

What's Historic?

I regularly read Wikipedia's "Historical Events on This Day." It's fun, and I learn new history. But I'm still puzzled by the selection criteria. Wikipedia casually blends three very different kinds of events:

1. Critical political, diplomatic, and military events that plausibly changed the lives of millions or even billions of people.
2. Terrorist attacks.
3. Natural disasters and major accidents.

"Historical events" for February 11, for example, include crucial events like the beginning of the Arab Spring in Egypt, the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, and the establishment of Iran's theocracy. But it also lists two plane crashes and a small terrorist attack in Saudi Arabia.

It's tempting to say, "Terrorism might be a tiny issue by itself. But since it provokes massive overreactions, it's indirectly important." But why would a couple of old plane crashes be on a list of events of historical importance? And most acts of terrorism, of course, have little or no effect on policy.

The obvious explanation, sadly, is that the innumeracy of the news infects the study of history. One of the main goals of history is to create enough psychological distance (and hindsight!) to sift the fundamental from the ephemeral. But doing this is easier said than done. Without a strong default view that vivid, emotionally engaging headlines *aren't* worth remembering, even people who think about history for a living fail to see trivia as trivial.