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From the President: A Viewpoint of History

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A VIEWPOINT OF HISTORY

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Man has always sought answers about the future: the Babylonians in the stars, the Greeks in oracles revealed at foul smelling springs, and the Gypsies through the study of the lines in one's palm. The Hebrew prophets contended that man, through his own acts, determined what the future would be. This concept was expressed by Scrooge in Dickens' Christmas Carol when he told Jacob Marley, "I wear the chains I forged in life." Historians have attempted to study the events of the past in order to gain insight into what the future may become. Some have concluded that history repeats itself and have employed this cyclical theory to ascertain the future state of nations. Others have contended, while researching the events of the past, that history could help man toward choices of action that would best support the aspirations and needs of all mankind.

Webster's **New Collegiate Dictionary**, 1975, defines history as a "chronological record of significant events including an explanation of their causes." One can understand why this definition is so written when a review of the development of history is made. Fundamental issues concerning the status of historical inquiry have arisen over the question of whether history can be said to be an objective discipline, such as chemistry or physics. The manner in which a historian conceptualizes his data is influenced by his cultural background and his sense of values. Therefore, the selection of "significant events" and the proposed "explanation" lead one to utilize subjective elements which would not fully meet the test for an exact science. Philosophers generally believe that historians need not follow the pattern of the exact sciences and that the greatest contributions of historians are their presentations of cause and effect.

Ancient History was a branch of literature. The most appreciated historians were those who wrote in a dramatic way about important events and who attracted readers by their excellent style and skill in composition. Isocrates, a teacher of rhetoric in Athens during the fourth century B.C., emphasized that "history was to be written in a clear but solemn style, akin to fine oratory." He taught that historians should introduce all manner of literary embellishment but "should not neglect to stress the moral lessons of history."

As general education spread in the European countries during the 19th century, history began to be taught in the schools, and, for the first time, the bulk of historical writings came to be done by professional historians. From about this same time, university appointments to professorships in history began to be based upon academic competence in history rather than preparation in literature and philosophy. In

American colleges and schools the study of Ancient and European history was considered to merit academic respectability, but it was not until 1876, under the leadership of Charles Elliott, president of Harvard University, that American history attained acceptance for credit in secondary schools.

During the 20th century free scholarship in the field of history has been seriously threatened. The establishment of a Communist regime in Russia led to the rejection of most pre-1917 history as a fit subject for Russian schools and Universities. The use of dictatorships in Germany and Italy also had disastrous effects on the selection and development of historical data in that they were to be used for indoctrination rather than objective study. The continued growth of autocratic governments during this century has limited the production of free scholarship in history along with other branches of humanistic studies and the emphasis on cause and effect has been used more for propaganda purposes than for discovering objectively the solutions to problems.

Life is wrought with situations and problems. One must have wisdom to distinguish between the two. A situation cannot be changed, but should be met with intelligent adjustment. Problems can be answered and wise solutions should be sought. Extremists limit the answers to problems and, as a result, limit one's prerogative to choose. If one chooses to react to the limitations of life rather than turning to the myriad of problem opportunities in our universe, one will lose hope for the future and reduce his effectiveness in the present. On the contrary, one may choose to view life as eternally becoming, expanding, and evolving, thereby recognizing that problems are solvable and that apparent situations can eventually be reduced to problems which man, in his wisdom, will ultimately solve. Man must recognize that, until situations are reduced to problems, he must make intelligent adjustment to those situations and expend his energy toward the solutions of recognized problems that impede the progress and development of society.

A viewpoint of history that supports such an evolving concept will not lead to maintaining the status quo, nor to destroying the privilege of choice, but to supporting activities that will result in effective benefits to society. This understanding of history can serve to prevent the repetition of errors of the past, and enable us to devote our lives to the advancement of liberty and, sustained through hope by faith in God, we shall wisely engage in the pursuit of happiness for which our forefathers dedicated their lives and fortunes 200 years ago.