# Chapter 1

# Tracing a Path to the Present

### *In This Chapter*

- Pondering how the past shaped the present
- Thinking about humankind's remarkable journey
- Following an intricate tapestry of historical threads

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, a lot of news stories on American TV and in print addressed the question: "How did we get here?" For several years, those stories were about U.S. wars abroad, especially a war in Iraq that went on much longer than the U.S. officials who started the conflict had foreseen.

"What series of events led the United States to this predicament?" asked the journalists. "How did decisions made by American leaders take us down this path?" pondered the pundits. "Why the heck didn't anybody see this coming?" screamed bloggers.

Then, in 2008, the American economy unraveled. Huge financial institutions teetered on the edge of failure. Congress and the White House threw these firms a rope by pledging many hundreds of billions of dollars in public money to save private businesses — banks and investment companies so big that, to let them die, the taxpayers were told, would mean absolute disaster for the nation and the world.

"What was the series of events?" asked the journalists. "How did leaders' decisions take us down this path?" puffed the pundits. "How could we be so stupid!" thundered the bloggers.

This book isn't about a twenty-first century war in Iraq any more than it's about first-century BC wars in Greece. It isn't about modern economics, either. (That's a subject I know way too little about.) It's about the broader questions of "How did things get to be like this?" and "Why is the world as it is?"

I can't answer those questions in detail because there have been too many years of human activity on this planet, too many lives lived, too many migrations, wars, murders, weddings, coronations, inventions, revolutions, recessions, natural disasters, and financial meltdowns. Too many historians have interpreted events in too many contradictory ways. But what I hope you find in this book is a general view of how human history has gotten you and the world you live in to current reality. To now.

# Firing Up the WABAC Machine

If you're old enough to remember or are a fanatic about classic TV cartoons, you may have heard of the WABAC machine. Pronounced "way back," it was a fictional time-traveling device built and operated by a genius dog named Mr. Peabody. In every episode of a 1960s animated show called *Rocky and His Friends* (later repackaged under other titles including *The Bullwinkle Show*), the professorial pooch and his pet boy, Sherman, would transport themselves to some historical setting — say, ancient Rome, revolutionary America, or medieval England — where they would interact with famous people from history and usually solve whatever ridiculously absurd dilemma was troubling Julius Caesar, George Washington, or King Arthur. Thus, Mr. Peabody and Sherman allowed the events we all know as history to take their proper course.

Filled with outrageous puns and deadpan humor (if a cartoon can be deadpan), these episodes were a goofy variation on a classic science fiction premise. Imaginative storytellers have often used time travel as a plot device. American novelist Mark Twain did it in 1889 with *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.* England's H.G. Wells followed suit in 1895 with *The Time Machine.* More recent examples include the *Terminator* films, British TV's various incarnations of *Doctor Who,* and innumerable episodes from the *Star Trek* television and feature film franchise.

Often these stories involve someone or something going back in time in order to change something in the present or to prevent the present from being changed in some disastrous fashion. One tiny interference in the "time continuum," as it's often called, can lead to a monumentally altered chain of events.

Of course nobody can really do that. Not now. Maybe not ever. It's a realm of possibility — or impossibility — that modern science has hardly begun to address, except in theoretical terms.


You can, however, understand a heck of a lot more about the present if you time travel in your head — that is, think about the ways that yesterday's events shaped today. Ponder how what happened a decade ago shapes this

year and how a single change somewhere in the past could have shaped a different present. Historians scoff at the "what if" game, but there may be no better tool for getting your head into history.

What if John McCain had won the 2008 U.S. presidential election instead of Barack Obama? Would anything be different? How about Al Gore over George W. Bush back in 2000? That election's results were so close, and the outcome so hotly contested, that it could easily have turned out the other way.

What if the terrorists who crashed airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, had been stopped before they could board those planes? Think about the lives saved, the grief avoided. Imagine the years since. What would have been different? U.S. troops wouldn't have been sent to Afghanistan, for one thing. Would you have ever heard of Osama Bin Laden? Would there have been that next U.S. war in the Middle East, the one in Iraq? Would you still be exactly where you are, doing the same thing you're doing now? For many people worldwide, the answer to all those questions is "no."

## From Footpath to Freeway: Humanity Built on Humble Beginnings

The earliest human beings were hunter-gatherers. There may be a slim chance that you're still living that way — spending all your time and energy intent on getting food from the natural world around you. But I very much doubt it. Instead you're a student, an office worker, a homemaker, a cable TV installer, or you perform any of thousands of occupations unimagined by early humankind. You use tools like cellphones and laptop computers — things hardly dreamed of when I was born in the middle of the twentieth century, let alone back at the dawn of civilization. Yet here I am, clacking away on a computer keyboard, checking my meager investments online, and listening to my iPod, just like a modern human being. And in a way, here too are the people of 30,000 years ago, my ancestors and yours.

They may have thought a lot about root plants, berries, seeds, probably insects and grubs, shellfish in season, meat when it was available, and calorie-rich bone marrow from fresh or scavenged kills. They literally had to scrounge to get what they needed to stay alive. In the warm climates where early members of the species lived, survival may not have been terribly difficult. They were endowed with the same basic mental equipment we have today. They were big-brained, tool-using animals, and after many tens of thousands of years living hand-to-mouth off of what they could find or kill, some of them decided there had to be a better way.

Either pushed by circumstance (climate change, for example) or somehow inspired by the thought of new possibilities, they traveled from the lush forests, savannahs, and seacoasts of Africa to face the harsh challenges of virtually every environment on Earth — mountains, deserts, frozen steppes, and remote islands. Eventually, they traded in their stone spearheads and scrapers for tools and weapons made of copper, then bronze, then iron . . . and ultimately things like microcircuits and NASA Mars rovers. Those people traveled and adapted and innovated all the way to today. They are you and me. In a weird way, then is now.


At some point around 10,000 years ago, not very long after the last Ice Age ended, some people whose technology still consisted largely of sticks and rocks settled down. They were discovering that if they put seeds in the ground, plants would come up there. It worked even better if they stuck around and tended the plants. This realization led to farming.

Historians point to an area they call the *Fertile Crescent* as a hotbed of early farming. Shaped like a slightly mangled croissant with a big bite taken out of it, the Fertile Crescent stretched from what is now western Iran and the Persian Gulf, up through the river valleys of today's Iraq, into western Turkey and then hooked south along the Mediterranean coast and the Jordan River through Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, into northern Africa and the Nile Valley of Egypt. In my flaky croissant analogy, the eastern Mediterranean is the missing bite.

The crescent is also where archeologists have found some of the oldest cities in the world. The mantra for the beginnings of civilization goes something like this: Agriculture means a reliable source of food. People stay put and grow food. Ample food enables population growth. Ample food also gives the growing population commodities to trade. Trade leads to more trade, which leads to more goods and wealth. Not everybody has to work in the fields. Some folks can specialize in shipping goods, for example. Others can specialize in building — whether as paid laborers or slaves — or perhaps concentrate on using weapons, either to protect their own wealth or take away that of others. Artisans create jewelry and turn mundane objects (weapons, pots, baskets) into aesthetic statements. Society gets more multilayered. Buildings rise. Cities rise. Trade necessitates keeping track of quantities and values, which necessitates a way to record information. Number systems get invented. Writing follows. Books get written. Ideas blossom. More trade results, cross-cultural influences appear, and so on.

Next thing you know, a English-speaking woman in Los Angeles, whose various ancestors spoke Spanish, Celtic, and Japanese, is sitting in her South Korean-made car, stuck in traffic on the freeway, a style of limited-access road invented in Germany. She's sipping a cup of coffee harvested in El Salvador, brewed in the Italian style with a machine manufactured in China to Swiss specifications. On her car's satellite radio, a voice beamed from Toronto is

introducing news stories filed by reporters in India, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. She reaches over and switches to a station that features a style of music invented in Jamaica by English-speaking people of African descent.

## War! What Is It Good For? Material for History Books, That's What

A view of history that sees only progress — as in, this advance leads to that terrific advance, which leads to another incredible breakthrough, and so on — doesn't account for the fact that people are imperfect, even awful. Some are ruthless, some destructive, some just plain stupid. Not you, of course. You're capable of some pretty great things, I know. Even I, on a good day, may contribute something positive toward history. And we all know or at least know *about* somebody whose ability to make this a better world is off the charts. But the human race also produces bad characters. Sometimes really bad.

Much of this book deals with war. I wish that weren't so, but for reasons that anthropologists, psychologists, historians, politicians, and many more have never been quite able to illuminate, there always seems to be somebody willing and even eager to skewer, shoot, blast, or even vaporize somebody else. And history is too often an account of how one group of people, under the banner of Persia or France or Japan or wherever, decided to overrun another group of people. Many such efforts succeeded, if success can be defined as killing other people and stealing their land, resources, wealth, wives, children, and so on.


One of my favorite quotations about war is this one from the historian Barbara Tuchman: "War is the unfolding of miscalculations." It underscores the fact that so many decisions made in war turn out to be wrong and so many successful wartime strategies have turned out to be the result of dumb luck.

Historians cite the twentieth century as perhaps the worst ever in terms of war and its toll — not because people were necessarily more warlike but because the weapons had grown so much deadlier and transportation (including that of weapons and troops) so much faster. In World War I (1914–1918) and then even more so in World War II (1939–1945), the machines of destruction reached farther and did much more damage than ever before.

Luckily, the wars since WWII have been limited wars in that they were contained to a particular region and didn't spread too widely, or they were fought with an understanding that neither side was going to escalate the weaponry or the tactics too far. The Vietnam War, a conflict between communist North Vietnam and the anticommunist government of South Vietnam, fits both categories.

Each side had allies with deep pockets and big guns. The Soviet Union and China provided supplies and arms to the North Vietnamese, while the U.S. sent military advisors and then, starting in 1965, active troops to fight for South Vietnam. Yet the conflict was somewhat contained. It spread to neighboring Cambodia and Thailand, yes, but not much beyond. The Americans, though deeply suspicious of and armed against both the Chinese and the Soviets, avoided a shooting war with either power. Some say that was a mistake, that the limited tactics employed by U.S. leaders caused the failure of the South Vietnamese effort. Others say that avoiding a larger war was well worth any disadvantage, even worth humiliation.


Were an all-out war to occur in the twenty-first century, humankind has far more than enough destructive power at hand to kill everybody on the planet. So, remember that there's progress as in trade, peaceful innovation, cultural exchange — and then there's *progress* as in thermonuclear weapons.

Human advances also have been disrupted and forestalled by natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions, massive storms, floods, droughts, and disease. For example, the Black Death of the fourteenth century, an epidemic of plague that swept through Europe, changed history because it so drastically reduced the continent's population. Fewer people meant labor was worth more and there was more wealth. More wealth meant more demand for goods, which spurred a search for better trade routes, which led Europeans to places like India, China, and the Americas. The results were great for Europeans but not so great for the Indians, Chinese, and Native Americans.

# Appreciating History's Tapestry

A standard history book analogy is that human events over the centuries are a "rich tapestry." Whoever originated the tapestry image deserves credit, because it's not a bad conceit. Yet many readers and students aren't all that familiar with *tapestries,* which are decorative fabrics usually hung on a wall or draped over a side table to show off their craftsmanship. Made from weaving threads together in such a way that the colors of the thread form recognizable shapes and scenes, a tapestry may be called "rich" so often because, through much of history, you had to be rich to own one.

The classic tapestry is hand-woven and takes a lot of time and skill to produce. That makes it expensive. It's complex. Each thread contributes a tiny percentage of the finished image.

History is like that, even if the threads interweave somewhat randomly and the picture is often hard to figure out. Yet with history, you can follow a thread and see where it crisscrosses and crosscrisses (if you will) other threads to get an idea of how the picture formed into what you recognize as the historical present.

## Threading backward

History usually gets told in chronological order, which makes sense. Much of this book is in chronological order, but not all of it. That's because I thought it would be a good idea to break out some of the big influences on how people behave — things like philosophy and religion, styles of warfare, and even individual personalities. Giving them their own parts of the book (Parts III, IV, and V) allows you to come at the same events and eras from different perspectives.

Even when I tell you things in the order they happened, though, I sometimes refer to latter-day developments that have resulted from long ago events, or I use modern examples of how things now can still work pretty much as they did then, whenever then was.

In studying history, it can also help to start at the now and work back, asking the questions that the journalists, pundits, and bloggers did earlier in this chapter — questions about how things got came to be.

Take the war in Iraq, for instance. I mean the one that began in March 2003, when U.S. planes bombed a bunker where Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was thought to be meeting with top staff. (They didn't get Saddam then but followed up with an invasion that led to his eventual capture and execution.) To trace every thread from that war through time would be too ambitious for this book (and this writer), but you can follow a few of them. Warm up the WABAC, Sherman.

U.S. President George W. Bush and his advisors citied a number of reasons for invading Iraq, among them the need to free Iraqis from the brutal dictator Saddam Hussein. Hussein came to power in 1979 when his cousin and predecessor Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr stepped down, or — as many believe — was forced from office by Saddam. Al-Bakr's career included ousting two previous Iraqi military dictators and helping to overthrow Iraq's monarchy in 1958.

The monarchy dated to the 1920s when Great Britain, which ruled Iraq as a colony, installed King Faisal I without really giving him any power. The king, a descendant of the family of the Prophet Mohammed, wasn't from Iraq but rather from Mecca Province in what's now Saudi Arabia. Yet he helped secure Iraq's independence from Britain before he died.

The League of Nations, a short-lived predecessor to the United Nations, cobbled together what you think of as Iraq in the 1920s. The body put Britain in charge of Baghdad and Basra, two adjacent parts of the old Ottoman Empire (which fell apart in WWI), and then a few years later threw in Mosul to the north.

The Ottomans, based in Istanbul (today in Turkey), had first conquered Baghdad in 1535. It had previously been part of the Mongol Empire and was a center of the Islamic world after Arabs conquered the region in the seventh century. Before that, it was a province of the Persian Empire for 900 years. Before that, a people called the Parthians were in charge, and before that, Alexander the Great conquered Baghdad.

In fact, when Alexander died in 323 BC, he was in Babylon, one of the most famous cities of the ancient world and one of those early cities that arose in the Fertile Crescent after agriculture took hold. Babylon had been the capital of a kingdom established by a people called the Amorites in the nineteenth century BC. Archeologists think the city, whose ruins lie about 50 miles south of present-day Baghdad, was a much older town that grew to city size by 2400 BC, more than 4,400 years ago.

## Crossing threads

Okay, so the preceding section has a highly superficial tracing of a thread I'll call "what was Iraq before, and who ruled it?" It's so superficial that I kind of skipped over some parts when different conquerors fought over the territory and rule shifted back and forth. For example, a famous Turkish-Mongol conqueror called Tamerlane took over for a while in the fourteenth century. His thread would take you back to his ancestor Genghis Khan, a great Mongol warrior and ruler. And *his* thread would take you to Genghis Khan's grandson, Kublai Khan, thirteenth-century emperor of China.

But in tracing that one thread back from twenty-first century Iraq, I crossed a number of other threads. At one intersection was WWI, which was triggered by a Serbian nationalist rebellion against Austrian rule of Bosnia. That war redrew the map of Europe and brought down not just the Ottoman Empire but also the Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian empires.

The overthrow of the Russian Empire led to the establishment of the Soviet Union — a military superpower and arch rival to the U.S. through much of the late twentieth century. Then there's the fact that WWI ended with the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, whose harsh terms imposed upon Germany have been blamed in part for the rise of Adolf Hitler and WWII. The war also led to the establishment of the League of Nations, which lumped together the group of territories known today as Iraq.

## Weaving home

The German Empire (another of those that fell in WWI) was a successor to the Holy Roman Empire, a union of Central European territories dating back to Otto the Great in 962 AD. It was considered a successor of the Frankish

Empire, established in 800 AD, when Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as Emperor of the West — essentially naming him the successor to the Roman Emperors, going back to Augustus, whose rule began in 27 BC.

Follow Leo's popish thread and you'll get to Pope Urban II, who in 1095 called upon Europe's Christians to join together in a war against the Turks, especially the Seljuk Dynasty of Turks who controlled the city of Jerusalem and the land surrounding it, considered the Christian Holy Land.

Urban's war became the First Crusade, followed by at least nine more crusades over several centuries in which Christians from Europe traveled east with the express purpose to kill Muslims in western Asia. Not surprisingly, these incursions contributed to enduring hard-feelings by many Muslims against the West and Christians.

Some people may find a thread between the Crusades and latter-day anti-U.S. sentiments, such as those held by the terrorist group Al Qaeda. However, that thread also crosses the one in which the United Nations partitioned what had been British Palestine (another post-WWI territory) into Arab and Jewish areas to make way for a modern nation of Israel.

Al Qaeda attacked the U.S. on September 11, 2001. The American response to Al Qaeda's aggression was a War on Terror(ism) that included the invasion of Iraq, whose leader was thought to be aiding terrorist groups. And I'm back where I started.

# Making the Connections

If you're not thrilled with the tapestry analogy of the previous section, how about the game called Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon? In it, you try to link any actor or movie to the veteran screen star Bacon by associating somebody who appeared in such-and-such film, who worked with so-and-so, who was married to what's-his-face, who directed the TV series that starred the actress who had a cameo role in a movie in which Bacon also starred. You get the idea.

The game calls for you to make the connection in six people or less. So let's see if I can do that with Alexander the Great, mentioned earlier in this chapter as having died in Babylon, and the Iraq War that started in 2003.

1. Alexander's conquests spread Greek influence around the Mediterranean Sea.
2. Romans embraced aspects of Greek religion and philosophy.
3. The Roman Empire switched to Christianity.

4. The Roman Catholic Church preserved ancient writings containing classical (Greek and Roman) ideas through the Middle Ages.
5. Christian scholars rediscovered Greek philosophy, sparking the Renaissance.

Oops. I'm not there yet.

So historical connections aren't as easy as Kevin Bacon connections, but I almost did it. See, the Renaissance led to the Enlightenment, when ideas such as government by consent of the governed took hold. That led to the American Revolution and modern democracies — the style of government that George W. Bush said he would establish in the Middle East after getting rid of Saddam Hussein by invading Iraq. A few more than six steps, but not bad.


If you fill in enough steps and make enough connections, you'll begin to see the interconnectedness of virtually everything people do on Earth. Maybe once upon a time, a band of hunter-gatherers in what would later be Yemen or Thailand could live for a thousand or even ten thousand years in blissful ignorance of the rest of the world. And no other band of hunter-gatherers anywhere would have the slightest clue that those prehistoric Yemeni or Thai people existed.

But if it was ever really so, that moment is long gone. Pull on any little piece of humankind now and you tug loose a thread that reaches far beyond whatever city or village you reached for. And each one of those threads tugs not just on other threads that together reach around the world; it also tugs through time to what came before. Every thing that ever happened, somebody once said, is still happening. History is now.

## Last man standing

How long ago was WWI? I can tell you that it started in 1914 and ended in 1918, but not everybody is good at visualizing when that was. What if I told you that of the millions of Americans mobilized in that war, only one man is still alive as I write this: 108-year-old Frank Buckles of West Virginia.

Buckles, originally from Missouri, managed to enlist in the U.S. Army in 1917, when he was 16 years old. Many accounts of his service say he lied about his age. He denies it, and maybe the recruiter didn't ask. Regardless, Buckles served as an ambulance driver and motorcycle courier in France and escorted prisoners of war back to Germany after the war. Among his distinctions, he reportedly met Adolf Hitler in the 1930s, before WWII.

Given his age, I can only hope that Frank Buckles is still alive as you read this. Perhaps you can think of him and his service as a teenager and remember that WWI happened a lifetime ago, a very long lifetime.

# Tracking the Centuries

**Before 12000 BC:** The Pleistocene Epoch, also known today as the last major Ice Age, ends after ice sheets recede northward.

**Perhaps 10000 BC:** Agricultural societies develop in an area called the Fertile Crescent, in the Middle East.

**About 2400 BC:** The town of Babylon, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, has grown into a city.

**About 323 BC:** Alexander the Great dies of a fever in the ancient city of Babylon.

**27 BC:** Augustus becomes the first Roman emperor.

**962 AD:** Otto the Great is crowned Holy Roman Emperor in Aix-la-Chapelle, Germany.

**1535:** Ottoman Turks conquer Baghdad.

**1919:** The Treaty of Versailles sets out terms of peace to officially end WWII.

**1932:** The Kingdom of Iraq wins its independence from British rule.

**1947:** The United Nations partitions what had been British Palestine into Jewish and Arab areas.

**1965:** The U.S. escalates its involvement in the Vietnam War by sending troops to fight on the side of the South Vietnamese government.

**2001:** Nineteen suicide terrorists hijack four commercial airlines and succeed at crashing two of them into New York's World Trade Center and a third into the Pentagon. The fourth plane crashes in Pennsylvania.

**2003:** The U.S. and Great Britain, along with small contingents of troops from other allied countries, invade Iraq.

**2009:** Barack Obama takes the oath of office as the forty-fourth president of the United States.