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America's national experience and character have been heavily shaped by our revolutionary roots. Our founders set an historic course and established guidelines for future generations in these fundamental documents that continue to inspire us today—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

In our own day and generation, it is our responsibility to insist that the ideals of the founders are respected and protected for future generations of Americans. That's why the study of history is so important. It's important for each citizen to understand and appreciate all that they achieved—often at such a high cost—and understand not only the decisions they made, but also the reasons for those decisions. American history includes bright eras of prosperity and progress, dark years of war, and continuing struggles against all forms of discrimination. Each of these defining times has called forth great leaders and national heroes.

Throughout our history, from all walks of life, leaders emerged to speak with courage to defend the principles of democracy and ensure that America remains a country dedicated to freedom and justice for all its citizens—and especially to tolerance, religious freedom, and equality of opportunity. Each generation of Americans has defended those principles and, in the process, strengthened our national purpose and resolve.

It's essential that the next generations of leaders understand those struggles and successes. As Thomas Jefferson said, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." Even in the earliest days of our democracy, Jefferson understood the vigilance required of a living democracy.

I've long encouraged young Americans to learn as much as possible about the nation's past. Excellent historical biographies are available. Recent examples include David McCullough's masterful work on the life of John Adams, and Doris Kearns Goodwin's extensive history of Abraham Lincoln's Administration in *Team of Rivals*. Such works bring history to life when you read these remarkable stories; you begin to understand the context for the extraordinary decisions that change the life of our country and to know about the leaders who made them. Many other examples could be cited of such defining works that both fascinate and educate their readers.

History is more than dates and facts. It is a gift from our ancestors to be nurtured and cared for, and bequeathed to our children. It is not confined to textbooks and dusty research tomes.

History also comes alive in relevant sites in countless communities across the country. In Boston, places such as the Old North Church, Concord Bridge, and the *USS Constitution* are inspiring symbols that attract constant attention from residents and visitors alike, and each visit adds a little more to our understanding and appreciation of our heritage.

One of my personal favorite landmarks is the Longfellow House in Cambridge, the home of one of America's most beloved poets. The two hundredth anniversary of his birth is being celebrated this year. His home was also once the headquarters of our Revolutionary Army. George Washington planned much of the war from there, and was constantly concerned that he had no real army, no uniforms and no weapons to challenge the British forces. When you visit Longfellow House, you can see the letters he wrote during this dark and dangerous time, and imagine the deep anxiety he must have felt.

Many years later, Longfellow wrote his famous poem, “Paul Revere’s Ride,” to commemorate the courage of the early patriot—and the beginning of our new nation. To read that great poem, or Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Concord Hymn,” is to immerse yourself in the opening days of the Revolutionary War, and be inspired anew by those early patriots who believed so deeply in their principles that they risked everything they had, including their own lives, so that they might live in freedom.

The study of history can also inspire each of us to become more active citizens, and to care about the future of our country. As my brother Robert Kennedy said, “Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of those acts will be written the history of this generation.” From coast to coast, in communities large and small, we can in our own ways, in our own lives, make a difference. We study the past in order to prepare better for the future.

American history belongs to each of us. It is a shared legacy of dedication to enduring principles and ideals that are just as important today in helping us face the contemporary challenges of our time as they were in revolutionary times, and they will remain the guiding principles of our children’s lives as well. May it always be so.