What-Really-Happened

• according to most people, **history** is “what really happened in the past”
  – but our understanding of history is often based on the testimony of witnesses
  – and different people see things different ways, so it’s not always possible to determine what happened in the past
    • cf. the police report of an accident based the report of eye-witnesses
What-Really-Happened

• people’s memories are filled with bias, self-righteousness, pride, vanity, spinning, obfuscation and outright lies
  – anyone who writes or records history has an agenda
  – cf. the different meanings which have been given to Christ’s crucifixion

• Would having a time machine help?
  – Probably not! cf. the Zapruder tape of Kennedy’s assassination
What-Really-Happened

• Is it impossible to find out what-really-happened-in-the past?
  – Probably! but by understanding certain things, we can get closer to the truth
  – nevertheless, not so much that everyone will agree
  – but discussion is good, especially in a democratic society
    • allowing no or limited discussion is an essential ingredient in tyranny!
What-Really-Happened

• in fact, discussing and arguing about the past is one of the ways we discover who we are collectively

  – cf. the evolution vs. intelligent design debate today

  – it’s an argument about our shared past and how one past or the other should affect our decision-making process today
What-Really-Happened

• indeed, all “historical” debates are at heart arguments about the present and the future
  – often with specific goals relating to how people should think — and vote!
  – all the martyrs and revolutionaries who have fought for a cause have usually done so to endorse some belief about the past

• so, history is very “relevant”

• all in all, studying the past is the only way to steer a course into the future
What-Really-Happened

• the best approach then is to do all we can to reconstruct as fully as possible our picture of the past
  – if we can’t nail down the truth completely, we can approach and circumscribe it
• one big advantage: the liars of history are usually quite transparent
What-Really-Happened

• for instance, the historian **Tacitus** *(The Annals of Imperial Rome)*
  – wrote about the **Pax Romana** (31 BCE - 180 CE)
    • especially the early period: the reigns of the **emperors** Augustus to Nero (31 BCE - 68 CE)
  – Tacitus laments the loss of the Romans’ freedom in the “gilded cage” of the Empire
What-Really-Happened

• for instance, the historian **Tacitus** (The Annals of Imperial Rome)
  – though he never says so directly, clearly he wants to shock the Romans into rejecting the very concept of having “emperors”
    • cf. his viciously negative picture of Nero
  – there can be no doubt about it: Tacitus’ Annals are great history, but are they good history?
What-Really-Happened

• cf. a very different historian who lived half a millennium later: Procopius
  – official court scribe of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (r. 535-565 CE)
  – by day, he sang Justinian’s praises
  – but by night, he wrote The Anecdota (“The Unpublished Accounts”), only discovered several centuries later
    • a scathing attack on Justinian
    • full of lies and scurrilous gossip
  – one historian can write two histories!
What-Really-Happened

• from one perspective, all history is propaganda, distortions and lies
  – for the simple reason that it’s been recorded by people who care
  – people who don’t care don’t write!

• but the lies of history are not all that hard to see through
  – especially, if there are external sources
What-Really-Happened

Three Types of History

• REMEMBERED HISTORY
  – the collective memory of a living society
  – “oral history” is primary evidence
  – but memories are easily distorted
    • cf. the grandfather who doesn’t want his grandchildren to know that he fled a battle
  – also, various “grandfathers” remember an event in different ways, which leads a large and often irreconcilable body of data
  – at heart, all history is “remembered”
Three Types of History

- **RECOVERED HISTORY**
  - forgotten “remembered history”
  - today, the most visible form of “recovered history” is *archaeology*
    - but also library research, decipherment
  - all in all, “recovered” data seem less biased because they haven’t been tampered with, but what about context?
  - how do we evaluate archaeological evidence?
What-Really-Happened

Three Types of History

• **RECOVERED HISTORY**
  – cf. **Pompeii**, destroyed in the eruption of **Mount Vesuvius** (79 CE)
  – is this city representative of Rome in the day?
    • a beach community full of wealthy people, gambling and prostitution
  – cf. **Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s The Last Days of Pompeii**
    • full of 19th-century Protestant bias
What-Really-Happened

Three Types of History

- **INVENTED HISTORY**
  - myths, fabrications, lies about the past

  Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,
  Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
  To the last syllable of recorded time;
  . . . it is a tale
  Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
  Signifying nothing.

  (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 5.5.19-28)
What-Really-Happened

Three Types of History

• **INVENTED HISTORY**
  – these sorts of historical distortion persist because people want to believe they’re true
    • as such, invented histories are repeated often and in the process assume the force of truth
  – in fact, what the “liars” are doing is satisfying a desperate need to see the past in a certain way
    • e.g., the Egyptian Captivity and the Hebrews’ building the Pyramids
What-Really-Happened

Three Types of History

• **INVENTED HISTORY**
  – many examples from modern history, too
    • George Washington and the cherry tree
    • the “good ole days” of the American West
    • that simple, old-time religion in America
  – but these “lies” do signify something
    • they show people’s hearts or sense of humor
  – all in all, however, they give insight into the liars’ present, not their past
What-Really-Happened

• Conclusion: What is History?
  – so, the point of history is not just to uncover what-really-happened but to put the past into context and give it meaning and force in modern life
  – in some ways, history is the study of the present by looking at the past
  – seen that way, all (in)famous figures who’ve ever lived are “historians” of a sort: St. Augustine, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Buddha, Mohammad, and even Hitler
What-Really-Happened

• Conclusion: What is History?
  – the lesson is: if you control people’s perception of the past, you control their path to the future!