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Imagination and history

Last week, Professor David Crew and I led a panel discussion on the demise of democratic institutions in Weimar Germany and classical Athens. Our differing views on what caused the collapse of democracy in pre-Hitler Germany and what led to oligarchic coups in post-

Periclean Athens prompted a colleague to question the value of history: "Can we, in fact, learn very much from history?"

This is the same question raised by the debate about the Confederate



statues at the University of Texas at Austin in the Austin American-Statesman.

One answer, of course, is wittily cynical: "History would be a wonderful thing — if it were only true." Leo Tolstoy thus acknowledges how hard it is to get people to agree upon truth about the past.

Any use we make of history is affected by our different perspectives. It is impossible for two of us to experience the same contemporary event in the same way. It is even more than impossible for us to agree upon what happened in the past and how to use the past to guide us now.

My own rejoinder to Tolstoy is that history is a wonderful thing even if we cannot agree what happened and why. Please hear me out. I am not advocating here that truth is relative or that we should not try to get at hard facts about the past. Rather, I would say that the exchange of views in the Statesman is a crucial part of history, part of the ongoing process of investigation by which human beings come to knowledge of the past that we universally agree is vital to our communal health and well-being in the present.

The very word *historia*, my colleague Mark Southern would explain, means something like "that which someone does as an agent of knowledge." It is analyzed as *wid-tor-ia*. The *-ia* denotes the process; *-tor* marks the agent who acts, as in our very word "actor," and *wid-* indicates the element of seeing and ultimate knowing that is both the means used and the goal pursued.

My own belief is that the most successful historians have the great gift of imagination, the consummate skill and the human empathy to be able to see and feel what it must have been like to live in the past. It is much needed in the field of ancient Greek history.

Historical and philosophical sources tell us that the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus, a long blip on the radar screen of developing Athenian democracy, ruled in a mild and law-abiding way. Yet the same sources

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inform us that he feigned an assassination attempt on himself in order to be assigned club-bearing bodyguards, he led a military attack upon Athenian soil and he had the sons of prominent would-be opponents sent into exile under effective house arrest. One student asked, wasn't that kidnapping and against the law? My answer. Use your imagination. Peisistratus would have told a potential rival, "I think that your son could use an extended vacation," and told him where. The rival, sizing up the situation, would have agreed.

One great proof is offered of how law-abiding Peisistratus was. When accused of murder, he actually dared to appear in court. We are also told his accuser did not show up. Again, using our imaginations, we can conclude that Peisistratus was thought capable of murder and would never have set foot in court unless he was sure that he had properly intimidated his accuser or found a suitable place for him, much like Giants Stadium is for Jimmy Hoffa.

Should we think that the history of slavery is disconnected from modern racial inequality, or that Martin Luther King Jr. was a mild man of prayer, or that slaves were contented under their relatively loving masters, or that society would have healed itself without government intervention? Let us read MLK's speech of Dec. 5, 1955, to the first Montgomery Improvement Association mass meeting in Clayborne Carson's "A Call to Conscience." Let us read John Lewis' account of journeying to Montgomery in Joan Morrison's "From Camelot to Kent State." Let us read the experience of black servicemen in World War II in Studs Terkel's "The Good War."

Let us even listen to soul singer James Brown talk about his own childhood in a late-night blues improvisation: "At least today you got a right to say you don't dig it. If we had said we don't dig it, we'd a been dead." Then let us use our imaginations in pursuit of the lessons of history.

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