By Andrew B. Wilson

Imagine you are in a car accident on New Year’s Eve. Like Jason Bourne in *The Bourne Identity*, you wake up to a strange new reality: You don't know who you are, where you are, and what you have done in your time on earth. That’s how the new year begins for you.

Surely, it would be a giant shock to discover your memory was gone.

To be cut adrift from your own past is, literally, to lose your own life in the midst of living it. Suddenly, you have no friends, no background, no identity. You have lost any sense of meaning and purpose of the life you once led. And how can you even begin to think about the future if you don’t know your own past?

But what if we as nation were to wake up one day in the same condition—destitute of any knowledge or understanding who we are as a people and what was going on at different stages in the long and eventful history of our country?

If not yet there, we may be fast approaching that state.

“We’ve been raising several generations of young Americans who are, by and large, historically
illiterate,” says David McCullough, two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize for history. As someone who has lectured at scores of colleges and universities across the country, he adds, “I know how much these young people – even at the most esteemed institutions of higher learning—don’t know. It’s shocking.”

By way of example, he tells the story of being approached by a college sophomore at a top Midwestern University who told him, “Until I heard your talk this morning, I never realized the original colonies are all on the East Coast.” “McCullough thought, “What have we been doing so wrong that this obviously bright young woman would get this far and not know that?”

In The Nation’s Report Card: U.S. History 2010, the U.S. Department of Education found that only 12 percent of high school seniors performed well enough to be rated “proficient” in their knowledge of the rudiments of U.S. history. To put that another way, 88 percent of high school seniors flunked the minimum proficiency rating, and only two percent correctly answered a question about the Supreme Court’s landmark decision in Brown vs. Board of Education.

When speaking in different forums about the dangers of historical illiteracy, McCullough puts “gratitude” high on his list of the many “benefits to history.” “Every day, we’re all enjoying freedoms and aspects of life that we would never have had if it weren’t for those who figure importantly in history.” And again he says: “I think that America has come further in giving opportunity to the best that’s in human nature than any other country ever in history.”

Yes, we ought to be grateful. At the same time, we ought to be keenly aware of the great danger to the good life that we are living posed by collectivist thinking – the kind of thinking that is the deadly enemy of individual liberty and the idea that people should be free to lead their own lives as they choose as long as they don’t impose upon the same freedoms of other people.

Metaphorically speaking, no country—not even the United States—is an island, entire in itself. In order to understand our own history, we also have to understand world history and how other people have coped in dealing with some of the same problems that we have faced in our own country.

Today, most Americans under the age of 40 are unaware of the millions upon millions of people murdered or starved to death by communist regimes around the world over the past century. They just have no idea.

Why? At both the high school and university levels, the true history of Marxist-inspired socialism isn’t being taught—or, if it is, it is being taught in a sanitized fashion to glosses over the enormous crimes against humanity committed by Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, and other communist leaders.

In the hands of gifted historians like David McCullough—the author of best-selling books on Harry Truman, John Adams, and the Wright Brothers—stories of historical figures and important events tell us more about ourselves than we guessed possible.

In both our schools and our homes, we need to upgrade the teaching (and learning) of history. It really should be an eye-opening experience—something that makes us more aware of who we
are and what we are capable of doing as a people and a nation.

**About the Author**

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