Why the Center Can't Hold: A Diagnosis of Puritanized America

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Once I was tutoring a young African-American who was about fifteen years old. He announced to me that he and his buddy had figured out that history was a worthless study. I asked how they’d come to that. He said they’d realized history was about the past but that they were interested in the future. I sat there, staring at him. After a while he became uneasy and said: “Well, what do you think?” “About what?” I asked. “About what I just said,” he replied. “Oh, that,” I said; “You did say that. But I’ve decided to focus on the future rather than the past.”

The incoherence of his program was what I’d hoped to demonstrate. In a way, though, he was ahead of many of his peers—for no doubt much that he’d been taught as history was worse than worthless, and he at least was conscious of his act as he struck history from his list of concerns. For many of his generation, history was never on their list. For some perhaps there was no list.

One worries about the digitalization of experience. Is the grand four-dimensional gestalt of things disintegrating into twitterings? As my students emerge from the classroom, I can watch as fifty percent or more reach robotically for cell phones—if they haven’t held fast to them through the session—in a conditioned reflex to return to comfort. Some stand stationary in the pathway as they tweet away their breaking news (“on way 2 library, c u there”). They seem oblivious to the four-dimensionally-present others trying to shuffle past them. Journals and diaries are important ways to memorialize events of one’s life; but something more radical seems in progress here: a kind of em-bubbling of oneself in a world of one’s own making. (Have we here an attempt to make Hume’s “Egocentric Predicament” a reality? Does each of
us want to become star of his or her universe in cyberspace—and
demote what’s outside that space to the status of a hypothesis?
Does the guy who goes and shoots up a crowd of anonymous oth-
ers believe more or less he’s simply the main character in a video
game of his invention?)

In the em-bubbled world where the student moves freely,
allusions to the past tend to fall flat. The ability to grip large
sequences of the past and hold in memory the figures and facts
of them seems (with the exception of baseball commentators) to
be in decline. Perhaps, to phrase the matter differently, there’s
a plasticity and multiplicity in the processing of the past which
amounts to the same thing. Some years ago I was discussing the
birth of free-market economics and I mentioned Adam Smith.
One of the more alert students remarked, “I think he’s gone
off the air.” (There had in fact been a media personality oper-
ating with that name.) Suppose I mention MacArthur leading
an invasion to regain the Philippines. A puzzled student may
object: “But I thought it was the Japanese who invaded the Phil-
ippines.” (It was, of course, but . . .)

A story has a plot that connects the incidents. In a slightly
different sense, history too has a plot, or at least a pattern. To
uncover it is at once the formal task of historians and the infor-
mal task of everybody. We ask what were the undergirding trends,
conditions, transformations, motivations that provided context
and opportunity for such and such to happen. Both to follow
a story and to follow history requires a certain difficult exercise
of keeping in focus a succession of incidents. One must be able
to sustain “long” thoughts. This capacity seems in trouble today.
The bleeps and splurges of our digitalized culture seem to work
against it.

So half the problem with the past may be that competence to
engage it is fading. Let me suggest a second half may be skepti-
cism about the past being recoverable in the best of conditions.
This latter I call “skepticism about history.”

Why does it matter?

In the struggle to create psychotherapy, Freud acts on a convic-
tion that recovery of the past is a worthwhile goal—in the case
of many of his patients a necessity. Perhaps his premise is that the
only people who can function effectively in the present are ones
equipped with a reasonably accurate sense of their personal past.
At the least, playing the matter from the other end, Freud seems to believe that when one can’t function effectively in the present, the remedy often begins with an active effort to re-engage the past. What we don’t know can hurt us, and does so all the time. It can, in fact, tie us in knots. The return of the repressed can occur in confused and disorienting ways. The alternative is to summon the repressed forth in a deliberate and painstaking effort at self-understanding.

We have, I’ve been arguing, a dynamic past—a shared past—regarding our experience as a society. It operates on us and in us but is not necessarily reflected in conscious memory. In fact, pseudo memory may conveniently mask a deeper, more dynamic and darker memory for a society as a whole just as it can for an individual. When that’s the case, we’re talking about a past: (1) that’s operating in us, (2) that’s guiding decisions, (3) that’s deeply installed in the shared affectivity of us all in our public celebrations, in our expectations, and throughout our interactions with one another (including what we will allow as “common sense” when we carry on discussions), but that (4) is never made a focus of attention in itself. It’s the kind of thing that can influence us to choose item A without hesitation, while we recoil from item B. It can explain why we walk through a particular door without hesitation while we do not even consider walking through some other door. To deliberately turn from delving into the actual past if one is a member of a deprived minority seems obviously counterproductive (which is why I made an issue of it with my African-American student); but if one turns from delving into injustices of which one’s group was the perpetrator, this too is profoundly counterproductive (which is why I have so belabored the injustices perpetrated by the white majority of America’s past).

While then we are capable of being aware of our past, often we’re not aware. It’s when we’re not aware, that its control over us is likely to be strongest.

When my teenage student said he’d written off the past, I thought it likely his freedom would be diminished if he managed to persevere in his disregard. Prompted by Heidegger, I’d say in fact my student was quite wrong about history. Deliberately paradoxical, Heidegger claims history is really always about the future. If you think of history not as something Napoleon
did, but as something historians do, you can take in Heidegger's point. "History," as he uses the term, does not occur simply when deeds are done; history occurs when someone creates a record purporting to be a record of such deeds.

The record can be accurate or distorted. It can even be quite fictitious. If it's presented as fiction, the historian isn't precisely a historian, but a maker of legends—one whom the ancient Greeks would have called a poet. When however it's a genuine effort to give a factual account, it can still be distorted and fictitious. Further, a counterfeit of an effort at historical accuracy may be offered in a deliberate effort to deceive. Here a "poet" is at work, but a malicious one.

Whatever of these is the case, what's noteworthy is that the writer is attempting to present to the listener or reader a future to be pursued. We are reminded often enough: "All history is told from a point of view." That however doesn't go the distance. History is always told for a point of view—is told to install a point of view in the recipient of the account. We do know this. When we listen to a long account that begins to seem tedious, we interrupt: "What's the point?" There always is one. The teller of the tale may be saying: "Look out! Don't do what this poor fellow did." Or again, may be saying: "See! In this woman's actions we find how things of this sort should be handled." Accounts commonly admonish in both ways.

The criterion of selection for the historian is the kind of world the historian would like his listeners or readers to ambition. The historian doesn't recount some action simply because it happened, but because the material seems relevant to future action—either clarifying a goal or giving a warning. This doesn't make the historian a poet in the Greek sense. An honest historian doesn't make things up; but he or she does select in accord with a purpose—"raises" the data by directing it toward a moral.

While it would be wrong then to say history is mere propaganda, it's true that all history not perverted by a desire to deceive is guided by an intention to edify. The historian is a moralist.

Patrick Henry spoke of experience as the one lamp by which his feet were guided. George Santayana said those who do not study history doom themselves to repeat it. Paradoxically, it's precisely this power of history to act the aggressive school marm—that tendency to take hold of us, to instruct us, to summon us to
do this and avoid that—that can make us want to run from it. When we don’t learn from our mistakes, it’s largely because we figure the process would prove painful. When we dismiss without reflection moments of insight and clarity, it’s because insight and clarity can spoil a whole day.¹

One way then to deal with history is just to dismiss it out of hand—much as a slothful person may discard evidence of his or her life’s triviality, much as an alcoholic or other drug addict may discard evidence of his or her illness. This seems in line with what may have been my student’s strategy; perhaps he didn’t want the painful nudge that memory of the past can give. In such cases, if the evasion is more or less outright, made in the clear light of decision, it may be less harmful. What’s outright can be questioned.²

Another approach, more subtle and therefore often preferred, is to say: “In looking to history, there’s no way to know if you’re getting it right. One historian sees things one way, and the next historian sees things quite differently.” Such a charge brings us quite explicitly to what I’m talking about when I talk of “skepticism about history.” I call it “convenient” because it provides a way to skip out on history and look principled in doing so. One can exempt oneself from the burden of trying to learn and understand the past on the principled ground that one knows better than to think such a thing possible.

This is the radical skepticism we must examine. Let’s look into the case for it.

At a radical level, one can question the efficacy of memory. It’s an easy target because, as a function of consciousness, memory

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¹ It doesn’t seem too strong to say that in such situations, we often choose for ourselves what may be the tragic plight of some schizophrenics: we choose a state of consciousness in which the past is neutralized and provides no lessons as to what we should do next; we choose to be in a state where the status quo seems inevitable.

² A professional colleague of mine once said: “You pay attention to history and current events? I’ve got better things to do.” I responded: “Does it not occur to you that you thereby retard your progress toward becoming an adult?” She was stunned—which is what I’d intended. The forthrightness of my colleague opened the door to my stark criticism and to a possibility of change.
entails the mysterious elusiveness of consciousness. One can state one’s mistrust saying: “Memory plays tricks on us.”

A more grounded approach, I’d say, challenges this challenge and replies: “Is it not rather that we play tricks on memory?” To take a common example: consider an event in one’s early childhood that has constantly been retold at family gatherings. Psychologists claim it’s frequently the case that the child protagonist in such events does not remember the events themselves, but remembers only the retelling of them in the family circle. Good enough! The child remembers something. What she perhaps doesn’t remember is that her first well-focused attention to these events was as material in stories told by relatives. This is natural enough, for her attention is on the content of the story and not upon how she first became aware of it. It does not seem accurate to say memory tricks her here; closer to the mark is to say there is an omission of memory or an omission of attention.

If I may give a trivial case of such an instance, I once caught myself remembering “that time I was fishing for marlin in the Caribbean.” Problem is, I’ve never been in the Caribbean, much less fished for marlin there. The memory was so clear, I was startled by this realization. Then it came to me: “That’s Hemingway putting me in the Caribbean by his uncanny capture of detail and mood.” My memory is not at fault. The content I’m holding in memory is something I truly experienced. What I’m not initially reflecting on is that this is a memory of literary experience.

For this reason I say we play tricks on memory. Memory works, but we don’t always scrutinize it as it works. I’d even say “memory never makes a mistake.” While we make mistakes about memory, these mistakes can more accurately be assigned to what we omit to remember—can be referred back to contextual matters we did not bother to note. Lacking a remembered context for an incident held securely in memory, we then improvise later. In fact: all the time and almost inevitably, we improvise context in order to imbed facts. This is why two eyewitnesses can, without lying, give incompatible accounts. What’s of key importance here is that it’s possible to sort these matters out. (One can observe this scrutinizing process in action on TV by watching Judge Judy at work; she’s a tireless master at stripping away and discarding conveniently improvised context from remembered fact.)
Bertrand Russell once presented the most absolute attack on memory he could think of. He said your memory of the past provides no purchase whatever on the past you remember; this is because for all you know, you and your memory of the past were all created just a moment ago. (This is a more radical version of the more familiar argument that, for all we know, the Grand Canyon was created more or less in its present configuration less than five thousand years ago.) We will touch briefly on absolute skepticism in a chapter later on, but not so comprehensively as to destroy this argument for those who find it compelling.

A less radical way of undermining history concedes to each of us a reliable memory (if we will be careful to scrutinize the claims we make), but then goes on to put in question all accounts received from others. People lie. David Hume was so impressed by this that his tendency was toward telling his reader never to believe things on the testimony of others; at most, take what another says as an invitation to go see for yourself. If you are told “there’s a three-legged chicken in that field over there,” that should not, Hume is inclined to say, function legitimately as anything more than an invitation to cross the field and see for yourself.

Rigidly adhered to, such a policy would overwhelm with uncertainties the context in which one conducts the affairs of daily life. Its effect on the study of history would be very nearly to end it. Did Napoleon exist? Hume’s advice to go take a look doesn’t take you the distance. Very soon you begin invoking testimony. (That Hume was a practicing historian, and judged to be a good one, shows how quickly he could put aside what he argued philosophically when he wanted to do something else.)

There is, to be sure, lots of data that people do lie. Particularly they lie these days. I’ve suggested our government and media routinely lie to the American people (especially to motivate continuing participation in the violent world mission this essay claims we’ve come to think is ours).

This lying comes with a backup strategy. When one objects to the lying, or wishes to investigate something beyond limits our government regards legitimate, one is likely to be labeled a “conspiracy theorist.” This, it seems, is a very bad thing. Threat of the label doesn’t, I think, exactly convince the typical American that the smooth and sanitized stories presented by the government
and media regarding official motives and acts are true; rather it simply discourages one person and then another from further inquiry, so that eventually most people give up the chase. Their discussions with others turn elsewhere. With regard at least to some particular thing (say the death of Kennedy or the circumstances leading to 9/11), they despair in effect of learning from the past; they cease paying attention to it.

This is a more genuinely unfortunate thing than being a conspiracy theorist. Of the death of Kennedy for instance, we know something: we know our government has not told us what happened. Those who studied it know that the assignment given the Warren Commission was to so massage the account of Kennedy’s death as to do minimal damage to The American Story. They know the report of the commission was riddled with implausibilities and contradictions. They know, for instance, that the many testimonies and indications that there was firing from in front of Kennedy have not been refuted but have simply been discarded. But think positively. To know that the account we have been given is not true, is to know a great deal. The cover-up is in plain sight even if the details it covers up are not.

In what is a far more complicated case, something similar can be said regarding conditions surrounding 9/11. Those who study it know for instance they’ve been given four mutually incompatible versions of what NORAD was up to that day—not just regarding incidentals, but regarding mission, orders, and actual deployment. To know we haven’t been told the truth is to know a great deal. While we are far from knowing exactly what happened, we do know that what we’ve been told happened is not—in matters of some importance—what did happen.

If we shrug complacently, and go about our business, not only does this shrug allow us to continue our support for America’s crusade against an expanding list of people without examining our premises and motivations, it also means that many related issues, rich in consequence, urgent for our future, also go unexamined. Reluctant to recognize the complex and continuing mental maneuvers and social constructions that have landed us in a box, we slacken in our efforts to think outside it.

Let me, by way of illustration, take up briefly two issues, closely related, where history could shed much light were it not that we have become demoralized about turning to history. Let’s take
the issue of population growth first. Since we don’t readily see a solution for it, our tendency is to act as if there is no problem. Yet our human population size (with our deep commitment, for instance, to eating meat in greater quantities than formerly) is clearly implicated in the whole crisis of habitat. All kinds of systems are overtaxed and in danger of toppling by reason of reciprocal interaction of our numbers and our ungoverned appetites: arable land, fishing, transportation, housing, and water, to name some obvious examples, are all jeopardized. The regurgitations of our waste clog our habitat and jeopardize these systems further.

Some biologists and sociologists hypothesize that the lethal skirmishes of human against human breaking out in so many parts of the world currently may not be due simply to racial, class, and religious antipathies, but may be due to those antipathies as they are heightened by anticipations of scarcity. Our common apprehensions seem, E.O. Wilson hypothesizes (in reflections on what happened in Rwanda), to be ginned up of late by the misgiving that there isn’t—or soon won’t be—enough for everyone. Our data-intake processing quietly suggests to us, “There may not be enough X [water; food; living space] for my grandchildren and the grandchildren of those others. Let us then strike before their numbers increase.” Hobbes would understand perfectly.

In this matter of pressure from population, we are given less leadership than we need. Pastors, rabbis, priests, and politicians have generally been worse than unhelpful. Often enough, they’ve encouraged their own group to outbreed the competition. Regarding American politicians, surely you’ve never heard even one candidate promise, “And if elected, I will do all I can to encourage smaller families.” Their campaign managers wouldn’t allow it. Sooner, would say the managers, attack baseball or apple pie than go after motherhood.

History has something to say about this problem. It provides instances where societies have collapsed when their numbers outran their resources. Our own American experience provides the example of how the increase of each new generation of aspiring white settlers led to such competition over habitat as to motivate the whites to entertain projects of genocide against native Americans. On a planetary scale, history marks time with a kind of steadily quickening drumbeat for those with ears to hear. Often we ignore that beat because the unwelcome message is that the
rich need to curb their consumption while the poor need to limit the number of their children.

History also suggests a way of escape. If one is disposed to consult history, what emerges as a salient feature of population growth is that it’s often greatest where one might least expect— namely in regions characterized by desperation. This may seem counterintuitive. Without benefit of historical study, one might conjecture that when people are well-to-do, they’d have lots of offspring; and that when they’re poor, they wouldn’t. The opposite is the more general case. It requires attention to history to take in this trend, and its lesson.

One learns it’s useless to denounce the phenomenon and regard the people of poor countries as irresponsible. Neither should we regard the poor in our own country as irresponsible. The poor are in fact responsible in the sense that they’re responding. They’re responding with a natural reflex to the experience of misery; they’re responding by reproducing. When situations are calamitous, people breed. This has been nature’s way of maintaining our species. Our evolutionary history has built it into us. A man close to despair may say: “The one thing I can still hope may give my life significance is to have offspring who survive me.” Another, less despairing, may say: “I must have children who will care for me when I’m old.” A still less distressed person, hopeful but still anxious, may say, “My enterprises will thrive if I have many children. And without them, who will take care of my enterprises when I’m gone?”

Perhaps though this is to be too ready to imply such things are dealt with at a conscious level. The blunt truth is: when things go bad, we breed. (If the pill disappointed some planners because it did not reduce the growth of population to the extent they’d hoped, it’s because the planners hadn’t factored in the extent to which conception itself, not just sex, can become more intensely desired in times of stress.) The solution is as simple as it is difficult for us affluent people to accept: if we would stop rigging the world markets to our advantage, and stop consuming more than is good for us, the poor of the world would have greater opportunities to achieve local prosperity and would curb the rate at which they reproduce.

My point in discussing this here is that, so far from seeking to master the not-too-difficult dynamics of overpopulation, we
prefer to act as if there is no problem. Though history could tell us much about the problem, we prefer not to acknowledge the problem. One might think, for all the attention paid it, it doesn’t exist. We seem to have trouble reaching any kind of consensus even on immigration—a problem deeply influenced by underlying problems of population growth and habitat degradation. We avoid the subject in part because we sense—correctly—that a solution will require a radical change in perspective and behavior. Demoralized, we ignore historical trend lines and what they predict. When challenged on this, we disingenuously counter: “What has history to tell us about the unique problems of the present?” If though we will put the problem of population in the context of an historical overview, the solution is, I claim, implicit in the problem. Over-consumption, unfettered development, and the desperation of the poor are the causes of the problem. Addressing these, we can move toward a solution.

History, as we anticipate though, is a tough task-master here. It offers an unwelcome answer. Desperate people breed; to reduce breeding, alleviate desperation. To do this, the affluent must place restraints on their lifestyles and their expectations of ever-greater prosperity in an effort to render the lives of the destitute less desperate. That is, the affluent must do this if they wish to continue to live some kind of shared life on this planet with those who are less fortunate. (The alternative for the affluent is to change, consciously or unconsciously, toward finding “final solutions.” As attempted refugeeism becomes more common, the two alternatives—one humane and the other inhumane—are going to test us Americans profoundly.)

As I speak of “shared life,” I don’t mean free food—which can, as Garrett Hardin argued, put local farmers out of business. What seems indicated rather is a sharing of opportunities—a willingness on the part of us, the substantially more affluent, to restrain ourselves in foreclosing the opportunities of others. We must reverse our expansion in the interest of allowing room and availability of resources for a multitude of diverse and independent initiatives on the part of others. But this means letting go our notion that the world is a wilderness which we have been assigned to tame and exploit. (It means—dare I say it?—wiggling free of the death grip in which capitalism holds us.) On the other hand, if we adhere yet tighter to traditional ways, there
will be exhaustion of resources and such changes of climate that
desperate people in many parts of the world will become envi-
ronmental refugees, squabbling in hardly imaginable ways over
scarcity.

What history suggests further is that if we can’t bring our-
selves to a concern for others, we will continue pursuing hege-
mony and waging wars of attrition against potential rivals. We’ll
continue to call these rivals “terrorists,” and in time many who
are not already such will become terrorists in their response to us.
We’ll intensify confrontations with these others in the interest of
moving things toward “final solutions” in a pursuit of air-tight
national security. Consequences of sharing and consequences of
not sharing seem the options history illuminates for us if we’re
willing to look to it for guidance. The beleaguered and desperate
state in which the Israeli people live may be an example that pre-
dicts what may become the beleaguered and desperate situation
of the United States.

Perhaps that’s enough for now on history and overpopulation.
A closely related instance where historical insight can help is, as
suggested earlier, regarding the issue of climate change. We see
the weather every day. Climate change is another matter. Yet in
the melting of the ice caps and the plight of polar bears and pen-
guins and Eskimos, and in the increasing tempo one can moni-
tor in lives of firemen and firewomen, and in the droughts that
increasingly plague California, and in the increasing storms that
disrupt life further east, a thing as theoretical as climate change
can become palpable. In fact it has become quite palpable. Hur-
rricanes, rising seas, fire storms, and the loss of familiar patterns
of rainfall are palpable. Increasingly therefore climate-change
deniers are pushed toward a more nuanced defense: “OK, climate
change is occurring, but there’s no reason to think it’s from any-
thing we’re doing.”

Some deniers go further; they say, “You want history; we’ll
give you history. Climates change all the time! They’ve been
changing all through time.” Yet as we scrutinize history, a plot-
ting of climate change against the increase in the atmosphere of
carbon dioxide discovers a robust correlation. The Greenhouse
Effect was a hypothesis proposed in the 1820s—when the Indus-
trial Revolution was still in its first half-century. The hypothesis
predicted that if we continued pouring CO₂, and like gases, into
the atmosphere, there would be a gradual rise in earth’s average temperature with the kind of climate-change phenomena we’re now observing. We’ve continued our experiment with CO$_2$ at exponentially increasing rates—rates which accelerate as I write. The confirmations of predicted correlation between CO$_2$ and climate change that are coming in are very strong. Robust correlation is the lifeblood of science. There is, then, human causality in the present case; but to grasp the robust correlation of trends that tells us so requires that one not only talk of history but be attentive to it.

Our peculiar American resistance to science surely has relations back to our Puritan past, a time when the only truths worth attending were thought to be those relating rather immediately to the salvation of one’s soul. The planet was reduced to little more than a scoreboard from which one could hope to coax signs of election. Further, anything historical which seemed to conflict with our superficial, uncritical, and highly westernized and anglicized reading of the Bible was rejected.

This tendency became further rigidified in America’s religious struggle against Darwinian biology. The modern-day Puritans among us—supported by the inner Puritan in many more of us—have never abandoned their rear-guard defenses against biological history. Because it’s common among us to deny that we are parts of nature, it’s inconceivable to many Americans that we’re now agents altering the habitat out of which we have sprung. A denial of the scientifically emerging timeline of human origins paves the way for a denial of current scientific reports about our human predicament at this moment. Without an attention to history, we neither know where we’ve come from nor where we’re going. History then is vital to our future.

To return then to the issue of history and validity, is there a way to do history effectively? Yes. But not if we insist that history’s lessons all be comforting, and not if we insist on holding history at arm’s length, enthralled by an arbitrary and uncritical reading of the Bible that assures us we are God’s elect. Memory can inform us, and can correct the errors we ascribe to it, if we want it to. Regarding the testimony of others—and much of history is a less-than-neatly-coherent tapestry woven from the testimony of others—there are means for sorting honest testimony from dishonest testimony, and reliable testimony from unreliable
testimony. (One hopes all who accept jury duty are convinced of this.)

From the medieval Schoolmen—who probably owe it to Aristotle—we get: *Nemo gratis mendax*, no one is gratuitously a liar. This seems both reasonable, and confirmed by experience. The impulse of humans is to communicate their sense of things. Hidden agendas notwithstanding, in general we want others to know what we think. We are social, and want to share our view of reality. For this we have coffee breaks, dinner parties, libraries, and theaters. Parents wish, by and large, to empower their children by telling them the truth. It would be a monster indeed who would choose to inundate his child with misinformation.

But this last sets up, paradoxically, an opportunity for exploitation by others. Parents who have raised their children well, conscientiously empowering them with information and thoughtful guidance, may have a hard time putting these same children on alert against the hidden agendas and deceptions of other more opportunistic adults. It’s especially difficult to fortify children against the common nonsense of the times. For the well raised child’s experience has been that adults provide wholesome testimony.

How do we guard our children and ourselves against those who would take advantage of our inclination to trust? Well, violation of trust by acts of fraud and manipulation requires special motives. In seeking to protect ourselves and those in our care, we look then for those hidden agendas and vested interests that stand to be served by deceit. And we try to engage our children in this exercise of detection from their early years. (Not only is it OK to attempt to raise one’s child as a discerning critic of out-in-the-open conspiracies, it’s a derelict parent who does not do so.)

This is because, for all I’ve said about honesty as the default mode of human behavior, hidden agendas are now everywhere in play. Milton Friedman’s doctrine (once its empty gesture of respect for ethics is peeled away) that a corporation boss’s obligation is to do everything possible to increase stock dividends and values, is a likely culprit here. Standard practice has dictated, at least till very recently, that if a food company’s advertising personnel can increase sales by misrepresenting the quality of its food, it’s not only their right but their duty to do so. If a car manufacturer finds it’s cheaper to pay civil damages for deaths caused by
a defect in its cars than it is to fix the defect, then that’s the way to go—so long as it can hide the game it’s playing. If the Koch brothers can let their oil pipes rot, and bribe regulators not to call them on it, and if they can pay such fines when accidents occur as are negligible when calculated against profits, then clearly it’s God’s will they do just that. If the Veterans Administration can win bonuses for its personnel by misrepresenting the efficiency of its services, surely sound business practice requires no less. An extreme example—so extreme one finds it hard to credit—is the much-litigated accusation that some drug companies, including Bayer/Cutter, though they had reason to believe some blood they had on hand for transfusions (developed through an outdated technique) could easily be tainted with HIV, decided nonetheless to continue marketing it to Asia. As a commodity, it had a market value. The governing logic, the plaintiffs alleged on behalf of the victims, seemed to be one could not just pour it down the drain. Talk of caveat emptor. The ethos in such examples as these seems to say to the public at large: “It’s your job not to trust us; if you ignore your duty, you deserve what you get.”

In the business of war-making, we’ve seen it’s entirely in conformity with our sense of national mission for our government to sponsor wars. Yet for our government to do so openly runs contrary to an image of ourselves that we hold dear. Honesty here would violate a cherished fiction. Knowing this is the case, knowing our officials must give accounts configured to fit The American Story, it’s reasonable and prudent for every American citizen to regard official statements relating to any and all motives for war with anticipatory suspicion. The track record of our government, brought to light by historical reflection, is of great service if we will attend to it.

Polk informs us that our acquisition of California was somehow a natural consequence of aggressive action by Mexicans. McKinley would have us believe our bloody annexation of the Philippines was somehow necessitated by the misconduct of Spain. Wilson tells us our desire to make the world safe for democracy required our entry into the First World War. Johnson tells us the popularity of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam threatened American security. (We were warned in quasi—official advisories it was better to fight with the Vietnamese in Hanoi than on the streets of San Francisco.) Suspicions emerging from this record
should prompt us to heroic scrutiny of governmental purposes when it comes to new proposals for war. (Norman Solomon and John Perkins can be helpful here—as of course can the publishers of the Pentagon Papers: Daniel Ellsberg, Howard Zinn, and Noam Chomsky.)

Regarding destruction of habitat, the moral that history teaches is similarly cautionary. We know that our corporations are, by and large, headed by people in the grip of an ethos of ever-expanding utilization. The ethos that infatuates them requires that with each passing day they find more resources and use them at a quicker pace than they did the day before. Therefore, when they tell us the environment is doing fine, or that only fools are concerned about long-term consequences, we should look to their agenda and their track-record of habitat protection. (Mark Hertsgaard has written eloquently about this; so too has Naomi Klein.)

What we learn is that attention to testimony can itself protect one against the traps that testimony can set. In the climate-change debate, for instance, when one hears geologists in the employ of oil companies say that global warming was invented by an elite band of climatologists on the lookout for research grants, one should not ignore the piece of fossil fuel in the eyes of these well paid spokespersons for big oil. Were money really the controlling goal of climate scientists warning of climate change, we know they could quickly become more wealthy than they are by switching sides. In some cases, it’s plausible to think entrepreneurs would pay them just to stop talking. (James Hansen, formerly NASA’s chief meteorologist, could probably be living in comfortable retirement in a New York penthouse, if he would just start saying kind words about the oil industry.) Historical awareness of how the money game is played should enable us to know whose testimony is the more trustworthy.

“History” then is self-correcting. If someone’s testimony is internally incoherent, that’s reason for discarding it. In a more complicated case, there can be remarkable internal coherence in statements of one testifying falsely. When, however, such a person says things incompatible with other things the listener knows well, that too arms the listener against being taken in. Good detectives everywhere know that incoherences of either type in testimony provide criteria for suspicion and rejection (and that
incoherence points toward what is being concealed). So do honest judges. (Judge Judy is quicker on an incoherence than a cat is on a mouse.)

Lest I seem to mangle and fray the thread of my argument, let me single it out clearly. Skeptics regarding history will point to the disagreements one finds among historians. “Where there is so much controversy,” they will say, “who can know the truth?” Yet the problem they cite is, in fact, the solution. The field of disagreements, entered honestly and with good will, is the field of answers. History will not save us by itself, but the desire to save ourselves without history is basically a desire to save ourselves without processing the painful lessons of our past. It’s a desire similar to the cocaine addict’s desire to find security and a full life in the sheltering clouds of cocaine.