

## Too Early to Say?

Why we need to teach recent history

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Zhou Enlai toasts Richard Nixon in 1972 ([public domain](#))

In 1972, during Richard Nixon's historic trip to China, Henry Kissinger asked Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai whether the French Revolution had been successful. Zhou replied: "It's too early to say."

Authors have repeatedly [cited](#) Zhou's statement — made almost 200 years after the French Revolution began — as evidence of his inscrutable personality or proof that the Chinese leadership "thinks in centuries." It became so famous that it ended up in Oxford's [Essential Quotations](#).

The only problem is that the story is inaccurate. Zhou did say those words to Kissinger, but he clearly [understood](#) Kissinger's question as referring to French protests in 1968, not the French Revolution of 1789. So Zhou wasn't making some wise, cryptic statement. It *really* was too early to say.

Even though Zhou wasn't saying anything terribly profound, something got lost in translation, and people around the world repeated the quote,

believing it meant something that it didn't. Only in the last decade or so, after an official [translator](#) set the record straight, has it become clear what Zhou was saying.

Even though Zhou never said what people thought he did, this whole episode shows the benefits of a patient approach to history. In the 1980s and 1990s, Zhou's little statement became the most-misused Chinese quotation next to "May you live in interesting times" (which is [not an ancient Chinese saying](#)). Only after time had passed and more evidence had come to light did the real significance (or lack thereof) of Zhou's line become apparent.

Why bring up a misunderstood quote from the 1970s? Well, because what happened with Zhou's quote happens with all events in the past. At a certain point, they pass from being contemporary events into being history. But where should we draw the line between the two?

To take one event, the election earlier this year between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump isn't history yet. We don't yet know how much or why it mattered — it's too early to say.

In contrast, the election between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in 1960 *is* history. Over the decades, historians and the public have shaped a narrative around it — it featured the first TV debate, it marked the beginning of a new era of image-based, TV-centric politics, Kennedy was the first Catholic president, the Kennedy administration became a youthful "Camelot," etc. — that both flattens the event itself and links it to its causes and effects.

But what about the elections in between? Is the 2000 election between Bush and Gore history? How about Obama's wins against McCain and Romney? Or Trump's against Clinton in 2016? At some point, we cross a line between history and current events, but it's hard to say exactly when that happens.

OK, let's focus on another story, this one fictional.

Imagine that you've sat down to watch *Star Wars*. So you sit, rapt, while Darth Vader storms a rebel ship. You meet an unknown moisture farmer named Luke who leaves his home planet, teams up with Han Solo and Princess Leia, and learns of a terrible weapon called the Death Star. The gang infiltrates the Death Star and then escapes.

And then you go and make yourself a snack or something, and miss the movie's climax. You get back to the TV in time to see Luke and Han get medals, celebrating some sort of victory.

How satisfying — or comprehensible — do you think your movie-watching experience would be? Would you have a clear sense of the significance of the earlier events of the movie? Would you understand what, exactly, the people at the end of the film were celebrating, or how they'd gotten to where they were?

This is not that different from what many history classes do in the United States. According to the American History Association's "[American Lesson Plan](#)" report, history classes often peter out (or begin to sprint) somewhere between the Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement.

This happens for a few reasons. First, we're constantly making more history. If someone has been teaching for 20 years, and they move through the curriculum at the same pace that they did in their first year, they're necessarily going to be leaving out 20 more years' worth of history than they were when they began teaching. Teaching history is like trying to cram an ever-growing collection of clothes into a suitcase that remains the same size.

Second, many teachers, especially those teaching in under-resourced areas, are using old materials. A [2017 report](#) found that many history teachers in Mississippi were using textbooks from as far back as 1995. Many of those books were published before Mississippi published new standards that required the teaching of the Civil Rights Movement.

Third, many teachers are uncomfortable teaching more recent content. This may be because these events weren't history when teachers were in college — they may still feel like current events to the teachers. They may not feel like they have the resources or historical knowledge to teach about the 2000 election in the same way they teach about the Civil War. In the AHA report, four of the six eras for which teachers most often said they lacked "sufficient background" were recent — "The Great Recession and Present Day," "Clinton and the New Democrats," "The Information Age," and "Reagan and the Conservative Movement."

It may also be that teachers feel that recent events are too controversial to bring into the classroom. God knows that if topics like slavery and the Civil War are full of potential pitfalls for history teachers, the last thing many of them want to do is wade into the legacy of Bill Clinton or discuss the impact

of 9/11. Many, understandably, would simply rather spend more time on the Gilded Age and skip the angry phone call from a parent about how they're slandering Ronald Reagan.

I get it — but think of the way that students who never formally learn about recent history experience the past and the present. In world history, they learn all about ancient and medieval civilizations, the age of imperialism, and the world wars. In their U.S. history classes, they get a lot of instruction on the founding of the republic, the conflicts over slavery and Reconstruction, the Gilded Age and Progressive Eras, the World Wars, and the Civil Rights Movement. Maybe, at the end, they get a day or two about globalization or the information age. There's a 50-to-75-year gap between the history they've learned and the world they're living in.

How's a high school student meant to make sense of, say, January 6th, or the Dobbs decision if their understanding of history functionally ends in the 1960s? Will an 18-year-old be able to contextualize the rise of Donald Trump if they haven't learned anything about the last few decades?

History teachers have an obligation to help fill in the gap for students. Events that teachers might think of as "current events" or "contemporary issues" are firmly in the past for the kids in their classes.

Remember, if you're 18 years old, Donald Trump has been the dominant politician in the United States since you were nine. It makes me feel very old to write this, but 9/11 is now as far away from today as the Vietnam War was from my 1990s childhood. Jimmy Carter's presidency is as distant for today's teenagers as the end of World War II was when I was their age. If teachers don't teach kids about events like the Clinton impeachment, the 2000 election, 9/11, and the Great Recession, their students probably won't ever understand them very well.

It is possible, by the way, to teach about these sorts of events in a way that won't turn a classroom toxic or get teachers in trouble for indoctrinating their students. The key is the same as teaching effectively about any historical period — stick to the facts, let the sources speak for themselves, and help the kids draw their own conclusions.

Zhou Enlai was wary of interpreting events that happened only four years before, and that's a reasonable and proper impulse. History teachers don't need to be current-events teachers. But teaching the recent past is key to what teachers are trying to accomplish.

When a 2023 [poll](#) of history teachers asked them about their goals as teachers, the top two responses were “Developing informed citizens for participation in a democratic society” and “Making connections to the present.” How can we do this if we don’t help students bridge their understanding of the past with the present?