Because history is indeed important, and the ideas that emerge from history are important, both are deeply contested in a world in which physical and ideological conflict seems to be the norm.

That does not eliminate the importance of the American achievement. It did, however, take nearly another century to abolish slavery, and to this day we struggle to realize fully the ideal of racial equality and justice. History and a clear understanding of the ideas that have emerged over time must inform our discussions. It is not only, as George Santayana said, that “those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (a sentiment, like the title of this essay, also attributed to Edmund Burke), but that those who do not understand the past — and its influence on the present — are unlikely to find enduring solutions to our problems or the common ground on which to debate them.

As I was contemplating the events of two centuries ago, I was also struck by a more recent event, namely the passing of Elie Wiesel — a Holocaust survivor, recipient of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize and renowned writer. I remember precisely when I read his book “Night,” which recounts his experience in the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. I was 16 and on a flight to Frankfurt to attend my junior year of high school in Braunschweig, Germany. It was an overnight flight, but I stayed up reading Wiesel’s book. I felt somehow it was my responsibility, particularly being Jewish, to arrive in Germany conscious of this piece of history.

These horrors had occurred three decades earlier, and some of the people I would meet would have been involved in some way. During my stay and subsequent trips, I visited at least a half dozen concentration camps, ranging from Auschwitz, which was preserved as liberated, to the sanitized fields of Bergen-Belsen. It seemed essential to me that this knowledge (and more) should form part of the foundation for this engagement.

That historical knowledge did not diminish the deep affection that I developed for Germany as a result of my experiences there. My interest and experience in Germany form part of the background for my broader interest in religious tolerance. Out of the Holocaust emerged new ideas, particularly among university scholars, supporting a new view of human rights and the development of a new international law to protect those rights. And while those ideas and laws have not eliminated the terrible abuses of human beings that we observe daily in the news, I believe they have diminished them and changed how we respond to them.

In so many of the contentious debates of our time, history, philosophical ideas and cultural chasms lie at the heart of our disagreements. Universities play a crucial role in fostering this critically important examination of history and social ideas. We hear today much discussion of the humanities, and some question why we should continue to study them. There are a wide range of reasons why we must, including the basic fostering of creativity. And without such disciplines as history, philosophy, religion and the study of other cultures, we would be far less well positioned to understand the implications of history for us today, or how to build upon that history to realize the most fundamental values and aspirations of the evolving American republic.