

Palaima: History as a raw onion sandwich

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The saying goes that youth is wasted on the young. That is how many of us feel when we look back on our own lives with the experience of several decades of adulthood.

The same might be said about our collective lives. History is a stern teacher. But we are bad students. Is it any wonder that History repeats herself, when we find it hard to learn her lessons?

In Julian Barnes' recent novel "A Sense of an Ending," Old Joe Hunt, a secondary school history teacher five years short of retirement, poses a simple question to his senior-year students, "What is History?"

The narrator Tony Webster answers with a cliché, "History is the lies of the victors." Hunt, who has dealt with years of glib schoolboys, responds, "Well, as long as you remember it is also the self-delusions of the defeated."

Tony's friend Colin proposes that history is a raw onion sandwich, because it "just repeats, sir. It burps. We've seen it again and again this year. Same old story, same old oscillation between tyranny and rebellion, war and peace, prosperity and impoverishment."

In its origins, history had two purposes. Herodotus saw it as a means of preserving in our social memory past doers and deeds that were worth remembering. Thucydides changed the focus. He explained the features and causes of events and assigned responsibility for them. He

believed that human beings, without the guidance of sober analysis of what happened in history, would respond to similar conditions in the future as they had in the past. We boil this down to “history repeats itself.”

The brightest of Hunt’s students Adrian Finn has a peculiar view of this second purpose of history: “Indeed, isn’t the whole business of ascribing responsibility a kind of cop-out? We want to blame an individual so that everyone is exculpated. Or we blame a historical process as a way of exonerating individuals. Or it’s all anarchic chaos, with the same consequence. It seems to me that there is — was — a chain of individual responsibilities, all of which were necessary, but not so long a chain that everyone can simply blame everyone else.”

These three takes on history, glib, humorous and highly serious, can all be true at one and the same time.

Several matters of recent history should have us thinking of why history does repeat itself and how to trace links in the chains of causation and assign responsibility for actions and their outcomes.

Nick Turse’s book “Kill Anything That Moves” about officially documented widespread “atrocities” committed by American soldiers during the Vietnam War has stirred controversy about what the public should be told during wartime and how our soldiers should be trained and guided during wars waged under the conditions in Vietnam and now in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Hundreds of workers and young people were killed senselessly in a nightclub fire in Santa Maria, Brazil and a cloth factory fire in Karachi, Pakistan. Both tragedies have clear precedents and could have been avoided by paying attention to history.

The wrist-slapping of our major banks for the harm they have done to millions of Americans through their mortgages and foreclosures is another case of *déjà vu*.

Ten banks are paying \$8.5 billion for improperly foreclosing on homeowners in 2009-2010. Around \$3 billion will go in direct payments to borrowers who were foreclosed on. \$5 billion will assist homeowners who are still struggling. Bank of America is paying \$10 billion for selling risky mortgages to Fannie Mae.

The numbers seem impressive, but consider the scale of the devastation and the sums of the individual settlements. Bank officers, mortgage brokers, real estate agents and home appraisers who profited from peddling subprime mortgages are accepting no responsibility. Nor are the former members of the U.S. Congress who voted in 1999 for the legislation that removed the safeguards that had protected Americans against rapacity like the subprime mortgage gimmickry. One of the sponsors of this bill, James Leach, is now sitting pretty as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Four million families lost their homes between 2007 and 2012. How many fathers, mothers and children had their lives torn apart? In this settlement, 750,000 people who lost their homes between September 2008 and the end of 2011 will receive \$2,000.

That is not a typo. There is no missing zero. What is missing is a way to keep history from exonerating individuals by blaming processes like the subprime crisis and mildly penalizing powerful institutions.