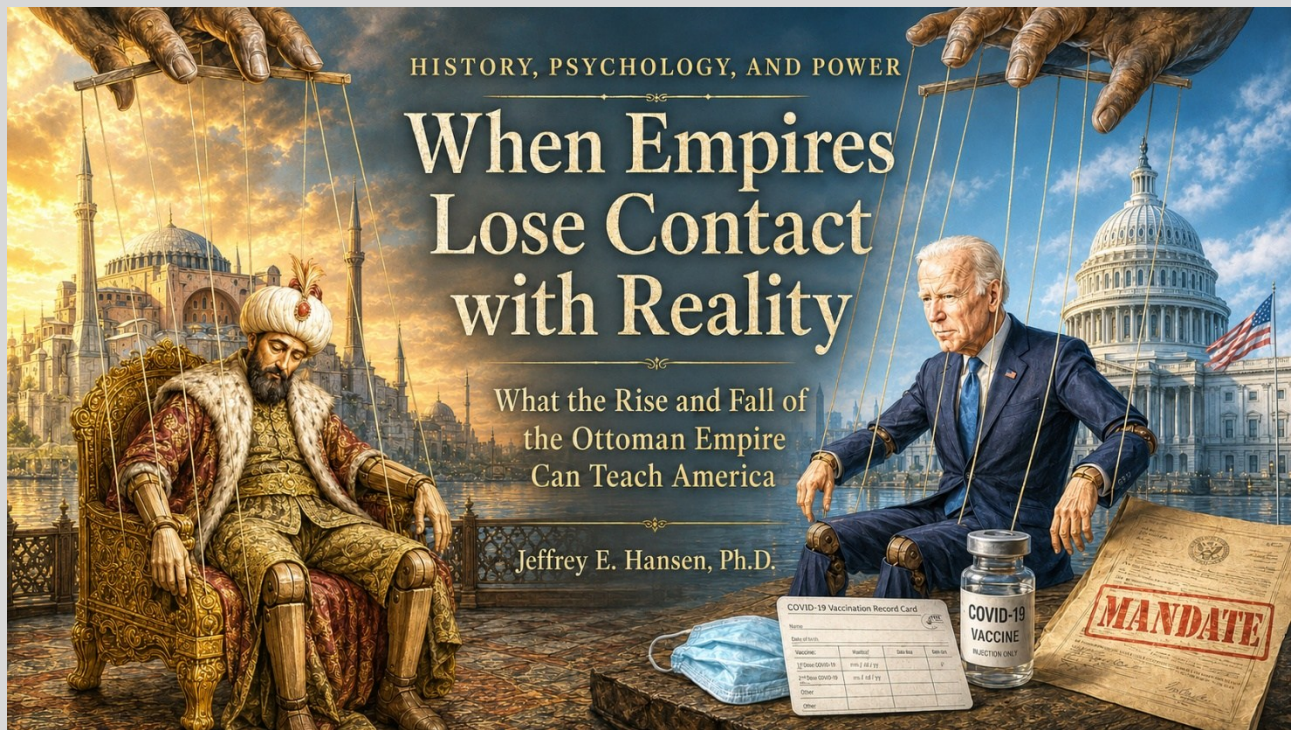




PART ONE

Why History Matters

In my increasingly sappy old age, I have become fascinated by history and philosophy, particularly where history, philosophy, and psychology intersect. History is not merely a collection of old names, distant wars, and dates we memorized long enough to pass an examination. History is the recorded behavior of human beings. It reveals what people do when they acquire power, what institutions do when their privileges are threatened, and what civilizations do when their leaders become insulated from reality. History teaches us what human beings can build. It also teaches us how fear, greed, pride, conformity, denial, religious fanaticism, and the lust for power can tear those accomplishments apart.

The philosopher George Santayana famously wrote, **“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”** History may not repeat itself exactly. The people, institutions, technologies, and political structures change. But human nature does not change nearly as much as we would like to believe. If we do not understand history, we cannot recognize its parallels. We become historically illiterate, politically manipulable, and largely oblivious to the patterns unfolding in front of us. We accept whichever explanation makes us feel safe, preserves our identity, and keeps us comfortably aligned with our tribe. The Ottoman Empire provides an extraordinary case study.

The Fall of Constantinople

The Byzantine Empire was the continuation of the Eastern Roman Empire. Constantinople stood as its magnificent political and religious capital for more than a thousand years. Its people understood themselves as Romans, and Eastern Orthodox Christianity became central to their identity. But by the fifteenth century, the Byzantine Empire had been reduced to a shadow of its former greatness. On May

29, 1453, Constantinople fell to the 21-year-old Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II, known as Mehmed the Conqueror. The city's capture brought the Byzantine Empire to its final end.

The conquest was a staggering military achievement. Mehmed employed enormous cannons against defensive walls that had protected Constantinople for centuries. Ottoman forces transported ships overland to circumvent the great chain protecting the Golden Horn. After a prolonged siege, Ottoman troops broke through the city's defenses. What followed was not a peaceful transfer of government. Ottoman soldiers killed defenders and civilians, looted the city, desecrated churches, and enslaved many of its inhabitants. Mehmed eventually stopped the uncontrolled pillaging, repopulated the city, rebuilt it, and made it the capital of his expanding empire. But we should not allow the magnificence of what came later to erase the bloodshed of the conquest itself.

From a Small Principality to a World Power

The Ottoman story had begun around **1299 with Osman I** and a relatively small Turkish frontier principality in northwestern Anatolia. From that modest beginning arose one of the largest, most powerful, and longest-lasting empires in human history. Following the conquest of Constantinople, the Ottomans expanded throughout southeastern Europe, the Middle East, Arabia, Egypt, and North Africa. They controlled critical waterways and commercial routes connecting Europe and Asia. Their armies reached the gates of Vienna. The empire's political and cultural zenith is most closely associated with **Sultan Süleyman I**, known in the West as Süleyman the Magnificent. He ruled from 1520 until 1566.

Süleyman was a formidable military leader, but he was also known within the empire as the Lawgiver because of his efforts to organize and codify Ottoman law. Under his leadership, the empire developed a sophisticated bureaucracy, an enormously powerful military, a commanding navy, and an administrative system capable of governing a remarkable variety of peoples and territories. The Ottomans also produced extraordinary achievements in architecture, engineering, calligraphy, ceramics, literature, and public works. The great architect Mimar Sinan designed hundreds of mosques, bridges, schools, hospitals, baths, aqueducts, public kitchens, and charitable complexes.

The **Süleymaniye** Mosque complex, constructed in Constantinople between 1550 and 1557, was not merely a place of worship. It included schools, medical services, food for the poor, and other public resources. This was not an ignorant or primitive civilization. It was organized, ambitious, cultured, militarily innovative, and capable of governing an immense empire for centuries. We should acknowledge those accomplishments honestly. But admiration must never become romanticization.

The Religious Engine of Conquest

Islam was not incidental to Ottoman identity and expansion. It supplied language, law, legitimacy, and a powerful religious justification for conquest. The early Ottoman rulers portrayed themselves as **ghazis**, warriors who fought to expand Muslim power into Christian territory. Ottoman warfare also pursued land, taxes, trade, slaves, strategic advantage, and dynastic glory. Religious and worldly motives were thoroughly intertwined. But the religious dimension was real.

Conquest could be understood as advancing the domain of Islam. Sultans presented themselves as defenders and champions of the Muslim faith. After conquering Egypt and the Islamic holy cities during the early sixteenth century, Ottoman rulers increasingly claimed leadership within the broader Muslim world. Christian kingdoms were not merely foreign competitors. They could also be portrayed as enemies of the faith. Religious language helped sanctify warfare, unify soldiers, legitimize imperial rule, and present territorial expansion as service to God. The Ottoman government later invoked jihad explicitly during the First World War, attempting to mobilize Muslims against the empire's Christian enemies.

We should be careful not to claim that every Ottoman war was fought purely for religion or that every Muslim supported brutality. That would be historically false. Nor was religious violence unique to Muslims. Christian kingdoms and empires also committed terrible acts while invoking God. But the brutality of Christian states does not excuse Ottoman brutality. Islamic imperial ideology was one of the engines driving Ottoman conquest, and Islamic law helped create the hierarchical system imposed after conquest.

Toleration Was Not Equality

The Ottoman Empire sometimes permitted Christians and Jews more room to practice their religions than certain contemporary European kingdoms. But we must not confuse limited toleration with equality or freedom in the modern sense. Christians and Jews were generally allowed to worship and maintain some communal institutions. But they remained subordinate to Muslims socially, politically, and legally. They were *dhimmis*: protected but inferior subjects required to acknowledge Muslim supremacy and pay the special *jizya tax*.

Restrictions varied across centuries and regions, but non-Muslims could face discrimination, humiliation, coercion, dispossession, forced conversion, and severe persecution. Churches could be restricted, converted, damaged, or destroyed. Conquered populations were taxed and controlled by a government in which Islamic identity carried legal and political privilege. Christians and Jews were tolerated when the state found toleration advantageous. They were not equal citizens. The empire also practiced slavery extensively. Military conquest and raiding supplied captives who could be sold, transported, sexually exploited, or placed into imperial and domestic service. Women and girls were particularly vulnerable to sexual enslavement.

Then there was the *devşirme*, sometimes remembered as the blood tax. For centuries, Ottoman authorities took boys, primarily from Christian families in the Balkans, removed them from their homes, converted them to Islam, and trained them for military or imperial service. Many became **Janissaries**, members of the sultan's elite infantry. Some of these boys eventually obtained education, wealth, authority, and remarkably high positions. But later success does not make the original act voluntary or benevolent. These were children taken from their parents, severed from their religion and culture, and conditioned to serve the empire that had conquered their people.

Some historical accounts also indicate that a portion of the boys taken through the broader *devşirme* system were castrated and made eunuchs. Some eunuchs later acquired important military or

governmental authority. Historians disagree about the frequency of this practice, and Janissaries as a class were not routinely castrated. Nevertheless, the larger reality is horrific. The Ottoman state used conquered Christian children as human resources for its military, palace, and bureaucracy. The Ottoman Empire built magnificent cities, produced extraordinary art, and governed diverse populations. It also conquered, oppressed, enslaved, displaced, forcibly converted, and killed enormous numbers of human beings. Both truths must be told.

When the Sultan Lost Contact with Reality

The early Ottoman sultans were expected to understand military command, administration, diplomacy, and the realities of governing. Princes were often sent into the provinces to gain practical experience. Over time, however, the system changed. Succession was extraordinarily brutal. **A new sultan might execute his brothers to eliminate potential rivals.** When Mehmed III became sultan in 1595, he reportedly had nineteen brothers strangled. Beginning in the early seventeenth century, potential successors were increasingly confined within the palace in the *kafes*, or cage. Some spent years isolated from ordinary life, deprived of military command, governmental experience, and meaningful contact with the people they might someday rule.

Then, suddenly, one of these sheltered and sometimes psychologically damaged men could be placed upon the throne and expected to govern one of the world's largest empires. Sultans could become isolated inside an artificial palace world. Producing heirs remained an essential dynastic function, but fathering children did not prepare a man to lead an army, govern a diverse population, understand an economy, or recognize the conditions beyond the palace walls. Meanwhile, powerful factions accumulated around the throne: Janissaries, bureaucrats, religious authorities, palace officials, royal mothers and consorts, eunuchs, provincial governors, tax collectors, and wealthy power brokers.

They were not one unified conspiracy. They often fought among themselves. But they possessed wealth, status, and institutional privileges they intended to protect. A weak sultan could be influenced. An isolated sultan could be manipulated. An incompetent sultan could be useful. A strong reforming sultan could become dangerous.

When Reform Threatened Power

Sultan Osman II discovered this in 1622. After recognizing serious problems within the Janissary corps and apparently considering the creation of a new military force, he was deposed and killed. He was approximately eighteen years old. Sultan Selim III attempted another major military reform after taking the throne in 1789. The Janissaries revolted and deposed him. He was killed in 1808. These were not simply stories about a few wicked soldiers. They reveal a recurring **institutional pathology**: *when an institution becomes more committed to preserving itself than fulfilling its purpose, reform becomes a threat and competence becomes dangerous.*

The Ottoman Empire reached its greatest territorial extent during the seventeenth century, but the failed siege of Vienna in 1683 became a symbolic turning point. The Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699 forced it to surrender substantial European territory. The empire survived for more than two additional centuries

and repeatedly attempted to reform. But European states were advancing in military organization, industry, finance, science, and technology. Ottoman reforms were often obstructed, delayed, or implemented only after crises had become severe.

During the nineteenth century, the empire lost territory, accumulated enormous foreign debt, and confronted nationalist rebellions and increasing European interference. It became known as “**the sick man of Europe.**” The final collapse came during the early twentieth century. The Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 stripped away most of its remaining European territory. The Ottoman government entered the First World War in 1914 and emerged defeated in 1918. Its final years included the Armenian genocide and mass atrocities against Armenian, Assyrian, Greek, and other Christian populations. An empire that had long claimed credit for managing religious diversity ended amid mass murder, starvation, forced deportation, and ethnic cleansing.

On November 1, 1922, the Ottoman sultanate was abolished. In 1923, the Republic of Turkey was established under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The caliphate was abolished in 1924. An empire that had endured for more than six centuries was gone.

PART TWO



The Parallel We Dare Not Ignore

Who Was Governing During the Biden Presidency?

Whatever one thinks of **Joe Biden's** policies, I believe it became increasingly difficult to deny his visible cognitive deterioration. I am a clinical psychologist, but I did not examine President Biden, and I am not claiming the authority to diagnose him from television footage. There is an important distinction between observing apparent deterioration and assigning a formal medical diagnosis. But refusing to diagnose him does not require me to abandon my eyes, ears, education, experience, or critical judgment.

The question was never merely whether Biden occasionally stumbled over a word. All public speakers do that. The concern arose from the accumulating pattern: **apparent confusion, difficulty completing thoughts, loss of verbal fluency, diminished physical presence, and increasing dependence upon tightly controlled appearances.** The deeper question was this: Who was actually governing? Who decided what information reached the president? Who decided which reporters could question him? Who prepared his instructions? Who controlled his schedule, appearances, and access? Who made consequential decisions when his capacities appeared diminished? Who benefited from keeping him in office?

Presidents have always depended upon advisers. No president personally makes every governmental decision. Delegation is not evidence of a conspiracy. But delegation by a fully functioning president is not the same thing as governing around an **impaired president**. There has been considerable discussion about whether Biden's family, senior advisers, party leaders, career officials, or some combination of these groups exercised unusual influence during his presidency. We may never know the complete answer. But why should asking the question be forbidden?

If the elected president was no longer fully capable of exercising the authority entrusted to him, the American people had a right to know. If unelected people were exercising that authority in his place, Americans had a right to know who they were. That is not a trivial partisan complaint. It goes directly to constitutional responsibility and democratic legitimacy. An isolated Ottoman sultan knew only what the people around him permitted him to know. If a modern president is similarly protected, managed, and shielded from unscripted scrutiny, is it unreasonable to examine the parallel? It does not prove that Biden was merely a marionette. But it makes intellectual curiosity essential.

What Happens When the Reforming Leader Cannot Be Controlled?

Then there is **Donald Trump**. Trump unquestionably has his faults. He has an enormous mouth, an enormous ego, and more than a hint of narcissism. He can be abrasive, impulsive, unnecessarily provocative, and his own worst enemy. But he is also intelligent, forceful, disruptive, and extraordinarily difficult for established institutions to control. That does not make Trump virtuous in every respect. It does make him threatening to people and institutions that depend upon maintaining the existing arrangement. During Ottoman history, powerful factions did not necessarily oppose a sultan because he was incompetent. Sometimes they opposed him precisely because he was competent enough to recognize institutional failure and independent enough to challenge it.

Osman II threatened the Janissaries, and they killed him. Selim III threatened the Janissaries, and they killed him. Trump survived political attacks, legal attacks, bureaucratic resistance, institutional opposition, and actual attempts on his life. **We must remain intellectually honest.** The existence of assassination attempts does not prove that a coordinated group of political elites ordered them. We should never claim evidence we do not possess merely because it would complete our historical analogy. But must we therefore stop asking every larger question? Who benefits when a disruptive political figure is discredited, financially exhausted, legally overwhelmed, removed from the ballot, imprisoned, or otherwise neutralized?

When does legitimate legal accountability become selective prosecution? When does political opposition become institutional warfare? When do unelected agencies cease implementing policy and begin obstructing the elected leader who threatens their institutional interests? Those questions do not prove that every action against Trump was corrupt. They do not establish that Trump is innocent of every allegation or wise in every decision. They establish that concentrated power deserves scrutiny. If our response to uncomfortable questions is to forbid the questions, we have already begun surrendering something essential.

When Political Orthodoxy Becomes a Secular Religion

The Ottoman Empire was powered in significant part by Islamic imperial ideology. Its rulers presented themselves as defenders and champions of Islam. Religious concepts helped legitimize conquest and holy warfare. Islamic law established Muslim supremacy and placed Christians and Jews into legally subordinate categories. Those who lived outside the accepted religious order could be treated as infidels, enemies, or inferior subjects. The treatment of non-Muslims varied considerably across different centuries, rulers, and regions. Not every non-Muslim was killed, and many Christian and Jewish communities survived for generations under Ottoman government. **But survival was not equality.**

The system established an approved religious order. Those who belonged to the dominant faith possessed advantages. Those outside it could be taxed, restricted, coerced, humiliated, dispossessed, enslaved, or killed. Modern American progressivism is obviously not Islam, and political censorship is not identical to religious conquest. Americans who questioned pandemic policies were not marched away by Janissaries or physically treated like conquered Ottoman subjects. Nevertheless, political orthodoxy can assume some of the psychological functions of an authoritarian religion. It develops unquestionable doctrines. It identifies approved experts. It demands professions of loyalty. **It labels dissenters ignorant, dangerous, immoral, or unclean.**

It treats disagreement not as an invitation to investigate, but as evidence of corruption. The dissenter becomes a modern heretic. During the pandemic, *“follow the science”* too often came to mean *“do not question the officials currently speaking in the name of science.”* **But science is not obedience. Science is organized skepticism.** It depends upon testing hypotheses, challenging assumptions, examining contrary evidence, replicating findings, identifying errors, and revising conclusions. The moment scientific authorities declare themselves beyond questioning, they are no longer merely practicing science. They are exercising power.

Fauci, COVID, and the Suppression of Questions

The early pandemic required difficult decisions under uncertainty. COVID-19 was dangerous, people were dying, hospitals faced extraordinary pressure, and public officials were required to act before all the evidence was available. That context matters. But emergency conditions do not eliminate the need for critical thought. They make critical thought even more important. **People who questioned lockdowns, school closures, natural immunity, vaccine mandates, mask policies, the suppression of inexpensive treatments, or the possibility of a laboratory origin were frequently dismissed as dangerous purveyors of misinformation.**

Some were censored or removed from social-media platforms. Some experienced professional retaliation or damage to their reputations. Physicians and scientists with legitimate credentials were sometimes treated as though disagreement itself proved incompetence or moral failure. Consider the **Great Barrington Declaration**. Its authors included respected epidemiologists and public-health scholars who argued for focused protection of vulnerable populations rather than prolonged restrictions upon everyone. They could have been debated openly and rigorously. Instead, then-NIH Director Francis

Collins wrote to Anthony Fauci calling the authors “**fringe epidemiologists**” and urging a “**quick and devastating published takedown**” of their proposal.

That language reveals a troubling mentality. It did not say: Let us test their evidence. It did not say: Let us convene an honest scientific debate. It called for a devastating takedown. Fauci later testified that, to his knowledge, the federal government did not publish a paper specifically carrying out that instruction. That qualification belongs in the record. But the email itself remains revealing because it demonstrates how influential public-health officials could think about qualified dissenters. Not as colleagues to be answered. As threats to be taken down.

The Biden White House and federal agencies also communicated extensively with social-media companies about COVID-related material and other alleged misinformation. Some communications encouraged or pressured platforms to suppress particular content and speakers. In ***Murthy v. Missouri***, the Supreme Court ultimately ruled that the plaintiffs lacked standing to obtain the requested injunction. The Court did not decide the underlying merits of whether the administration’s conduct violated the First Amendment. Three dissenting justices believed the record demonstrated a far-reaching censorship campaign.

We should represent that decision honestly. The Supreme Court did not conclusively rule that the Biden administration operated an unconstitutional censorship system. But neither did it vindicate everything the administration did. The underlying communications remain worthy of scrutiny. When government officials use their authority to pressure private platforms into suppressing lawful speech, the constitutional danger is obvious. Government should not be able to evade the First Amendment by persuading, threatening, or quietly pressuring private companies to censor what government itself cannot legally prohibit.

Were People “Destroyed”?

We need precision when we say people were destroyed. Pandemic dissenters in America were not destroyed in the manner of religious minorities or political enemies under an imperial regime. Most were not imprisoned, physically tortured, enslaved, or executed. But destruction can also be professional, financial, relational, and reputational. People could lose employment, professional standing, access to platforms, friendships, educational opportunities, or the ability to participate in public discussion. They could be publicly branded as selfish, anti-scientific, conspiratorial, or dangerous merely for questioning policies later recognized as uncertain, ineffective, or open to legitimate debate. That is not equivalent to physical persecution.

But it is still coercive. When people understand that asking the wrong question may cost them their job, reputation, relationships, or professional license, formal imprisonment may not be necessary. Many will censor themselves. The most effective censorship is often the censorship people learn to impose upon their own minds.

Why Did the Masses Accept It?

Why did so many ordinary people accept restrictions upon thought and discussion? Part of the answer is **fear**. COVID frightened people. It threatened health, family, employment, stability, and life itself. When people are terrified, they naturally seek certainty, protection, and authoritative leadership. The nervous system does not love ambiguity. Under threat, we narrow our attention. We seek simple explanations. We divide the world into safe and dangerous, loyal and disloyal, informed and ignorant. We become more willing to obey people who promise protection. That response is psychologically understandable. It is also politically dangerous.

A frightened population may surrender individual judgment in exchange for the feeling of safety. People may accept extraordinary governmental power because the alternative feels chaotic. They may attack dissenters because dissent reintroduces uncertainty. If I have surrendered my freedom because authorities assured me it was necessary, your refusal to surrender yours may force me to question my own decision. It may be psychologically easier for me to condemn you than to reconsider what I accepted. This is **cognitive dissonance**. It is also motivated reasoning, conformity, groupthink, and blind obedience. We do not always believe what is true. **We often believe what allows us to remain emotionally regulated, socially accepted, and aligned with our tribe.**

Belonging feels safer than thinking.

Safety, Liberty, and Necessary Authority

None of this means that government is unnecessary. A civilized society requires law, order, legitimate authority, and reasonable protections for the public. During genuine emergencies, governments may need to act quickly. Individual freedom does not give someone unlimited permission to injure other people. But the existence of legitimate authority does not justify unlimited authority. Law and order must remain subject to constitutional limits, public accountability, open debate, and the right to question those exercising power. Safety and liberty exist in tension. A healthy society must protect both.

The promise of perfect safety is one of history's most dangerous political temptations. No government can eliminate all danger. But governments can use fear of danger to acquire powers that they are reluctant to surrender. **When citizens trade independent thought for the promise of protection, they may eventually lose both freedom and safety.**

Intellectual Curiosity Is a Civic Duty

I understand that I am stepping onto thin ice. **But intellectual curiosity requires us to walk onto thin ice occasionally.** It requires us to ask questions before we know exactly where the answers will lead. I am not claiming that every suspicion is true. I am claiming that no government, political party, religious authority, scientific institution, or public official should possess the power to prohibit honest inquiry. We must be allowed to ask:

- Was Biden capable of exercising the full responsibilities of his office? If not, who exercised them for him?

- Did government officials improperly pressure private companies to silence lawful speech?
- Were qualified scientists marginalized because their evidence threatened an established policy?
- Did fear make Americans too willing to surrender bodily autonomy, freedom of association, religious practice, education, employment, and public debate?
- Were some emergency measures continued after their scientific justification had weakened?
- Who benefited politically, institutionally, and financially?

Those questions are not answers. **But a society that cannot tolerate the questions is already in danger.**

History's Warning

Civilizations do not begin to collapse merely when an enemy appears at the gate.

- They begin to collapse when leaders lose contact with reality, when unelected power gathers behind dependent figureheads, when institutions protect privilege rather than purpose, and when competence becomes threatening.
- They begin to collapse when political or religious orthodoxy replaces intellectual curiosity.
- They begin to collapse when dissenters become heretics, when difficult evidence is suppressed, and when frightened people exchange independent judgment for the promise of safety.

America is not the Ottoman Empire.

But Americans remain human beings. We are no less vulnerable to fear, pride, corruption, conformity, tribalism, denial, and the intoxicating effects of power than the people who came before us. History does not provide a perfect map of the future. It provides a record of recurring human behavior.

- Are our leaders connected to reality?
- Are our institutions serving their purposes or protecting themselves?
- Do we reward competence, or do we prefer leaders who can be managed?
- Can we acknowledge truth when it threatens our political tribe?
- Can we distinguish evidence from propaganda, whether it comes from the right or the left?
- Can we preserve law and order without surrendering liberty?
- Can we remain intellectually curious when questioning authority carries a personal cost?

As George Santayana reminded us earlier, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Scripture expresses much the same truth. Looking back upon the failures of those who came before us, the Apostle Paul wrote, "*These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us*" (1 Corinthians 10:11). History is therefore more than a record of dead empires, forgotten rulers, and vanished civilizations. It is a **gift of accumulated human experience**. It allows us to recognize danger before it becomes catastrophe, to correct our course before decline becomes collapse, and to choose wisdom where others chose fear, pride, conformity, or denial.

That is the hopeful truth. We are not condemned to repeat every failure of the past. We remain capable of learning. We can insist that our leaders remain accountable to reality. We can call our institutions back to their proper purposes. We can defend honest inquiry, resist the pressure to surrender our

When Empires Lose Contact with Reality
-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

judgment to the crowd, and preserve both legitimate authority and individual liberty. We can choose courage over fear, truth over tribal loyalty, and intellectual curiosity over comfortable conformity.

History has issued its warning, but the ending has not yet been written. The hour may be late, but it is not too late. Oh my gosh, we had better start learning. We had better learn our history, open our eyes to what is unfolding around us, recover the courage to question those who wield power, and refuse to surrender our judgment merely because thinking has become uncomfortable. History is still speaking. We had better listen.

And I believe we will. I believe the American people remain capable of awakening, learning, correcting our course, and choosing wisdom over repetition. I believe enough of us still value truth, liberty, courage, faith, and the responsibilities of citizenship to resist the forces that would pull us toward decline. History offers us a warning, but it also offers us a choice. With open eyes, courageous minds, and humble hearts, we can learn from those who came before us and write a better ending.