

America since 1973

History 389, section 2. George Mason University. Spring 2006

MWF, 11:30-12:20 Robinson B113

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At first glance, the years since 1973 have been very good ones for the United States. Despite a few recessions, the economy has grown steadily, more than doubling the real gross domestic product. The worst abuses of individual rights, such as state-sanctioned racial segregation and legally permissible sex discrimination in employment, are fading memories. New technologies, from the VCR to the Internet to the MRI, have given Americans more ways to amuse themselves, heightened economic productivity, and longer lives. And the Soviet Union, the only nation ever to have threatened America’s existence as a country, no longer exists.

On the other hand, Americans have suffered severe disappointments. Prosperity has come more slowly than it did in previous decades and has not been evenly distributed, so that inequality in income and wealth is far greater now than it was thirty years ago. Americans still battle over questions of race, ethnicity, and sexuality, as well as the role of the government in regulating those issues. Families are weaker, more Americans sit in prison, and political leaders are unable to agree on basic rules for the elections that define American democracy. Internationally, the nation remains vulnerable to economic competition and military attack. These problems have left many asking the question posed by Rodney King during the Los Angeles riots of 1992: can we all get along?

This course will suggest some answers to that question, focusing particularly on the shifting political economy of the country during the resurgence of conservatism, the political debates over culture and identity, and the waning of the Cold War and its replacement with other international concerns. In addition, it will suggest ways in which historical analysis can illuminate the recent past. By focusing on events, narrative, and the question of change over time, a historical appreciation of these years can complement the work of other social science disciplines and prepare students for further study of contemporary America.

Readings

Required—Available at the bookstore in the Johnson Center

- Harvey, Gordon. *Writing With Sources: A Guide for Students*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998.
- Rieder, Jonathan. *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985.

- Dudley, Kathryn Marie. *Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Luker, Kristin. *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- Bowden, Mark. *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War*. 1999. Rev. ed., New York: Signet, 2002. [note: the Penguin edition is also fine.]
- DeParle, Jason. *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare*. New York: Penguin 2005.
- Meyerowitz, Joanne, ed. *History and September 11th*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003.

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.

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 11:30 am; chronic tardiness will lower your grade. To be counted as on time, you must sign in by 11:30. To be counted present, you must sign the late attendance sheet.

Basic classroom rules:

- Bring the appropriate book to class on the day we discuss it.
- 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.

Responses (5 percent each; 50 percent total)

On twelve occasions you will be assigned essays in response to lectures or readings. Each essay is to be 400-600 words (no longer), approximately two pages. See the assignment instructions for more details. Your top ten scores will count toward your final grade, so you may skip two assignments without penalty.

Your essays must be brought to the start of class. Late papers, including papers brought late to class, will be penalized a full point on a ten-point scale and an additional half point 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.

Exams (15 percent and 20 percent)

We will have two exams. For each exam you will be given a choice of primary documents and asked to interpret them in an essay, drawing on the views of people you have read about in the assigned readings. The midterm exam will be a 48-hour take home. The final exam will be a 165-minute in-class, closed-book essay exam.

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

Week 1

- January 23. Course introduction
- January 25. Lecture: America at 1973
- January 27: Lecture: Inflation and Vietnam

Week 2

- January 30. Discussion: LECTURE RESPONSE 1 DUE
February 1. Lecture: Watergate
February 3. Lecture: Backlash

Week 3

- February 6. Discussion: READING RESPONSE 1 DUE:
Canarsie, 57-167, 233-263, and photographs following 54 and 167
February 7. Last day to add a class or to drop without tuition liability
February 8. Lecture: The Diplomacy of Human Rights
February 10. Lecture: Iran and Afghanistan

Week 4

- February 13. Discussion: LECTURE RESPONSE 2 DUE
February 15. Lecture: Reaganomics
February 17. Lecture: Winners and Losers

Week 5

- February 20. Discussion: READING RESPONSE 2 DUE:
Debt and Dispossession (entire)
February 22. Lecture: Rich and Poor
February 24. Lecture: Abortion and the Law

Last day to drop with no academic liability

Week 6

- February 27. Discussion: LECTURE RESPONSE 3 DUE
March 1. Lecture: The War on Drugs
March 3. Lecture: The AIDS debates

Week 7

- March 6. Discussion: READING RESPONSE 3 DUE:
Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood, 1-11, 92-245.
March 8. **Take-home midterm distributed**
March 10. **Take-home midterm due at start of class**
Movie

SPRING BREAK

- March 13-17.

Week 8

- March 20. Movie: *The Day After*
March 22. Lecture: Peace Through Strength
March 24. Lecture: End of the Cold War

Week 9

- March 27. Discussion: LECTURE RESPONSE 4 DUE
March 29. Lecture: New World Order
March 31. Lecture: Globalization Debates

Week 10

- April 3. Discussion: READING RESPONSE 4 DUE:
Black Hawk Down, 1-215, 406-422 [Penguin edition: 1-179, 331-346]
April 5. Lecture: The Two Nations of Black America
April 7. Lecture: The Browning of America

Week 11

- April 10. Discussion: LECTURE RESPONSE 5 DUE
April 12. Lecture: The Graying of America
April 14. Lecture: Welfare as We Knew It

Week 12

- April 17. Discussion: READING RESPONSE 5 DUE:
American Dream, 175-338
April 19. Lecture: The Culture Wars
April 21. NO CLASS

Week 13

- April 24. Lecture: The Stained Blue Dress
April 26. Discussion: LECTURE RESPONSE 6 DUE
April 28. Lecture: A Nation Challenged

Week 14

- May 1. Discussion: READING RESPONSE 6 DUE:
History and September 11, 81-116, 131-190, 237-261
May 3. Lecture: America at 2006
May 5. Course Review

Final Exam

Friday, May 12, 10:30 am - 1:15 pm

America since 1973: Response Essay Instructions

Process

Lecture responses should address one or both of the previous two lectures. Reading responses should address the assigned reading and, if appropriate, material from lecture. In both cases, you should:

1. Select some significant theme from the lecture or reading about which you would like to know more.
2. Find a primary source from the period being studied that addresses that theme. The source need not be long—a newspaper article will do. The easiest way to find a source is to use the News and Current Events database page <http://oscr.gmu.edu/sql/subdb.php?News_&_Current_Events>. The Historic Documents, LexisNexis, and ProQuest databases should be particularly helpful. You are also free to find a document on microfilm or even in print. However you find it, your document should be relevant to the lecture or reading and come from the period being studied. For example, *Debt and Dispossession* is a book about the 1980s, so an article about farming written in the late 1990s would not be appropriate.
3. Write an essay explaining how the primary source adds to your understanding of the material addressed in the lecture or reading. Underline your thesis statement.

Goals

The goals of this assignment are to encourage you to:

1. **Pay close attention** to the lectures and readings.
2. **Ask questions** of the lectures and readings.
3. **Conduct research** by finding primary sources that can answer those questions.
4. **Analyze primary source material**, using the techniques described in “How to Read a Primary Source” <<http://www.schrag.info/teaching/primary.html>>
5. **Communicate in writing**, by crafting a short essay that conforms to academic standards of argument, style, and citation.
6. **Contribute to class discussions** by sharing your findings.

Evaluation

I will evaluate your work by judging the degree to which it meets the goals of the assignment. Specifically, I will look for:

1. Close attention. By including specific facts (and for reading assignments, quotations), you can show that you took good notes. By including facts and quotations that are important to the lecturer's or author's argument, rather than random tidbits, you show that you read the entire assignment and grasped the most important points.
2. Questions. This assignment is designed to encourage you to think critically about lectures and readings. Critical thinking includes looking for flaws, but a more important component is looking for opportunities to complicate, rather than contradict. For example, if a book describes the thoughts of one group of Americans, you might ask how another group of Americans might have thought about the same issue. Or if the lecturer or author gives one interpretation of an event, you might ask how that same event could be interpreted differently.
3. Research. Your choice of documents is important, so do not settle for the first document you find. Find a few, and choose the best. The most credit will be given to documents that do more than confirm the thesis of the reading or lecture, by providing a different perspective.
4. Analysis. Show your close reading of your primary source by quoting from it and analyzing the quotations. Explain why the document was created—by whom, and for whom. And compare it to the lecture or readings.
5. Communication. The first thing I will look for is a thesis statement, near the start or at the end of the essay. Your thesis statement should be surprising; it should show that by reading the primary source, you learned something you did not know before. See “The Thesis Statement” <<http://www.schrag.info/teaching/thesis.html>>. I will look for paragraphs with clear topic sentences, correct grammar and style, and complete citations in Chicago style. Before submitting your essay, print it out and compare it to the Pre-Submission Checklist: <http://www.schrag.info/teaching/checklist.html>. Also, make sure to stay within the 600 word limit.
6. Contribution. Your contribution to class discussion will factor into your participation grade, but you should think about class discussions as you write your essays, and work at them until you have something to say out loud. To please your instructor, teach your classmates.

Note: a model essay is posted on WebCT