, but it lights what is often a dark path ahead.”

- General James Mattis, email to a subordinate, 2003

“The problem with being ‘too busy to read’ is that you learn by experience (or by your men’s experience), i.e. the hard way. By reading history, you learn through others’ experiences, generally a better way to do business, especially in our line of work where the consequences of incompetence are so final for young men.”

- General James Mattis, email to a subordinate, 2003

“We have been fighting on this planet for 5,000 years and we should take advantage of their experience. ‘Winging it’ and filling body bags as we sort out what works reminds us of the moral dictates and the cost of incompetence in our profession.”

- General James Mattis, email to a subordinate, 2003

“Visiting the past is something like visiting a foreign country: they do some things the same and some things differently, but above all else they make us more aware of what we call ‘home.’”

- John Arnold, in Margaret MacMillan, *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (2010)

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“In times of change and danger when there is a quicksand of fear under men’s reasoning, a sense of continuity with generations gone before can stretch like a lifeline across the scary present.”

- John Dos Passos, *The Ground We Stand On: Some Examples from the History of a Political Creed* (1941)

“Our record must be judged against the tasks and the turmoil of the times ... and not merely through the trick binoculars of hindsight—which make all things easy, and all men wise.”

- John F. Kennedy

“There is little that is more important for an American citizen to know than the history and traditions of his country. Without such knowledge, he stands uncertain and defenseless before the world, knowing neither where he has come from nor where he is going. With such knowledge, he is no longer alone but draws a strength far greater than his own from the cumulative experience of the past and a cumulative vision of the future.”

- John F. Kennedy, “JFK On Our Nation’s Memory,” *American Heritage*, 1962

“What presidents and their advisers think are innovations usually are not that at all, but rather some earlier administration’s forgotten mistakes.”

- John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (1982)

“History without political science has no fruit; Political science without history has no root.”

- J. R. Seeley, *Introduction to Political Science* (1896)

“Guizot calls history analysis; Thierry calls it narrative; I call it resurrection.”

- Jules Michelet, Cited in *A History of Historical Writing, Volume II* (1942)

“History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce.”

- Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (1852)

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”

- Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” (1852)

“History does not repeat itself in the same way each time, but certain trends and consequences are constants.”

- Lee Kuan Yew, Quoted in Allison, Blackwill, and Wyne, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (2013)

“If you do not know history, you think short term. If you know history, you think medium and long term.”

- Lee Kuan Yew, Quoted in Allison, Blackwill, and Wyne, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (2013)

“The crowning attainment of historical study is a historical sense—an intuitive understanding of how things do not happen.”

- Lewis Namier, “History and Political Culture” in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History* (1956)

“If the past has been an obstacle and a burden, knowledge of the past is the safest and the surest emancipation.”

- Lord Acton, “Inaugural lecture on the study of history” (1895)

“The best of prophets of the future is the past.”

- Lord Byron, “What is Poetry?—The feeling of a Former world and Future. Thought Second,” in Byron’s Journal, January 28, 1821

“History is a strange teacher. It never repeats itself exactly, but you ignore its general lessons at your peril.”

- Madeleine Albright, “The Role of the United States in Central Europe” (1991)

“To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child.”

- Marcus Tullius Cicero, *M. Tulli Ciceronis Orator Ad M. Brutum* (46 B.C.E) [Hubbell, trans.]

“The wisdom of hindsight, so useful to historians and indeed to authors of memoirs, is sadly denied to practicing politicians.”

- Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (1995)

“We should be careful to get out of an experience only the wisdom that is in it—and stop there; lest we be like the cat that sits down on a hot stove-lid. She will never sit down on a hot stove-lid again—and that is well; but also she will never sit down on a cold one anymore.”

- Mark Twain, *Following the Equator* (1897)

“Instead of making history, we are made by history.”

- Martin Luther King Jr., “Transformed Nonconformist” sermon to his congregation in Montgomery, Alabama, 1954

“Whoever wishes to foresee the future must consult the past; for human events ever resemble those of preceding times. This arises from the fact that they are produced by men who ever have been, and ever shall be, animated by the same passions, and thus they necessarily have the same results.”

- Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter XLIII (1532)

“History is a vast early warning system.”

- Norman Cousins, Cited in *The Harper Book of Quotations Revised Edition* (1993)

“A page of history is worth a volume of logic.”

- Oliver Wendell Holmes, *New York Trust v. Eisner*, 256 US 345, 349 (1921).

“I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging of the future but by the past.”

- Patrick Henry, “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death” speech, March 23, 1775

“When the tectonic plates of history move, move with them...He had fought against the Reagan Revolution inside the Republican Party on behalf of Gerald Ford and George Bush, then became the revolution’s most capable executor as Reagan’s White House chief of staff. As Bush’s secretary of state, he had watched the unraveling of the Soviet Union and its empire in Eastern Europe, another revolution that Baker did not start but figured out how to channel. The lesson he had taken from these events was simple and it was clear: When the tectonic plates of history move, move with them.”

- Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *The Man Who Ran Washington: The Life and Times of James A. Baker III* (2020)

“Mankind possesses no better guide to conduct than the knowledge of the past...The study of history is at once an education in the truest sense and a training for a political career, and that the most infallible, indeed the only method of learning how to bear with dignity the vicissitudes of Fortune is to be reminded of the disasters suffered by others.”

- Polybius, *Rise of the Roman Empire*, Book 1, Introduction [Scott-Kilvert, trans.] (Around 120 BC)

“I have no expectation that any man will read history aright, who thinks that what was done in a remote age, by men whose names have resounded far, has any deeper sense than what he is doing today.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History” (1841)

“We’re going to meet a lot of lonely people in the next week and the next month and the next year. And when they ask us what we’re doing, you can say, We’re remembering. That’s where we’ll win out in the long run. And someday we’ll remember so much that we’ll build the biggest goddamn steamshovel in history and dig the biggest grave of all time and shove war in it and cover it up.”

- Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953)

“True historical problems arise out of practical problems. We study history in order to see more clearly into the situation in which we are called upon to act. Hence the plane on which, ultimately, all problems arise is the plane of ‘real’ life: that to which they are referred for their solution is history.”

- R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (1939)

“The historian may very well be related to the non-historian as the trained woodsman is to the ignorant traveller. ‘Nothing here but trees and grass,’ thinks the traveller, and marches on. ‘Look,’ says the woodsman, ‘there is a tiger in that grass.’”

- R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (1939)

“The true use and scope of all Histories ought to tend to no other purpose, than a true Narration of what is done, or hath beene achieved either in Forraigne or Domesticke affaires; with a domest Application (for present use) to caution us in things Offensive, and excite us to the management of employments in themselves generous, and worthy of imitation.”

- Richard Braithwait, *A Survey of History* (1651)

“The past is not a foolproof guide to the present or the future—it is simply the only guide we have.”

- Robert Crowcroft, “The Case for Applied History,” *History Today*, September 2018

“The past is our sole repository of information about what works and what does not; we have nothing else to draw upon.”

- Robert Crowcroft, “The Case for Applied History,” *History Today*, September 2018

“History cannot give us a program for the future, but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves, and of our common humanity, so that we can better face the future.”

- Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961)

“We cannot make sense out of our environment without assuming that, in some sense, the future will resemble the past.”

- Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (1976)

“Good judgment is usually the result of experience. And experience is frequently the result of bad judgment.”

- Robert Lovett, quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (1978)

“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.”

- Rudyard Kipling, *The Collected Works* (1941)

“With bronze as a mirror, we tidy our clothes; with history as a mirror, we can discern the rise and fall of dynasties.”

- Taizong emperor, 7th century

“History...may be called, more generally still, the Message, verbal or written, which all Mankind delivers to every man.”

- Thomas Carlyle, “On History Again” in *Fraser's Magazine* (1833)

“The Present is the living sum-total of the whole Past.”

- Thomas Carlyle, “Characteristics” (1831)

“The people are the ultimate guardians of their own liberty. History by apprising them of the past will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views.”

- Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on the State of Virginia” (1785)

“If you’re concerned about what’s going on today, read history and figure out what to do because it’s all right there.”

- Tom Hanks, National Archives Foundation annual gala in Washington D.C., October 21, 2017

“In a word, we may gather out of history a policy no less wise than eternal; by the comparison and application of other men’s fore-passed miseries with our own like errors and ill deservings.”

- Sir Walter Raleigh, “Preface,” *The History of the World* (1614)

“The past is never dead; it’s not even past.”

- William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (1951)

“The longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward.”

- Winston Churchill, in Richard Langworth, *Churchill By Himself* (2011)

“The future is unknowable, but the past should give us hope.”

- Winston Churchill, in Richard Langworth, *Churchill: In His Own Words* (2012)

“Study history, study history—in history lie all the secrets of statecraft.”

- Winston Churchill, Advice given to James Humes, 1953

“What is past is prologue.”

- William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (c. 1610-1612)