

Lying About the Past

(History 389-009/ver. 2.3)

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M/W 3:00-4:00

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Introduction

I hope this course will be unlike any history class that you've ever taken. It certainly is unlike any course that I've ever taught. Why? Because instead of focusing all of our attention on the truth of what happened in the past, we'll be focusing our attention on the lies told about what happened—lies told with the specific intention of deceiving others (most typically known as historical hoaxes). And then we'll do something truly unthinkable—we'll make up our own hoaxes and turn them loose on the Internet to see if we can fool anyone.

Why would I design a course that is both a study of historical hoaxes and then has the specific aim of promoting a lie (or two) about the past? I have two answers to this question, both of which I hope will convince you that I'm onto something. The first answer is that by learning about historical fakery, lying, and hoaxes, we all become much better consumers of historical information. In short, we are much less likely to be tricked by what we find in our own personal research about the past. That alone ought to be enough of a reason to teach this course. But my second reason is that I believe that the study of history ought to be fun and that too often historians (I include myself in this category) take an overly stuffy approach to the past. Maybe it's our conditioning in graduate school, or maybe we're afraid that if we get too playful with our field we won't be taken seriously as scholars. Whatever the reason, I think history has just gotten a bit too boring for its own good. This course is my attempt to lighten up a little and see where it gets us.

In the interest of full disclosure, I have only taught this class once before and to my knowledge, no other history professor in the world is willing to teach something similar (or works in a department where they could get away with it). Various courses taught around the world spend some time on hoaxes and hoaxing, but I haven't found one that is all about the hoax. So the only model to work from is the one I used last time (Fall 2008). The last time around, the final class project generated a great deal of discussion (much, but not all of it negative) in the academic blogosphere. As you'll see when we discuss the previous iteration of this course, I'm not particularly sympathetic to those who took a dim view of what my students did.

Learning Goals

I do have some specific learning goals for this course. I hope that you'll improve your research and analytical skills and that you'll become a much better consumer of historical information. I hope you'll become more skeptical without becoming too skeptical for your own good. I hope you'll learn some new skills in the digital realm that can translate to other courses you take or to your eventual career. And, I hope you'll be at least a little sneakier than you were before you started the course.

Assigned Materials

In addition to the books listed below, there will be several additional reading assignments (articles on reserve, websites, etc.). The *Selling Hitler* book is out of print and is available *only* online in the used market. The bookstore can't get any copies. I've placed two personal copies on reserve at the Library and have at least one more personal copy on reserve in my office. You will need all of these books because we will be discussing them in detail in class at various points in the semester. If you plan to buy them during the semester instead of all at once, be advised that the Bookstore begins returning their inventory after the add/drop deadline. The books assigned are:

John Mitchinson and John Lloyd, *The Book of General Ignorance*

Robert Harris, *Selling Hitler: The Extraordinary Story of the Con Job of the Century*

Robert Silverberg, *Scientists and Scoundrels: A Book of Hoaxes*

Michael Farquhar, *A Treasury of Deception: Liars, Misleaders, Hoodwinkers, and the Extraordinary True Stories of History's Greatest Hoaxes, Fakes and Frauds*

Edward Owens, the Last American Pirate: Class blog: <http://lastamericanpirate.net/>; Class

YouTube channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/janebrowning/videos>; "Pirates":

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RT9ZwINLeY>

Assignments

In addition to being a regular participant in class and keeping up with the assigned readings, there are several assignments that need to be completed for this course. The first is a five page paper that analyzes one historical hoax of your choosing (more details in a handout). This paper is due **February 17**. The second is a three to five page paper on the characteristics of a successful historical hoax. This paper is due **March 5** (again, more details in a handout). The biggest part of your work this semester, though, will be working on our own online historical hoaxes. We need to decide as a group how to proceed on this part of our work—in small groups, in two larger groups, or in one very large group. My current view is that with 30 students in the class, we probably need to have two hoaxes—but that's a matter for discussion. Once we decide, then you'll need to decide on what, exactly, each person is expected to do. But for now, know that you will be graded primarily on the work you do on the hoax, but with a relatively small portion of your grade dependent on the final product as a whole.

Grading

Your grade for the semester will be based upon the following criteria:

Class participation (on-line and in person)	30%
First essay	15%
Second essay	15%
Final project	40%

The Big Hoax: The most time consuming part of what we'll be doing this semester is creating an online historical hoax (or hoaxes depending on what we decide) that we will then turn loose on the Internet. What will our hoax be? That's a topic for the class to decide as a group. But for now, I'll say that three topic areas are off limits. The first is anything to do with the American Civil War. Why? Because the amount of intricately detailed knowledge of this conflict held in

the minds of tens of thousands of Civil War enthusiasts is so great that a Civil War hoax wouldn't last two hours before it was debunked. The second topic that is off limits is anything to do with medicine or health care (meaning medical matters that might be of interest to those who are currently ill). Given how much those with various illnesses rely on the Internet for information on their afflictions, there would be nothing funny about fooling them in any way. The third topic that is off limits is pirates—it's already been done. In addition, it may be that we come up with other topics that are off limits during our class time, but these are the three that occur to me today. Other things that are off limits are anything that would get me fired or you thrown out of the University (or any of us arrested). That seems pretty obvious, but I thought it needed to be said. Anything else is fair game.

What's our goal? Buzz, of course! Viral! We want our hoax to be picked up and spread around the Internet like wildfire! But I'll settle for the following scenario: Somewhere in the United States, during the happy talk segment of the news—that part right at the end where the newscasters chat and smile—one of the newscasters says to his or her colleagues, "Now here's something I bet you didn't know..." If that happens and you can prove it, I'll invite the entire class to my house for a bar-b-que. I might even settle for a reputable daily newspaper reporting our hoax as fact. But that's going to be a matter of negotiation when it comes to the free food.

Pulling this off won't be easy, because as you'll learn, successful hoaxes are complex animals and require a lot of careful planning and preparatory work. If skeptics find even one hole in our hoax, the whole thing will collapse like a house of cards.

Finally—I think the hardest part of this entire project will be keeping our mouths shut. The temptation to tell friends and family what our hoax is will be very great. But I'm going to swear you all to silence once we settle on the topic for our hoax. From that moment until the hoax is exposed (as it must be in the end), you **MUST** keep your mouth shut! Tell your roommates, your mothers, your boyfriends and your girlfriends, that it's none of their business and that when the time comes, you will tell all. Just not now.

Course Policies (please read them all)

Attendance: Because this course will be run as a collaborative project, attendance is absolutely necessary if you intend to be successful in the class. A significant portion of your grade is predicated on your participation in the discussions that take place in class (or online) and so if you are not in class you cannot participate. As a result, if you fail to attend class, your participation grade will certainly suffer.

ADA: Any student who requires special arrangements in order to meet course requirements should contact me to make necessary accommodations (before February 15 please). Students should present appropriate verification from the Disability Resource Center.

Medical and Other Excuses: Every semester someone is forced to miss either an examination or the due date for an assignment either as the result of an illness or a family emergency. If you find yourself in this situation, fairness to all students in the class requires the proper documentation, without which your excuses will not be accepted. If you need to know more about this process consult me as soon as the emergency is taken care of.

Plagiarism and Cheating: There is some irony here, because we're going to engage in lying about the past! However, plagiarism and cheating still cannot be tolerated. This means you must do your own work, not someone else's. In my courses all students are responsible for adhering to a certain standard of behavior when it comes to honesty and plagiarism. I expect each individual to adhere to these standards so that every member of the class knows that his or her work is being held to an equal standard. If one student cheats, all students in the class suffer. Even worse, however, is the fact that the student who cheats is hurting him or herself. When you are cheating, you are not learning and the reason you are here is to learn.

In addition to my own high expectations when it comes to academic honesty, the University also expects students to demonstrate a high code of personal honor when it comes to academic work. Please read the *George Mason University Honor Code* if you have any questions about what is expected of you in this regard. Penalties for academic dishonesty are severe. If I have reason to believe you have cheated or plagiarized another person's work, I will discuss this matter with you. If I am not satisfied that no cheating or plagiarism has occurred, your case will be referred to the Honor Committee. When I refer a case to the Honor Committee I *always* recommend failure for the *course*. If you have any questions about these policies, please come talk to me in my office.

Food, Drink, Tobacco: In my classes drink is permitted, but food and tobacco products of all kinds are prohibited. If you must chew, whether food or tobacco, do it before you arrive or after you leave.

Reading Schedule

The pattern for this class is pretty straightforward. We'll be spending the first half of the semester learning about hoaxes and the second half creating one. During the first half, we'll be discussing readings and the results of your investigations. During the second half, we'll be working collaboratively in more of a production mode, giving progress reports throughout the week.

January 23-25

Monday: Course introduction. Before class, dig into the hoax from 2008 (links above about Edward Owens, Last American Pirate. Be prepared to discuss what happened in that class. If you want to read the blog that was the central feature of the hoax in sequence, the first post is: <http://lastamericanpirate.net/2008/09/03/hello-world/index.html>.

Wednesday: Come to class ready to discuss John Jeremiah Sullivan, "Violence of the Lambs," *GQ* (February 2008): 118-121 and 187-191.

January 30-February 1: A first look at historical hoaxes

Monday: Be prepared to discuss “Top Ten Greatest Hoaxes of All Time”

(<http://www.bspcn.com/2007/08/31/top-10-greatest-hoaxes-of-all-time/>) and “The 10 Biggest Hoaxes in Wikipedia’s First 10 Years,” *PCWorld*, January 14, 2011

(http://www.pcworld.com/article/216799/the_10_biggest_hoaxes_in_wikipedias_first_10_years.html). In particular, I want you to think about what changes when a hoax goes online. Then, pick a hoax in the Hoaxipedia and come to class prepared to discuss it (<http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoax/hoaxipedia>). Do not pick one that was on the “Top 10” list.

Wednesday: Continuation of Wednesday’s discussion.

February 6-8: Plagiarism vs. Hoaxing vs. Myths vs. Conspiracy Theories

Monday: Pick an article from this collection on plagiarism by prominent historians

(<http://www.bridgewater.edu/WritingCenter/Workshops/PlagiarismCases.htm>) and come to class prepared to discuss the ways that plagiarism happens, the ways that it is detected and the consequences of plagiarism. See also Carol Memmot, “Author’s ‘Love and Consequences’ Memoir Untrue,” *USAToday*, March 5, 2008 (http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2008-03-04-memoir-hoax_N.htm)

Wednesday: Select a common historical myth in the *Book of General Ignorance* and find an example of how it is still related as fact. Come to class prepared to discuss what you found. Be sure to read: “Heard the One About the Rocket Car?” *Wired* 8.08 (August 2000):

<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.08/rocketcar.html>. Then read the Snopes.com page on the Rocket Car story (<http://www.snopes.com/autos/dream/jato.asp>). Snopes.com, by the way, is our enemy in this course. Finally, take a look at: “Thomas Bailey Project: Historical Myths to Beware Of!” (<http://hnn.us/articles/920.html>). And then—select a common conspiracy theory and come to class prepared to discuss what you found. See also “Who put the Gau in Gaucho” *StrangeMaps* March 1, 2008 (<http://strangemaps.wordpress.com/2008/03/01/250-who-put-the-gau-in-gaucha-a-forged-map-of-nazi-south-america/>)

February 13-15: Analyzing Hoaxes

Monday: Select the hoax you want to analyze (use *A Treasury of Deception* as your starting point) and come to class prepared to discuss why you chose it and how you are going to analyze it.

Wednesday: Come to class prepared to discuss the hoax you selected and what you found out about it. In particular, I want you to be able to tell us what lessons you’ve learned from your hoax.

Friday: First essay due at 5:00 pm via email.

February 20-22: Scientific Hoaxes

Monday: Select a hoax in *Scientists and Scoundrels*, read that chapter carefully, then analyze the elements of that hoax. Come to class prepared to discuss what those key elements are.

Wednesday: Watch “The Old Negro Space Program” (<http://www.negrospaceprogram.com/>) and examine “Boilerplate. The History of a Victorian Era Robot” (<http://www.bigredhair.com/boilerplate/>) for more insights and ideas.

February 27-29: Selling Hitler

Monday: No class. I’m out of town for a meeting

Wednesday: Come to class prepared to discuss the book *Selling Hitler*. Ask yourself how the perpetrator managed to pull off his hoax (at first), how he prepared the ground for his hoax, why the moment seemed right for just such a hoax, why it worked for a very brief time, and why it ultimately failed. What are the lessons we need to learn from this example?

March 5-7: What makes a successful hoax work

Monday: Come to class with an example of a hoax that worked with a detailed list of why it did.

Wednesday: Continuation of Monday's discussion.

Friday: Second paper is due by 5:00 pm (but sooner if you want, given that spring break is starting)

Spring Break – No Joke!**March 19-21: The Big Hoax Begins**

Monday: Come to class with ideas for possible hoaxes we might pull off. The more detailed you can be in your proposal, the better.

Wednesday: Continuation of Monday's discussion. We need to try to arrive at a final choice by Wednesday, March 28, so this is a really important week to be in class all week!

March 26-28: The Big Hoax (continued)

Monday: Further discussion of the Big Hoax(es).

Wednesday: Final decision! Apportionment of roles for the work ahead. Creation of work plan.

April 2-4: Group work on Hoax(es)

Both days: In class work on the final project.

April 9-11: Group work on Hoax(es)

Both days: In class work on the final project.

April 16-18: Group work on Hoax(es)

Monday: In class work on the final project.

Wednesday: Presentation of work in progress

April 23-25: Group work on Hoax(es)

Monday: In class work on the final project.

Wednesday: Presentation of work in progress. Final "punch list".

April 30-May 2: Show time

Monday: Launching the hoax(es)!

Wednesday: First returns—tracking the results.

May 7-9: Tracking the results

Monday: Discussion of what's happening out there (or not) on the Internet

Wednesday: Class party. Coming clean, alas.