

Historical Thinking for Resilient Leaders

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The future is unknowable, which is why we study the past. The long record of humanity is the best laboratory we have for understanding how people are likely to act in a range of different, often unanticipated, circumstances. Patterns of behavior, not genetics, define markets, organizations, and ultimately societies.

No matter how rich and powerful, leaders cannot control the currents of change or the surrounding circumstances. No matter how smart and hardworking they might be, they can never master every necessary task or understand every crucial issue for the survival of the ship of state. They must make choices—often small, but ultimately significant—with limited information and under conditions of profound uncertainty. The smartest leaders recognize how little they really know and make up for it by leveraging a broad knowledge of history to navigate what are always rough seas.

Few people associate humility with Henry Kissinger, the larger-than-life figure who did so much to reshape American foreign policy in the 1970s. But when writing on the subject of historical dynamics and the limitations of leaders, he aptly summoned the wisdom of Otto von Bismarck: “The statesman can never create anything himself; he can only wait and listen until he hears the footsteps of God through the force of events, then lunge forward and seize the hem of His coat—that is all.”

To seize the moment is to see opportunities where others do not. Kissinger succeeded because he recognized openings for new partnerships, even with former adversaries like China. He could see through the partisanship and distractions of his time because he did not focus only on the present, but also looked back to assess how societies had developed over a long period of time—and how they might change in the future. China needed assistance against a continuous Russian border threat, despite their shared communist dogmas. The US needed allies in Asia, especially after its lengthy and painful war in Vietnam.

Kissinger drew on a history of shared Chinese-American trade and security interests dating back to the nineteenth century to envision how leaders in Beijing and Washington could work productively together in the future. They had to look deeper than the public recriminations of their current moment and imagine something different, based on past experiences. Kissinger found partners in Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, who famously spoke of a “historic opportunity” for collaboration, even as they condemned American policies elsewhere.

Kissinger, Mao, and Zhou recognized that while the controversies of the present attract most of our attention (which is even more the case today, with our 24-hour news cycles and pervasive social media), history, even forgotten history, can have a greater bearing on the future course of behavior. Patterns forged over a long time are likely to be more enduring than the passions of the moment. Enlightened leaders understand this and take action to awaken dormant historical possibilities.

Abraham Lincoln did this better than anyone. Struggling to win a civil war, justify the abolition of slavery (which was protected by the US Constitution), and reunite the country, he dug deep into the past. He went back to the American Revolution and the true founding document for what would become the United States: the Declaration of Independence. Speaking at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, he began by returning to 1776—“four score and seven years ago”—when “our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Lincoln reframed the war not as North versus South, but as “unfinished work,” completing the founders’ vision that “this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

One hundred years after Lincoln, the leaders of the American Civil Rights Movement used history in the same way—to reconnect with a deeper past and articulate an alternative to the hatred and violence around them. The peaceful sit-ins and marches organized throughout the South by local activists like Fannie Lou Hamer and Diane Nash reenacted a long history of efforts by mistreated citizens who appealed to the rule of law for fairness and justice. The most famous speech of the movement, delivered by Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, struck an enduring chord in its return to the historic promise of the country's founding:

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, Black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the “unalienable rights” of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

King contended that “America has defaulted on this promissory note.” But his famous dream—the dream that he stamped on the Civil Rights Movement—was a return to the neglected historical trajectory of inclusion, justice, and opportunity for all Americans. King called upon his listeners to strive for a future built not on the present hatred of Jim Crow, but rather on a deeper strain of American togetherness and hope. He closed with the powerful words of an early nineteenth-century hymn to the nation, often sung by abolitionists:

*My country, 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died,
Land of the pilgrims' pride,
From every mountainside
Let freedom ring!*

Of course, Lincoln and King did not convince all of their critics. They were both murdered because their words provoked the violent defenders of the very hatred they strove to overcome. They could not remake the world themselves; single leaders never can. But Lincoln and King succeeded in pushing enduring change because they mobilized countless citizens to see beyond their present circumstances and imagine a different future, based on past experiences and expectations. By looking backward, they redefined the terms of debate, opening up a new potential for future change.

The past does not, however, make any single future inevitable. Historical thinking allows leaders to see alternatives to the present in the past, but each of those alternatives offers many different possible futures. For that reason, successful leaders do not make

predictions. If we believe we know the future, then we lock ourselves into a very narrow understanding of the present and the past; we see only the evidence that confirms our beliefs.

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Historical thinking should move leaders from prediction to anticipation—the active preparation for any number of possible futures. Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal policies illustrate this well. Entering the presidency during the worst days of the Great Depression, when unemployment was higher than 25 percent and banks across the country were failing, Roosevelt looked deep into the past—including many earlier reforms to help the poor and vulnerable—to craft a diverse range of programs that stimulated the economy. In contrast to Herbert Hoover’s economic orthodoxy, Roosevelt knew he had to widen the range of policy options beyond contemporary expectations.

He promised recovery, but he never predicted what it would look like. Roosevelt knew that each New Deal program—the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Works Progress Administration, and numerous others—would have unpredictable results. Instead of locking himself into one view of the future, he anticipated many possible futures and resolved to adjust as new information became available. The New Deal was an iterative experiment, in which leaders implemented ideas from the past, observed the results, and made new decisions based on what occurred. The goal was national recovery, but the expectation was that the nature of the recovery would evolve over time. Roosevelt anticipated mixed and unforeseen developments, and he prepared to adjust. He encouraged a deep look into the past and an open vision of what that past could mean for an ever-changing future.

We live in a time similar to Roosevelt’s. COVID-19 has caused a global health and economic emergency. Democratic institutions have come under attack from demagogues and their supporters, who seek to exploit the suffering of citizens. And long-standing threats, especially climate change, are now adversely affecting vulnerable communities on every continent.

Although we do not know what the future will bring, we do know that current conditions cannot endure. Leaders are poorly served by reactive efforts to reduce risks and limit change. Instead, they must accept and embrace the fact that this is a time of transformation. Historical perspective allows leaders to see many different patterns of change in the past, which they can try to leverage for a better future. Leaders must avoid narrow predictions, anticipate many possibilities, and prepare to adjust as they emerge. Openness and flexibility are necessary in looking backward and forward at the same time, escaping the paralysis of the present.

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Resilient leaders ask the right historical questions: *What are the deeper, longer patterns of behavior that will shape our future? Which paths of action from the past look promising for the future? How can I prepare to observe and adjust to developments I cannot predict?*

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