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Don't know much about History ...

HISTORY making a great comeback in school? It's about time.

No matter what the younger people think, History should not be perceived as the boring stuff that goes with memorising dates and events like a parrot. It is in fact the most understated and underrated of all subjects since its relevance can be applied anywhere at any time.

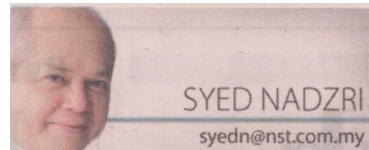
The announcement by Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin at the Umno general assembly on Saturday that it would be compulsory to pass History for students sitting the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination in three years should be welcomed by all — if not for anything else than that chilling reminder that "those who don't know history are destined to repeat it".

Muhyiddin's notification, which came midway through his winding-up speech at the Umno general assembly, was certainly not out of turn or mistimed as some people might construe. On the contrary, the political platform from which he spoke was most apt — not just because of that stark reminder mentioned above but also the correlation about history being past politics and politics present history.

Indeed, the pulsating political developments taking place right now would be even more interesting if we were to add that historical perspective to each and every issue.

The much-talked-about Federal Constitution, for instance — the story behind it, who drafted it and what was the climate then. Or the fall of the Malay kingdoms of old.

Not too long ago, I wrote in this column about Malacca being on the threshold of its 500th anniversary of the fall of its mighty sultanate, which also marked the beginning of West-



ern colonial rule in Malaya and how we could learn from the episode.

I quoted J. Kennedy in *A History of Malaya* who wrote that the people of Malacca were politically disunited when the Portuguese launched their offensive and that one of the main factors was the split over the choice of Tun Mutahir as *bendahara* (equivalent to today's menteri besar or prime minister).

"For the Portuguese, it had not been an easy victory," Kennedy wrote. "In manpower, they were greatly outnumbered. The defenders of Malacca used a variety of weapons, from firearms to bows and arrows and poisoned darts.

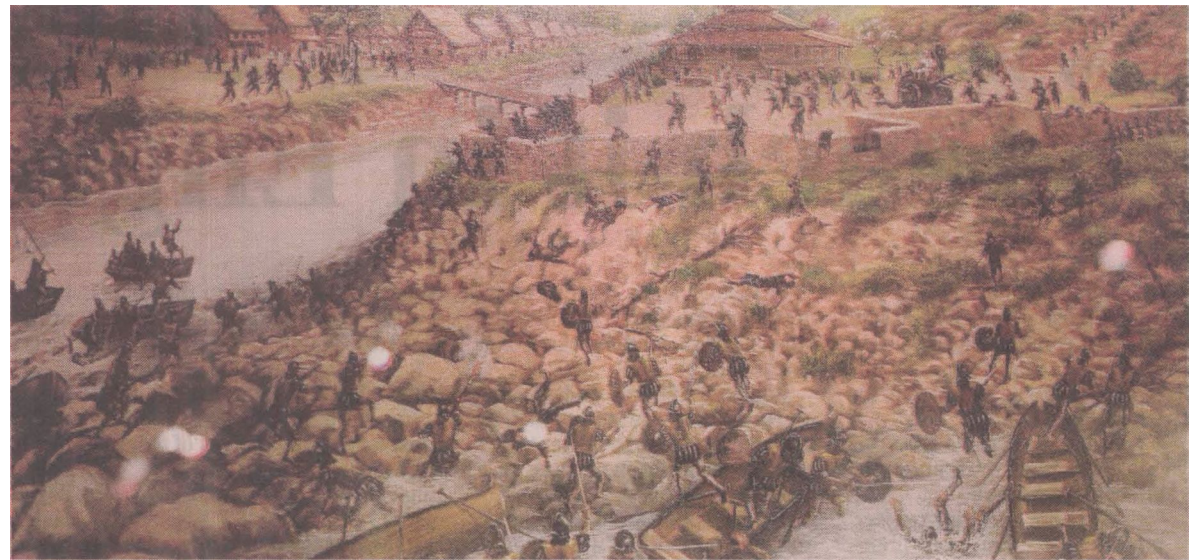
"Yet, certain advantages lay on the Portuguese side." Their strategy, he added, was helped by inside information provided by traitors and turn-coats.

Kennedy also wrote that many merchants in Malacca at that time just stood by, ready to support whoever won as long as their properties were not taken away and their interests safeguarded. And this included the Chinese.

Some people did not take too kindly to the extracts that I reproduced. But I was not being mischievous nor selective as I had done so just to illustrate the conditions then, so that we could learn from them.

Interestingly, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak in his presidential speech at the Umno assembly on Thursday also touched on this historical milestone.

He said: "Let it be known, the forth-



Next year is the 500th anniversary of the fall of the Malacca empire to the Portuguese.

coming 2011 is not an ordinary year. It marks 500 years since the fall of the Malacca empire. Here, we should learn why a great empire in the Malay Archipelago, once a trading transit point between two continents, had fallen to the Portuguese.

"Ironically, many quarters focus only on the collapse of the Malay empire due to internal betrayal. True, this was part of the reason. But no less important was the great difference in military might and the weapons used.

"What I mean is that the Portuguese had used modern weapons of the time with rifles and artillery while the defenders of Malacca were still using weapons of a bygone era. Although daggers, spears, bows and arrows were a symbol of heroism, they could not match guns and cannon. That was the convention, the way the world turned.

"Therefore, Malays of the third millennium, the 21st-century Malays, must be ready for the era. Rather than being obsessed with rights, Malays of the 21st century must prepare themselves to take advantage of existing rights. What is the use of quotas, reserves and permits if everything is being wasted? What good is a chance if it is forfeited for short-term profits?

"Hence, Malays of the 21st century must work hard to build capacity and capability, instead of just thumping their chests and exerting that they should be successful as it is their right to succeed. Like it or not, Malays must face the reality of this century to achieve success."

Interesting? Of course, because history provides that avenue for varied interpretations and analyses of events.

Hence, it opens the way for critical

and dissecting minds. It is different from the straightforward, black-and-white dy/dx formula in Mathematics or the Chemistry lessons about the rate of reaction between potassium manganate and ethanedioic acid. And it is no less critical in the school curriculum.

While historical facts are sacred, the perspectives can be very subjective. The authors and textbooks will, therefore, be crucial to determine what kind of lessons the students get.

Was Mat Kilau a hero or a rebel? What about Chin Peng? Was J.W. Birch killed by a nationalist or common criminal? What was the story behind the Pangkor Treaty? Is it true that the British colonial government applied a divide-and-rule policy to the Malay states?

Indeed, those who ignore history are destined to repeat it.