### **The Lens of Ideas: Forging History from Bare Happenings**

What drives history—ideas or events? But this is a false choice for at least two reasons. Events that matter are seldom bare happenings; they arrive clothed in a context of ideas, stories, and narratives that give them purpose and meaning. Furthermore, what we label a single "event" is often a complex series of occurrences, bound together by a unifying idea or a retrospective narrative. In short, a historical event is frequently a construction, not just a simple fact.

Take the French Revolution as an example. In school, we learn to think of it as if it were a single moment in history, yet the reality was far more complex: it was composed of countless occurrences, spread over a decade, from 1789 to 1799. For a peasant in the countryside, preoccupied with scratching out a living, the Revolution might have passed almost unnoticed. And when should we mark the Revolution’s end? Does it end with Napoleon’s rise in 1799, as textbooks often suggest, or with Robespierre’s execution in 1794, when the radical phase collapsed, and the end, arguably, was inevitable? Its meaning is even more fluid. Was it a fight for “liberty, equality, and fraternity,” or the inevitable unfolding of Hegel’s dialectic of history? The answer shifts depending on the lens—that of a peasant, a monarch, a Jacobin, or a philosopher. The point is that events and the ideas that animate them are fundamentally entangled.

What matters, then, are the relationships between ideas and events. An idea can transform a simple occurrence into a consequential event. Without interpretation, a narrative to give it significance, a happening fades into obscurity, stripped of its power to shape history. This is true for our collective history and for our personal lives.

Nearly sixty years ago, on the way home from a school competition, our bus stopped at a small diner. I was sitting at the counter when I saw the cook hand my teacher, who was standing just outside the kitchen door, a hotdog. It was pure chance I noticed; had I been more caught up in my friends’ jokes, I might have missed it. On the surface, it was unremarkable -- just a man being given food. But that moment changed my life. For, you see, my teacher, standing outside the kitchen door, was Black, and everyone seated comfortably inside was white. The pervasive idea of Jim Crow transformed that simple act into something cruel and demeaning: a reminder to my teacher to remember his place: he could teach me (if the federal government insisted), but he could not share a meal with me. The very ordinariness of the exclusion, the fact that it went unnoticed by almost everyone, made it all the more awful. In that moment, I grew up. I felt in the pit of my stomach, the wrongness of the world that I called my home, and I was no longer comfortable in it.

In a way, there is nothing insightful here, and I don’t mean in this story to lecture anyone. It is a story about me and my personal history. But it does mean that we have to pay close attention to the lens of ideas and narratives by which we view the occurrences or happenings in our lives. The philosopher Hannah Arendt observed that the "factual truth" of happenings is perhaps the most fragile of all claims. She meant two things. First, they are contingent—they could have happened otherwise. Had I not glanced up at that exact moment, a pivotal experience would have been lost to me, and perhaps my life would have been very different. Second, and more importantly, the significance of any happening depends entirely on the web of stories and ideas in which it is caught. By deconstructing or replacing those ideas, we can transform the event itself. In short, change the narrative, and you change the event. This is an incredibly powerful, and ultimately dangerous, fact.

There is a deeper point here. It is not just that we use ideas to interpret events; we use them to construct events from the raw material of what happened. A bare happening is merely an objective description of something that occurred. It becomes an event only when it is imbued with meaning. The bare happening in that diner was a Black man being handed a hotdog; the event was an ugly act of racism. It is little wonder that partisans seek to control the narrative lens through which we view the everyday occurrences of our lives. In doing so, they do not merely change our interpretation; they revise history itself. Deconstruct the narrative of the Civil War, and it becomes a dispute over states' rights, not slavery. Change the story of January 6th, and an attack on the Capitol becomes an expression of patriotism. Change a single word, and the neighbor you have known your whole life, who you have sat and prayed with in church on Sunday mornings, becomes an "illegal," suddenly undeserving of a place in your community. History, then, is not a fixed chronology of happenings. It is a contested space.

It is therefore critical that we get the ideas and stories right. With the right ones, we forge history. A small, personal moment -- looking up from a diner countertop to see a Black man being given a hotdog -- can make all the difference in the world. But with the wrong ones, evils can be made to seem trivial.

Michael D. Redmond

October 4, 2025