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## COMMENTARY

Palaima: Suppressing the truth is a crime against history

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Societies suppress or keep alive their histories for many reasons, and there are usually many, often opposing, political and social forces at work.

Here in Spain there has been serious political debate about the recently passed Law of Historical Memory, promoted by Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and his Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). The bill was adopted to address "those people whose rights were harmed during the civil war and the dictatorship" of Francisco Franco. "Rights were harmed" is a euphemism for such things as having your parents taken away, and summarily tried and executed, because their political beliefs made them enemies of the fascist government.

The law is controversial because the post-Franco constitutional democracy was established through a "pact of silence." Political parties from the far left to the far right agreed to forget about the arrests and executions. By publicly reopening the past, attention has been drawn to the human rights violations of the civil war and the Franco regime. But the political compromising produced a law that has pleased almost no one.

The conservative Party of the People attacks the law for reopening forgotten wounds and for "tearing down the fundamental pillar of harmony and reconciliation among all Spaniards," i.e., "the pact of silence." Critics say the law provides insufficient means to obtain "justice" for crimes against humanity, and does not assume the responsibilities laid down in a United Nations resolution on the "disappearances" of human beings through use of force. The families of those imprisoned and killed by the Franco regime have never forgotten these wounds. They criticize the bill for declaring that "all Spaniards were victims" from 1936 to 1975.

We can see that not only the government is involved in interpreting the past in different ways. So it is worth thinking about what the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform investigations into the cases of Pat Tillman and Jessica Lynch mean for Americans.

The past matters to us and to the people of Spain because of our notions about justice and "what is right."

A great problem in many ancient Greek city-states was how to control the harmful effects of the strong and often violent struggles between rival social and political groups: rich against poor, democrats against oligarchs. Aeschylus' great tragic trilogy, the Oresteia, was written at a time of high political tensions surrounding a democratic push to reform a major oligarchic council. Aeschylus addressed the tricky problem of how a society might best put an end to the cycle of killing and reprisal killing that can go on for generations. These kinds of vendettas are known to us wherever civil war erupts.

The Athenians and Aeschylus had recourse to the concept of public juries. Individuals and clan groups no longer had the right to seek their own justice. Instead jury panels, randomly chosen, would examine the facts in public and reach a decision about how to put things in balance. It was rarely possible to achieve social harmony, and even this process was deeply politicized. The jury in Aeschylus left one side, at best, mollified.

The Greeks also recognized and used the concept of *amnesteia* as a way of solving serious social problems. It literally means "not remembering," and gives us the word amnesty.

The cases of misinformation about Iraq and Afghanistan being investigated by the House can be viewed as merely part of a political agenda, a way for Democrats to attack the Republican administration and its wars.

But Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., chairman of the House committee, has spoken a truth about those who were done the greatest injustice, declaring that our government violates its most basic duty when it fails to tell soldiers and their families the truth.

The past will always be politicized. It was in ancient Athens. It has been in Spain. And it is in the United States.

When our government creates false heroes or covers up a "friendly fire incident," it prevents us from making sound decisions. Who knows how our public response to these wars would have changed without such misleading propaganda?

History always matters. Jessica Lynch and the family of Pat Tillman have helped us all by making this truth self-evident.

Palaima is a classics professor at the University of Texas. This is the fourth in a series of columns from Spain.