

The American Experience: United States History

History 120, sections MT4 and 33
George Mason University. Spring 2006

MWF, 10:30 am - 11:20 am, Robinson Hall B113

Professor Zachary M. Schrag
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Office Hours: Wednesdays, 2-4 pm, and by appointment.
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"My fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." So did President John F. Kennedy address the nation in 1961. In this course, we will study how, from the 1770s through the 1970s, Americans asked both what they could do for their country *and* what their country could do for them. In other words, how they defined the rights and responsibilities of citizens, whom they considered to be their fellow Americans, and how their answers changed over time.

Goals

By the end of this course, you will

- become familiar with major debates and developments in politics, culture, and the economy over two centuries of American history
- learn to analyze primary documents
- practice writing interpretive essays, using primary and secondary sources in support of clear thesis statements

This course is designed to prepare you for further study and professional life by building your knowledge and skills of communication and analysis. But its primary aim is to prepare you for civic life. Whether your ancestors came to this country thousands of years ago or whether you yourself arrived yesterday, you have a stake in the future of the United States. And you cannot shape that future wisely without understanding something of the past.

Readings

Required—Available at the bookstore in the Johnson Center

- John Hollitz and A. James Fuller, *Contending Voices: Biographical Explorations of the American Past* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), volumes 1 and 2.
- Gordon Harvey, *Writing With Sources: A Guide for Students* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).

Required—available online

- Zachary M. Schrag, “Guidelines for History Students,”
<http://www.schrag.info/teaching/teaching.html>.

These guidelines offer suggestions for reading efficiently, building strong thesis statements, and organizing essays. Following them closely will improve your grade.

- Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, chapter X
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/douglass/douglass.html>
- Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, chapters V-VII, XXXV, and XL
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/JACOBS/hjch5.htm> and following
- Other primary sources, to be posted on WebCT.

Required—screening or reserve

- Charlie Chaplin, *Modern Times* (1936)

Recommended

- Steven Mintz et al., “Hypertext History,”
<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/hyper_titles.cfm> (2003)

Requirements*Participation (15 percent)*

Much of this course is discussion based, which means that each student’s learning depends on the other students’ being prepared, punctual, and active. The participation grade is designed to encourage you to help other students learn, and to prepare you for a lifetime of meetings.

You are expected to attend class three times a week. The participation grade is based on your prompt arrival and active participation in discussions. You should be in your seat, ready to take notes at 10:30 am; chronic tardiness will lower your grade. To be counted as on time, you must sign in by 10:30. To be counted present, you must sign the late attendance sheet.

Basic classroom rules:

- Bring the appropriate volume of *Contending Voices* to class on discussion days.
- Bring materials for notetaking. If you take notes on a computer, bring a pen or pencil anyway for quizzes.
- Do not eat in the classroom, before or during class.
- Turn off all cell phones, pagers, and other noisemakers.
- Wait until the end of class to begin packing up your belongings.

Quizzes (15 percent total; 1.5 percent each)

On at least twelve occasions during the course, you will be given short-answer quizzes on the material presented in readings and in lecture. The goal of the quizzes is to give you credit for mastering the basic factual material needed for informed discussion.

Your best ten scores will count toward your final grade. The dates of these quizzes will not be announced in advance, and there may be more than one quiz during a week. The quizzes will be given at the start of class, and no credit will be given to students who do not sign in on time the day a quiz is given.

Special Events

On three occasions, the Mason Topics program will sponsor special evening events. Students in this class, whether they are in the Topics section or not, are welcome to attend. Attending any event counts as a 100 percent grade on one quiz.

Essays (50 percent total; 10 percent each)

Six essays are assigned over the course of the semester in response to the assigned readings, and your best five grades will count toward your final grade. Each essay should run five paragraphs (500-750 words or roughly two double-spaced pages). Specific assignments will be posted on WebCT.

Along with the exam, the goal of the essay assignment is to teach you to craft interpretive arguments supported by evidence from primary sources. Your grade will be based on:

- The interpretive power of your thesis statement. The more surprising your finding, the more it is worth.
- Your ability to support your thesis statement with evidence from primary sources, especially direct quotations.
- The quality of your writing and its conformity to academic norms. I will look for topic sentences that support your thesis, complete sentences, appropriate grammar, spelling, punctuation, and Chicago-style citation.

Consult my “Guidelines for History Students,”

<<http://www.schrag.info/teaching/teaching.html>> for specific advice on analyzing primary sources, crafting thesis statements, and organizing essays. Prior to submitting your work, compare it to the pre-submission checklist at

<<http://www.schrag.info/teaching/checklist.html>>

Your essays must be brought to the start of class. Late papers, including papers brought late to class, will be penalized a full grade and 1/3 of a grade (e.g, B to B-) for each additional 24-hour period or fraction thereof. Late papers should be sent by e-mail to zschrag@gmu.edu or via the e-mail function on WebCT. Paste the text of your paper into the body of the e-mail in case your attachment does not go through.

Note for Mason Topics students: Two essays will count for credit in both this and your English course. For each paper, you must submit one copy to me and one to Professor Koch.

Final Exam (20 percent)

The final exam will be a 165 minute in-class closed-book essay exam. You will be asked to analyze primary documents using your knowledge of the material we cover throughout the semester.

Administrative information

All assignments are governed by the George Mason University **honor code**, online at <http://www.gmu.edu/departments/unilife/honorcode.html>. You are expected to work independently and to acknowledge all sources, including assigned texts and materials found online.

Gordon Harvey's *Writing with Sources* is required reading and should answer most questions about **citation**, but ask me if you need clarification. In general, any sentence in your work that can be traced to a single sentence in someone else's work should bear a footnote. Any collaboration, such as consultation with the Writing Center, should also be acknowledged. Violations of academic integrity will be reported to the administration and may result in grade penalties, including failure of the course.

In case of **inclement weather**, please call the main switchboard at 703-993-1000 or consult the main web page at <http://www.gmu.edu/> to see if classes are cancelled. I expect to cancel class only when the university cancels all classes.

If you are a student with a **disability** and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the DRC.

All students are expected to check their **gmu.edu e-mail** regularly and are responsible for information sent to their GMU addresses.

Schedule

CV1 = *Contending Voices*, volume 1. CV2 = *Contending Voices*, volume 2.

Week 1

UNIT 1: EMPIRE OR REPUBLIC?

- January 23. Course Introduction
- January 25. Lecture: Revolutionary Gentlemen
- January 27. Discussion: CV1, chapter 4

Week 2

- January 30. Discussion: CV1, chapter 5

February 1. Lecture: Looking West
 February 3. Discussion: CV1, chapter 6

Week 3

February 6. Discussion: CV1, chapter 7

February 7. Last day to add a class or to drop without tuition liability.

UNIT 2: WHO IS A CITIZEN?

February 8. **ESSAY 1 DUE**
 Lecture: Religion and Reform

February 10. Discussion: CV1, chapter 8

Week 4

February 13. Discussion: CV1, chapter 9

February 15. Lecture: The Nation United

February 17. Discussion: CV1, chapter 10

Week 5

February 20. Discussion: CV1, chapter 11
 UNIT 3: SLAVERY OR FREEDOM?

February 22. **ESSAY 2 DUE**
 Lecture: The Nation Divided

February 24. Discussion: CV1, chapter 12.

Last day to drop with no academic liability

Week 6

February 27. Lecture: The Cause of the Conflict

March 1. Discussion:

- Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, chapter X
- Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, chapters V-VII, XXXV, and XL

MT4 ESSAY 3 DUE

March 3. Discussion: CV1, chapter 14

Week 7

March 6. Discussion: CV1, chapter 15

March 8. Lecture: The Limits of Reconstruction

March 10. **Section 33 ESSAY 3 DUE**

Movie: *Power and the Land*

SPRING BREAK

March 13-17.

Week 8

UNIT 4: INDUSTRIALIZING AMERICA

March 20. Lecture: Agrarian Tradition, Industrial Progress

March 22. Discussion: CV2, Chapter 2

March 24. Discussion: CV2, Chapter 3

Week 9

March 27. Lecture: Progressivism

March 29. Discussion: CV2, Chapter 4

March 31. Discussion: CV2, Chapter 7

Week 10

UNIT 5: AMERICA AND THE WORLD

April 3. **ESSAY 4 DUE**

Lecture: The End of Isolation

April 5. Discussion: CV2, Chapter 5

April 7. Lecture: The Tribal Twenties

Week 11

April 10. Discussion: CV2, Chapter 6

April 12. Lecture: America at War

April 14. Discussion: World War II [readings TBA]

Week 12

April 17. Discussion: CV2, Chapter 10

UNIT 6: THE RIGHTS DEBATES

April 19. **ESSAY 5 DUE**

Lecture: Civil Rights

April 21. NO CLASS

Week 13

April 24. Discussion: CV2, Chapter 12

April 26. Lecture: The Rights Debates

April 28. Discussion: CV2, Chapter 13

Week 14

May 1. Lecture: Backlash

May 3. Discussion: CV2, Chapter 14.

May 5. **ESSAY 6 DUE**

Conclusion

Final Exam

Wednesday, May 10, 10:30 am - 1:15 pm.