

# Lying About the Past

(History 389-07/ver. 1.2)

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## Office Hours

M/W 1:30-2:30

or by appointment

## Introduction

I hope this course will be unlike any history class that you've ever taken. I know it will be 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 hoax and turn it 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'll all become much better consumers of historical information. In short, we'll be 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 create 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 never taught this course before, nor has anyone else as far as I can tell (although the Internet Famous class at the Parsons New School does have an assignment that gets close: <http://internetfamo.us/class/syllabus>). 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 I don't have any models to work from. That means I'm making some of this up as I go along and I will be depending on you to help me make several important decisions about the course. In other words, as a group, we'll decide where, exactly, we're going and how we're going to get there.

## 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.). *None* of the books assigned for the course are in the University Bookstore as of August 18, so your best bet is to order them online (likely at a discount over what the Bookstore charges in most cases). The Bookstore plans to get copies into their stock in the next week or so. The *Selling Hitler* book is out of print and is available *only* online. I've placed a personal copy on reserve. 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*

### 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 **September 19**. The second is a three to five page paper on the characteristics of a successful historical hoax. This paper is due **October 10** (again, more details in a handout). The biggest part of your work this semester, though, will be working on our own online historical hoax. 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. Once we decide, then I'll 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 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 several 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 two 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 modern medicine (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. It may be that we come up with other topics that are off limits during our class time, but these are the two 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! 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 surely will 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. You knew this was a MWF course when you signed up, so plan on coming to class on Fridays.

**ADA:** Any student who requires special arrangements in order to meet course requirements should contact me to make necessary accommodations (before October 1 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:** 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. If you have any questions about these policies, please come talk to me in my office.

Plagiarism and cheating are much easier in the digital age. It is an unfortunate fact that since I began teaching here in 2001 a number of my Mason students have felt free to follow those rules that suit them and ignore those that don't. As a result, I use the database service Turnitin.com. Since I began using Turnitin.com the number of cases I have reported to the Honor Committee on an annual basis has dropped. If I (or the software) come across work that appears to be plagiarized, I will meet with you first. If I am not satisfied with the results of our conversation, I will refer the matter to the Honor Committee for adjudication. When I refer a case to the Honor Committee I *always* recommend failure for the *course*.

**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.

#### **Week of August 25**

Monday: Course introduction

Wednesday: Come to class ready to discuss John Jeremiah Sullivan, "Violence of the Lambs,"

*GQ* (February 2008): 118-121 and 187-191. (see blog)

Friday: Come to class ready to discuss the "Top Ten Greatest Hoaxes of All Time"

(<http://www.bspcn.com/2007/08/31/top-10-greatest-hoaxes-of-all-time/>)

#### **Week of September 1 – A first look at historical hoaxes**

No class on Monday—Labor Day.

Wednesday: 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.

Friday: Continuation of Wednesday's discussion.

## **Week of September 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](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>).

Friday: 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-gaucho-a-forged-map-of-nazi-south-america/>)

## **Week of September 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 and Friday: 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.

## **Week of September 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: Continuation of Monday’s discussion.

Friday: 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.

## **Week of September 29 – Selling Hitler**

All three days: 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?

## **Week of October 6 – 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: Come to class ready to hand in your essays. They are due in class. We’ll discuss them in class.

### **Week of October 13 – 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 and Friday: Continuation of Monday's discussion. We need to try to arrive at a final choice by Monday, October 20, so this is a really important week to be in class all week!

### **Week of October 20**

Monday: Final selection of the Big Hoax.

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

Friday: Finalizing the work plan.

### **Week of October 27**

All three days: In class work on the final project.

### **Week of November 3**

Monday: In class work on the final project.

Wednesday and Friday: No class. I'm at a conference. Use the time to work in your groups.

### **Week of November 10**

Monday and Wednesday: In class work on the final project.

Friday: Presentation of work in progress

### **Week of November 17**

Monday: In class work on the final project.

Wednesday: Presentation of work in progress.

Friday: No class. I'm at a conference. Use the time to work in your groups.

### **Week of November 24**

Monday: Final punch list and assignments for the last week before launch

Wednesday and Friday: No class. Work on your final preparations for the launch and eat lots

### **Week of December 1**

Monday: Last minute preparations. Last chance to make changes before launch.

Wednesday: Hoax Launch Day!

Friday: Tracking the hoax and class party.