

# Mark James Miller: History Is a Light We Dare Not Put Out

By Mark James Miller | Published on 11.07.2014 1:30 p.m.

- Share on facebookShare on twitterShare on google\_plusone\_shareShare on linkedinShare on emailShare on printMore Sharing Services5
- **COMMENT**
- 



**The New York Times** reports that the Taliban are once more on the rise in northern Afghanistan — in fact, all over the country. Districts that had once been free of them are now falling under their control. Opium poppy cultivation is at an all-time high, another sign of the Taliban’s comeback, since money from opium sales funds the insurgency.

This 13-year-long war is coming to an end, not with a bang but a whimper, and the resurgence of an enemy declared moribund so many times highlights an unpleasant truth: This war, like Vietnam and Iraq, has been another costly failure, a senseless waste of lives and resources.

It didn’t have to happen this way. Anyone with the most rudimentary knowledge of Afghanistan’s turbulent past could have predicted this. There is a reason why this troubled land is called “the graveyard of empires.” In 330 B.C.E. **Alexander the Great** commented that Afghanistan was “easy to march into, hard to march out of.” The Soviet Union learned the truth of this with the unsuccessful war it waged in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1988. England fought there repeatedly in the 19th and early 20th centuries. So savage were these wars that **Rudyard Kipling**, the poet-laureate of empire, warned British Tommies of what awaited them if they were sent to fight there:

*“When you are wounded and left on Afghanistan’s plains  
And the women come out to cut up what remains  
Just roll to your rifle and blow out your brains  
And go to your God like a soldier.”*

**Henry Ford** famously opined that “history is more or less bunk.” Knowledge of history is essential, but to my dismay, I have discovered that my students at **Allan Hancock College** (and other colleges as well) are, as a rule, woefully deficient in what they know about the past.

Sometimes I give my classes a “quiz” on the **Vietnam War**. When did it start? When did it end? Why was it fought? Only a few have the slightest idea, and tell me they were taught next to nothing about it in high school. Yet Vietnam happened just over a generation ago. At least 58,000 Americans died. The scars from that war have yet to heal. But it is already being forgotten, as are the lessons it offers.

“The past is the best prophet of the future,” said **Lord Byron**, echoing Dutch philosopher **Baruch Spinoza**: “If you want the present to be different from the past, study the past.” **Shakespeare** agreed, saying “What is past is prologue.”

There are dangers to not having an adequate knowledge of history, the most obvious being that it can be repeated.

Late in 2013, a reality television star from Louisiana made headlines when he said that as a boy growing up in the segregated South, he felt African-Americans were happy. “No one was singing the blues,” he said. He never heard any of them complain about their lowly status or their second-class citizenship.

Evidently he never heard of **Emmett Till**, the 14-year-old African-American boy who was murdered by white racists in 1955 for allegedly whistling at a white woman. He evidently never heard of the **Ku Klux Klan**, responsible for lynchings, beatings and intimidation in the **Jim Crow South**. A rigid code of conduct was enforced on black people, and it did not allow them to voice any sort of discontent with the status quo; to do so invited violence and murder. As many as 4,742 African-Americans were lynched between 1882 and 1968.

Someone without knowledge of the past, hearing ignorant and misleading comments like these, could come away thinking that the Jim Crow era wasn't so bad, and not object when attempts are made to repeal civil rights laws.

This brings us to the classic rebuttal to Henry Ford: “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” History is a warning light, signaling what can happen if we are not alert to the lessons it offers.

As a component of critical thinking I give my classes a lesson on the **Nazi Holocaust**. Once again, the lack of knowledge is dismaying. “I knew it was bad,” a

student once told me, “but no one ever went into depth about it.” But this is a subject the students always want to learn more about, and they instinctively know the answer when asked why knowing about it is important: So it can’t happen again.

On Nov. 11, 1918, the Germans asked the Allies for an armistice, admitting they were beaten in **World War I**. But in the years that followed, a myth took root in Germany that became known as “the stab in the back.” The Germans hadn’t been beaten at all, they were on the brink of victory when the politicians sold out their army and surrendered. Next time there would be no sellout. Next time they would win.

This myth, exploited by the mustachioed maniac who became Germany’s Fuhrer in 1933, paved the way for the next war. With the devastation of their country, millions dead and their cities incinerated, the Germans learned the price of refusing to face a historical truth.

“That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach,” said English writer **Aldous Huxley**.

In September and October this year, students and teachers in Colorado protested when their school board sought to impose a right-wing version of American history on them, one that emphasized “nationalism,” “respect for authority” and “the benefits of the free-market system.” It would gloss over the more unpleasant aspects of our past, and remove references to “civil disobedience” (such as the civil rights movement). “Don’t make history a mystery,” their signs read. “History is fundamental.”

These students and teachers realized both the value of history and the dangers of ignoring it. History is a light we dare not put out. History is a warning signal we disregard at our own risk. We dare not ignore history because history will not ignore us. The light of history must be kept on.

— *Mark James Miller is a teacher and writer, and has been a part-time English instructor at **Allan Hancock College** in Santa Maria since 1995. He is president of the **Part-Time Faculty Association of Allan Hancock College, California Federation of Teachers Local 6185**, and is an executive board member of the **Tri-Counties Central Labor Council**. [Click here to read previous columns](#). The opinions expressed are his own.*

