

I Will Never Forget

By Jennifer Freeland

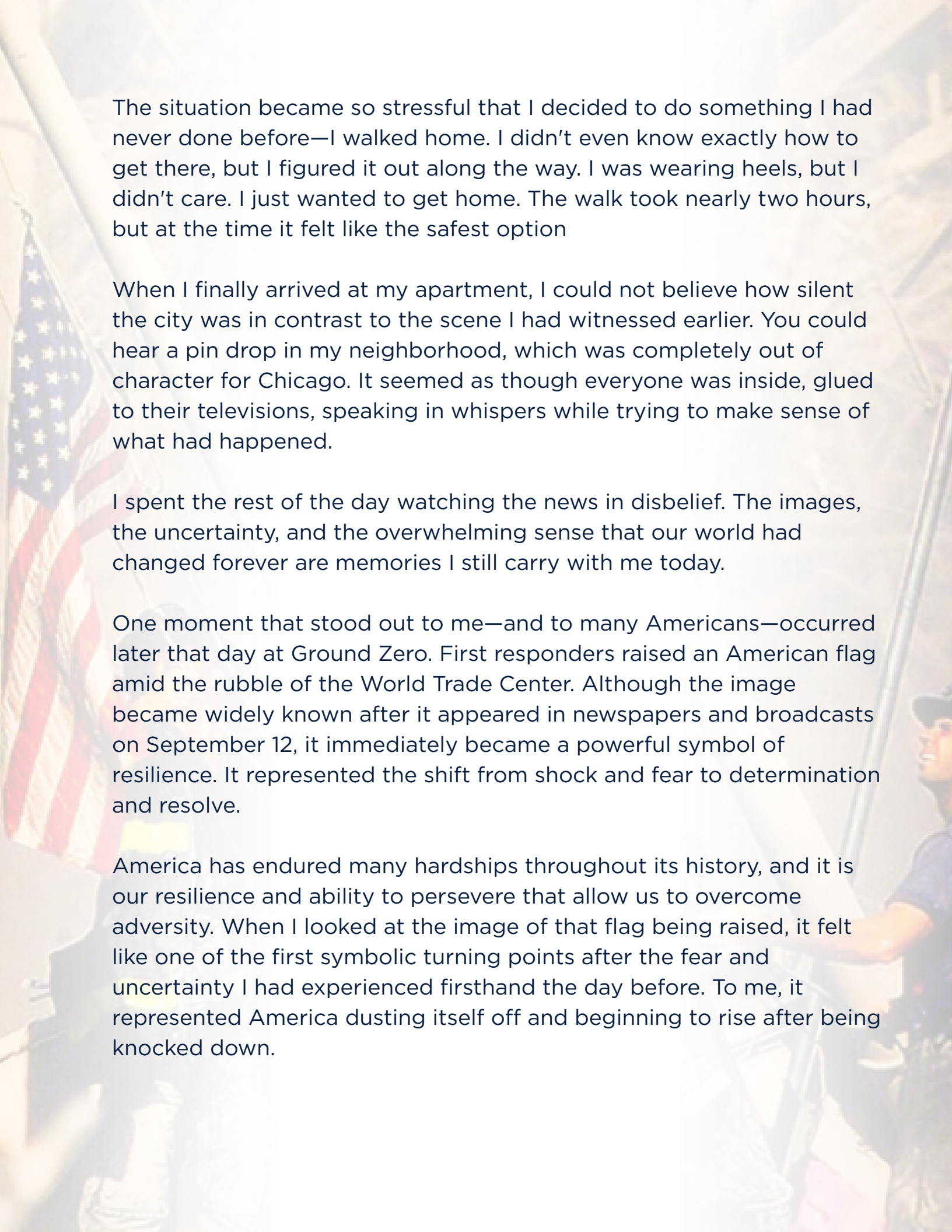
I will never forget Tuesday, September 11, 2001.

I was in my twenties, living and working in Chicago. I remember it was a beautiful Tuesday morning, and as always, I took the "L" into the city for work. Shortly after I arrived at the office, one of my coworkers barged in asking if anyone had heard that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City.

At the time, none of us knew what she was talking about. We quickly turned on the television and were glued to the news. With Chicago home to some of the world's tallest skyscrapers, officials acted immediately because they believed some of the city's landmarks could become secondary targets. My office building was evacuated because it was located near the skyscraper then known as the Sears Tower.

After the evacuation, I stood shoulder to shoulder with others in the crowded streets of Chicago who had poured out of nearby office buildings. Everyone was studying the sky for anything unusual or threatening. One of my coworkers was terrified because her fiancé's parents were flying from Boston to California that morning. She had no idea whether they were on one of the planes involved. To make matters worse, she was unable to reach her fiancé because cell phone networks were overwhelmed. Fear, confusion, and uncertainty filled the air.

It was nearly impossible to get on public transportation because thousands of people were trying to leave downtown at the same time. People were being aggressive, pushing, cutting in line, and desperately trying to get onto the next train. The atmosphere was tense, chaotic, and unlike anything I had ever experienced.



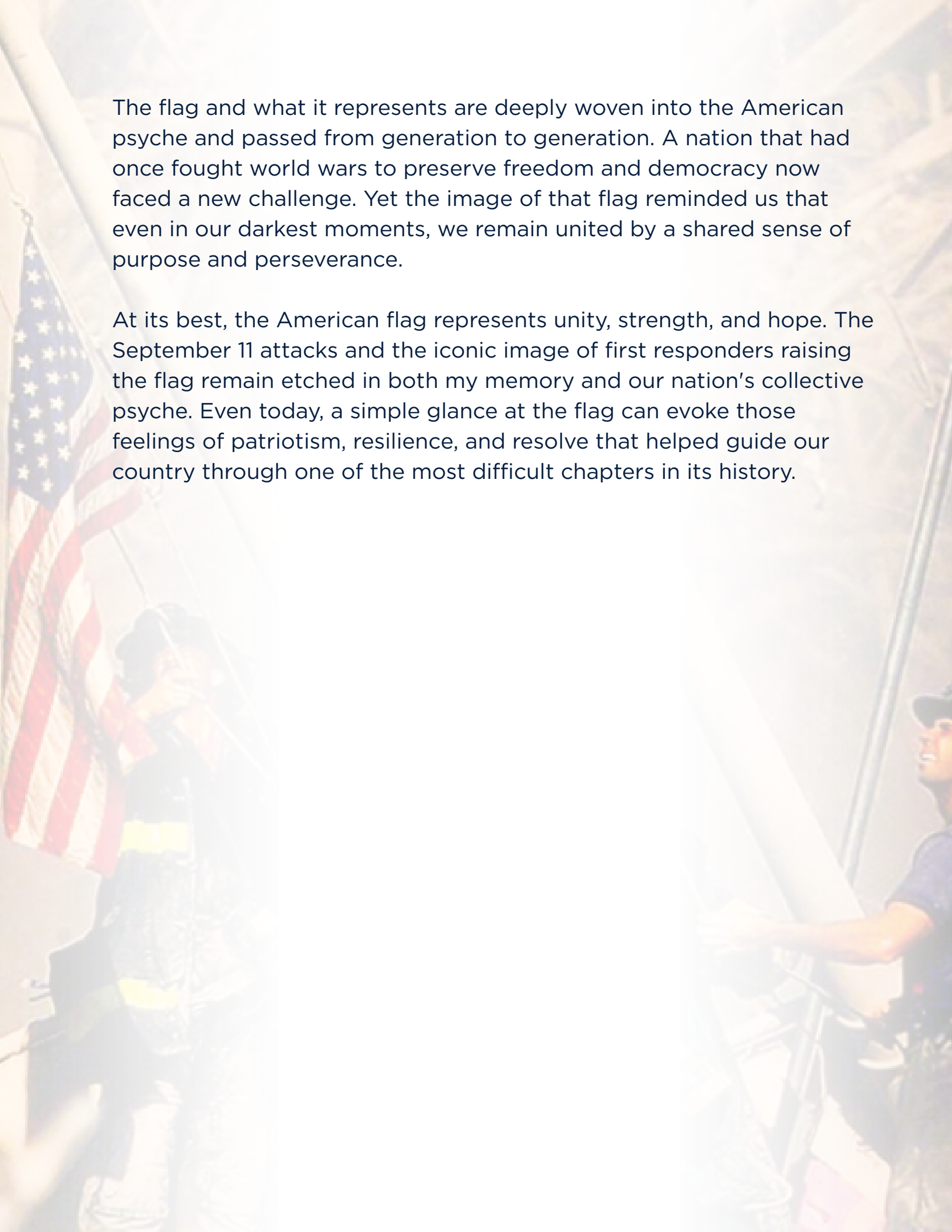
The situation became so stressful that I decided to do something I had never done before—I walked home. I didn't even know exactly how to get there, but I figured it out along the way. I was wearing heels, but I didn't care. I just wanted to get home. The walk took nearly two hours, but at the time it felt like the safest option

When I finally arrived at my apartment, I could not believe how silent the city was in contrast to the scene I had witnessed earlier. You could hear a pin drop in my neighborhood, which was completely out of character for Chicago. It seemed as though everyone was inside, glued to their televisions, speaking in whispers while trying to make sense of what had happened.

I spent the rest of the day watching the news in disbelief. The images, the uncertainty, and the overwhelming sense that our world had changed forever are memories I still carry with me today.

One moment that stood out to me—and to many Americans—occurred later that day at Ground Zero. First responders raised an American flag amid the rubble of the World Trade Center. Although the image became widely known after it appeared in newspapers and broadcasts on September 12, it immediately became a powerful symbol of resilience. It represented the shift from shock and fear to determination and resolve.

America has endured many hardships throughout its history, and it is our resilience and ability to persevere that allow us to overcome adversity. When I looked at the image of that flag being raised, it felt like one of the first symbolic turning points after the fear and uncertainty I had experienced firsthand the day before. To me, it represented America dusting itself off and beginning to rise after being knocked down.



The flag and what it represents are deeply woven into the American psyche and passed from generation to generation. A nation that had once fought world wars to preserve freedom and democracy now faced a new challenge. Yet the image of that flag reminded us that even in our darkest moments, we remain united by a shared sense of purpose and perseverance.

At its best, the American flag represents unity, strength, and hope. The September 11 attacks and the iconic image of first responders raising the flag remain etched in both my memory and our nation's collective psyche. Even today, a simple glance at the flag can evoke those feelings of patriotism, resilience, and resolve that helped guide our country through one of the most difficult chapters in its history.