

TEACHING MODERN AMERICAN HISTORY IN AN HONORS PROGRAM

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Two years ago the State University of New York at Oneonta re-established an honors program. The purpose of this venture was to attract outstanding students to our college and retain them. To create a strong base before expanding, only two honors sections were offered initially, one in philosophy and the other in history. Admittance to these two courses was by invitation only, with selection, limited to an elite group of incoming freshmen, based on high school grade average and class standing, Scholastic Aptitude Tests, and a writing sample. Asked to teach the history course, I established its primary purpose: to demonstrate the relevance of the past to the present.

The honors course I confronted was, in Oneonta parlance, United States History II, a survey beginning in 1877 and ending in the present. A typical U.S. History II section had 45-50 heterogeneous students, utilized lecture as the primary mode of instruction, assigned a major textbook, progressed chronologically, covered considerable content, and employed examinations as the major instrument of evaluation. Simply increasing the required reading load would not convert the survey into a honors course. Brainstorming about curriculum revision always came back to the student audience: It would comprise thirteen bright, motivated first-semester freshmen, with a record of past academic success and ready to face a new challenge. I resolved to conduct this course as a seminar, driven by discussion.

Convinced that the affective is as important as the cognitive to the learning experience, I decided, for this group, to flout the conventional wisdom that first-semester freshmen should avoid long night courses. To allow discussions to gain momentum and nuance, I decided that we would meet once a week, on Tuesday evenings, for approximately three hours. Long sessions, I hoped, would create the familiarity and trust that would transform a class into a community of learners.

Then I decided to take a risk in my evaluation of student performances. There would be no tests. Evaluated discussion would form a major component of the course grade. Class size would preclude anonymity. The extent of an individual's engagement with the relevant history and historiography would manifest itself through the discussion. Still, discussions must not degenerate into rote recitation or mere documentation of empirical mastery. I distributed probe questions in advance for the readings and discussion, but I counseled students that these materials were not to be regarded as catechism, simply as a tool. Student remarks would not be followed regularly by instructor commentary—meaningful discussion would require students to engage each other.

Given the desirability of providing frequent feedback, encouraging student progress, and confronting a variety of topics, I decided that four interpretative papers, each from five to seven pages, better suited the objectives of an introductory survey

course than a single 20 to 25-page research paper. In addition to honing generic writing skills, these medium-sized essays would facilitate the specific skills of an interpretive historical essay—identification and defense of a thesis, disputation with alternative viewpoints, judicious selection of supporting data, analysis, and synthesis. Readings for the papers came, for the most part, from common assignments rather than individual research.

I considered eschewing a basic text and relying exclusively on a series of more specialized readings. Ultimately, however, I decided upon a textbook, acknowledging that a survey course in United States history must cast a broad net while providing connections between and context for topics. Although there are many outstanding introductory textbooks, several of which I have used in past years, for this course I chose George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, Fifth Edition, Volume II (New York: Norton, 1999). The clarity, engaging writing style, and balance appeal to students. The reading list also included Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: Norton 1996); W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997); J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt & Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs Against Japan* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997); *Time: 9/11 One Year Later*, September 11, 2002; *The New York Times*, September 11, 2002; and several articles, some academic and others journalistic. Supplementary readings were dictated by course structure.

Each week's class meeting dealt with a single historical period running in chronological sequence. For an innovative curricular aspect, our weekly session also focused on a single issue indigenous to the era under consideration. Thus, the first part of a class meeting featured discussion about the distinctive and defining attributes of the period, and the second half of the session focused on a single major issue of that era. The issues were ones that had their peak significance in a particular period but also possessed an enduring significance for America that transcend a single era. This strategy allowed for course organization to be both chronological and topical.

Although issues other than those selected might appeal to others and, undoubtedly to me in the future, a description of the topics employed in the inaugural edition of my honors survey of modern American history provides prospective teachers of such a course with a construct that they can adapt to their own needs. A description of the fifteen class meetings of the honors survey follows, linking each chronological period to a significant historical issue that encourages students to discuss connections between the past and the present.

Class Meeting #1

Chronological Period: Gilded Age

Issue: The Reality and Mythology of Socio-Economic Mobility

After a brief orientation, we discussed significant phenomena of the Gilded Age. Given the era's numerous components, this discussion of the chronological period was not comprehensive, but it was analytic, established important connections, and provided

context for consideration of our first issue. Time allotment for this first class provided the prototype for those that followed. This honors course differed from normative surveys of modern American history in the attention given to a single issue each session.

Confronting the Reality and Mythology of Socio-Economic Mobility in the Gilded Age, students received data packets containing a few brief excerpts from Horatio Alger novels, concise assessments by consensus and revisionist historians about the extent of social fluidity during the era, material from city directories germane to representative Americans, and statistical information about the origins of Captains of Industry. Students concluded that socio-economic mobility during the Gilded Age, though real, was not uniform and less pronounced than some of the hyperbole surrounding it. We also discussed the relationship between the aspiration for "rags to riches" and the American Dream, whether this belief in the possibility of great fluidity, as well as the gap between aspiration and actuality, remains vital today, and the relevance of contemporary beliefs and opportunities for achieving great success to students' own lives. Applying the past to the present, students debated whether today's corporate CEOs, superstar athletes, and victors in reality television shows embody Horatio Algerism.

Class Meeting #2

Chronological Period: The Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries from a Regional Perspective

Issue: The Relationship between the Leo Frank Case and Southern Exceptionalism

Students discussed regionalism in the Northeast, Midwest, South, and Trans-Missouri West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from a comparative perspective. We considered factors that sustained regional identity and those that challenged it. The opening discussion provided an introduction to one of the South's most significant episodes of this era.

The Leo Frank Case involved the 1913 murder of Mary Phagan, a thirteen-year old white girl employed by the National Pencil Factory in Atlanta, Georgia, and the arrest of Leo Frank, the superintendent of the establishment, who was charged with her murder. Virulent prejudice against Frank, as a Jew, a Northerner, an urbanite, and an industrialist who symbolized values alien to the rural South, colored his trial, which ended in a guilty verdict. Students examined the components of Southern exceptionalism and the extent to which the Leo Frank Case mirrored those phenomena. Consideration was also given to whether regional distinctiveness still defines the contemporary South. Students compared Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, ex-Presidents but still contemporary figures, to past political leaders native to the South. Although concluding that the region today differs considerably from the earlier South, students found that a powerful trajectory bound, albeit differentiated, the two.

Class Meeting #3**Chronological Period: The Progressive Era****Issue: The Response to Racism—Accommodation versus Protest**

Students discussed the Progressive Era's complex response to corruption and inefficiency, attuned to the contradictory motives of reformers and conservatives. Then, students focused on a specific issue, The Response to Racism—Accommodation versus Protest. The Progressive Era marked an important period in African-American history, encompassing the beginning of the mass movement of blacks from the rural South to the urban North. Progressivism, as a whole, was not particularly responsive to black needs as exemplified by race riots and the segregation and removal of black officeholders.

During the Progressive Era, two black leaders, Booker T. Washington, principal of the Tuskegee Institute, and W.E.B. DuBois, a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, offered very different prescriptions for black advancement in the face of racism. Washington, although possessed of an encrypted complexity, appeared to advocate black accommodation while DuBois urged vigorous protest as the path to progress. Prior to class, students read *Up From Slavery* and *The Souls of Black Folk* and completed interpretive essay #1, which asked: "What did Booker T. Washington advocate for black America? What were the strengths and weaknesses of Washington's program?"

During the class discussion, students analyzed, compared, and debated the merits of Washington's and DuBois's strategies within the context of the early years of the last century. Students then considered the efficacy of accommodation and protest as antidotes to contemporary racism, finding the relevance of these alternative approaches to understanding the disparate ideologies of contemporary African-American leaders, including Reverend Al Sharpton, noted for his fiery rhetoric, and Secretary of State Colin Powell, an institutionalist.

Class Meeting #4**Chronological Period: The Twenties—The Politics and Government of Normalcy****Issue: Cycles of History**

Typically historians treat the 1920s as a distinct entity, and we adopted this approach to our examination of the politics and government of "normalcy." Application of the Cycles of History theory posited by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Sr. provided us with an issue for this session. The Schlesingers, father and son, contended that the American polity, from its origins onward, has swung back and forth like a pendulum between liberalism, reform, and public involvement on one side and conservatism, reaction, and privatism on the other. I asked students to consider whether such a shift took place between the Progressive Era and the Twenties. Was the shift as profound as the Schlesingers suggested, or were there significant continuities? How did the shift manifest itself? What significance did it possess? Finally, students debated whether consideration of the entire sweep of American history validates or discredits

the Schlesingers' Cycles of History thesis as well as the theory's possible relevance to the present and future: If the theory is correct, does the present represent a liberal or conservative phase, and when will the present zeitgeist yield to a new formulation?

Class Meeting #5

Chronological Period: The Jazz Age—Society and Culture in the 1920s

Issues: Dualisms in American Civilization

After completing a broad canvas of the main currents of Jazz Age society and culture, students confronted an important issue germane to the era. The oppositional forces of change and tradition are constants in American history, but this dynamic was particularly pronounced in the Jazz Age. After viewing selected excerpts from the film *Inherit the Wind*, students discussed the Scopes trial as a microcosm of society and culture in the 1920s. By doing so, they identified and analyzed several bifurcations, including the tradition-change, liberal-conservative, faith-science, rural-urban, regional-national, and tribal-pluralistic dualisms. Next, students offered diverse theories as to why the Jazz Age was so replete with permutations. We concluded by scrutinizing the present for dichotomies, finding the phenomena enduring, manifesting themselves in contemporary civil liberties-national security and domestic priorities-international responsibilities debates.

Class Meeting #6

Chronological Period: The Great Depression

Issue: Why Wasn't There a Revolution During the Great Depression?

During this session students examined the period from 1929 to 1941, the years of the Great Depression. Students identified many New Deal accomplishments, but they also recognized that the New Deal failed to bring about full recovery. It took wartime spending to finally eradicate the Great Depression. This led students to debate an important issue: Why was there no revolution during the Great Depression? Given that hard times afflicted millions for over a decade despite the New Deal, how did democracy and capitalism, albeit in a more regulated form, survive the 1930s? The discussion that ensued gave attention to definitions of revolution, distinctions between revolution and reform, the extent of class consciousness in America, and Franklin Roosevelt's leadership as both instrumental and psychological. Some students questioned the assumption underlying our discussion, claiming that a revolution did indeed occur in the 1930s. Other students doubted whether the United States possessed a genuine revolutionary tradition. The dialogue was intense and thoughtful but brought no consensus. Nonetheless, discussion did lead to recognition that the question was germane to our own era: Why, for example, did disaffected Democrats not revolt in 2000, despite the controversial voting irregularities in the disputed presidential election of that year?

Class Meeting #7**Chronological Period: The Road to Pearl Harbor—Foreign Policy, 1933-1941****Issue: Isolationism versus Internationalism**

The class examined the rise of aggressive totalitarian regimes, the threat to collective security, appeasement, the America First movement, and the foreign policy of the Roosevelt Administration from March 4, 1933, to December 7, 1941. Students then focused on the great issue of the years immediately preceding Pearl Harbor: isolationism versus internationalism. Students debated the ability of American democracy to effectively formulate and conduct foreign policy, conditions that justify U.S. military intervention, the appropriateness of a presidential administration acting covertly and/or infringing upon the Constitution in the interests of national security, the role of public opinion, the patriotism of obstructionists, and the impact of a direct attack upon the United States. After considering those items within the context of the isolationist-internationalist debate that preceded Pearl Harbor, the class applied them to concerns about American foreign policy before and after September 11, 2001.

Class Meeting #8**Chronological Period: World War II****Issue: President Harry Truman's Use of Atomic Bombs**

Discussion of the chronological period entailed examination of the causes, conduct, and consequences of American participation in World War II. The issue for this meeting concerned President Harry Truman's use of atomic bombs. To prepare for this class, students read J. Samuel Walker's *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs Against Japan*. Due for this sessions, interpretive paper #2 posed the following: "How should President Harry Truman have used the atomic bomb(s)? Take into account the political, diplomatic, and military content as well as wartime and postwar objectives."

Students understood that doing exactly as Truman did, which resulted in the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and Nagasaki on August 9, 1945, or rejecting any military use of these weapons were not the only options available. Students identified and analyzed diverse opinions. Evaluation of Truman's decision addressed the relative importance of bringing the war in Japan to the quickest possible end, American casualties, Japanese casualties, morality, revenge, and impact upon the Cold War and the arms race. After thoughtful debate, students voted to determine which of the options garnered the most support. Finally, the class considered under what circumstances, if any, contemporary American use of weapons of mass destruction would be justified: Are there scenarios, students were asked, in which the United States's use of nuclear weapons would be militarily effective and morally justified against present-day rogue nations and /or terrorist organizations?

Class Meeting #9**Chronological Period: Postwar America, 1945-1960****Issue: Were the 1950s a Golden Age for the American Family?**

After examining the major historical currents of Postwar America, 1945-1960, students addressed the issue of the week: Were the 1950s a golden age for the American family? Prior to class, students read chapter 2 ("What We Really Miss about the 1950s") in Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1997). Consideration of this issue began with the viewing of brief video excerpts drawn from two sources: an episode of the 1950s television series *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and the 1955 movie *Rebel Without a Cause*. Both were icons of the 1950s popular culture, but their depictions of families of that era were highly divergent.

With these contradictory visions of family life in the fifties as a catalyst, students analyzed dating, sex, marriage, spousal relations, divorce, the relationship between public perceptions and private truths, childbearing, childcare, adolescence, juvenile delinquency, child and spousal abuse, emotional health, women's work in and outside the home, motherhood, the feminine mystique, fatherhood, masculinity, gender roles, housing, material standard of living, education, and other attributes of familial structure and functions. They also gave attention to the relationship between 1950s families and the historical macrocosm, including the Cold War and postwar prosperity. Finally, the class compared 1950s family life to that of today, finding that past prototypes provided perspective for understanding contemporary models.

Class Meeting #10**Chronological Period: The Sixties—Politics and Government under JFK and LBJ****Issue: Evaluating JFK's Leadership during the Cuban Missile Crisis**

Students examined politics, government, and war during the 1960s from the vantage point of the presidential administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. After surveying the period, students addressed the issue of President Kennedy's leadership during the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. A vignette from the film *Thirteen Days* (2000) engaged students on an experiential level. The discussion considered Kennedy's prior policies toward Cuba and the Soviet Union, options open to the President, time pressures, morality, political considerations, the structure of the decision-making process, risks incurred by Kennedy's conduct to that of Nikita Khrushchev, and the impact of the crisis upon the Cold War and on history. The session involved comparisons of Kennedy's leadership during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Truman's approach to ending the war with Japan, and the contemporary campaign against terrorism. Students debated the lessons that President George W. Bush might derive from the context, process, and consequence of Kennedy's decision-making.

Class Meeting #11**Chronological Period: The Sixties—Society and Culture****Issue: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Just Society—Civil Rights and Vietnam**

After analyzing society and culture in the 1960s, students discussed the crusade of Martin Luther King, Jr., for a just America, focusing on his advocacy of civil rights and his opposition to the war in Vietnam. To prepare for this session, students read excerpts from writings about and by King and viewed video clips from some of his most significant speeches. The discussion entailed debate of the following questions: How did King view racism in America, and how did those perceptions shape the philosophy, tactics, and strategy of his civil rights campaign? Why did King oppose the Vietnam War, and what form did this opposition take? What linked King's critique of racism and his opposition to the Vietnam War? What were King's major triumphs and failures? Are King's character and personal life relevant to an evaluation of his philosophy and leadership? Students compared King to other black leaders of the 1960s as well as those who preceded him and those who followed. The class also considered King's overall effectiveness, his impact on history, his legacy, and the relevance of his goals and tactics in the present. Students concluded by responding to a query: How would King have responded to court rulings on affirmative action, racial profiling by police, proposals that the descendants of slaves receive indemnities, and other components of race relations in contemporary America? How would he have responded to George W. Bush's war on terrorism?

Class Meeting #12**Chronological Period: The Seventies****Issue: Richard Nixon and the Search for National Character**

Critical discussion of the United States in the 1970s preceded consideration of the issue of the week: Richard Nixon and the Search for National Character. Prior to class, students read excerpts from diverse theories about national character as well as abridged articles about the life and presidency of Richard Nixon. Discussion about Nixon and national character was also facilitated by the viewing of brief video excerpts from some of Nixon's emblematic public moments and from Oliver Stone's film *Nixon* (1995). Student initially raised generic questions about national character: Is there such a thing as American national character? If there is, does national character transcend cultural and political divisions, regions, lifestyles, genders, races, ethnic groups, and economic classes? Is national character static from chronological period to chronological period, or does each generation recreate it? What are the attributes of national character? Then, students applied the concept of national character to the character of Nixon, particularly as it manifested itself during his presidency.

The discussion of Nixon's relationship to national character included examination of the following: Was there a consistent Nixon character or rather a succession of New Nixons? What were the defining components of Nixon's character? Did Nixon's character reflect or deviate from the national character? Did Nixon's character reflect

or deviate from the zeitgeist of the 1970s? Did Nixon's character, more than his ideology or politics, shape the domestic and foreign policies of his presidency? What were the chief strengths and weaknesses of Nixon's character, and how did that impact on his life and presidency as well as upon history? Students considered whether policies of the incumbent president, George W. Bush, and his immediate predecessor, Bill Clinton, were driven more or less by character than were those of Richard Nixon?

Class Meeting #13

Chronological Period: The Eighties

Issue: Rating Reagan—Presidential Evaluations

After surveying the main currents of American history during the 1980s, students took up the task of rating the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Prior to class, they read a few articles representing varying viewpoints that assessed the Reagan presidency within a comparative context. To engage students on an experiential level, they heard brief excerpts from some of Reagan's speeches and press conferences. Rating Reagan began with the class's attempt to establish generic criteria to employ to evaluate any American president. Suggestions for areas to include in these evaluative criteria encompassed pre-presidential background, electoral success, communication skills, creation of a national mood, character, intelligence, ideology, vision, idealism, compassion, priorities, appointments, domestic and foreign policies, management of the economy, national defense, effectiveness during crises, and impact on history. Students also considered whether a single area might be so important as to dwarf all others in evaluating a president, and, if this was the case, whether Reagan's handling of the Cold War constituted the defining issue of his administration. Students debated how much credit Reagan merited for hastening the end of the Cold War. As a means of evaluating the Reagan presidency, students compared it to presidential administrations that preceded and followed it, identifying similarities and differences between the Reagan administration and those of other recent presidents.

Class Meeting #14

Chronological Period: 9/11/01 and Beyond

Issue: Days That Defined America

Through reading (the September 11, 2002, commemorative issues of *Time* magazine and *The New York Times*), antecedent topics, probe questions, curricular context, and an essay assignment, students were prepared to discuss the new era that commenced on September 11, 2001, and the issue of Days That Defined America. Interpretive paper #3, due for this meeting, asked, "What impact did the September 11, 2001, attack have, in the months since the tragedy, on the public and private lives of: (1) America as a nation, (2) the individual you were assigned from the *Time* magazine profile, and (3) you?"

The class commenced with SUNY-Oneonta Professor Emeritus Dennis Shea's remembrance of how the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor ended the isolation

of America as well as that of his own insular Irish-Catholic neighborhood in the Queens region of New York City. SUNY-Oneonta provost and historian F. Daniel Larkin followed by recounting the shock and disbelief that swept the nation and his personal circle in Albany, New York, upon hearing of the November 22, 1963, assassination of President Kennedy; he also hypothesized about how the tragedy altered history. Next, SUNY-Oneonta graduate John Jermyn, a twenty-year veteran of the New York City Fire Department, described his participation in rescue efforts at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001; he also commented on life in New York since the terrorist attack. Presentations by the guest speakers were introduced by visual images from documentary films. Then, students discussed and analyzed the impact of 9/11 on the nation, specific individuals, and themselves within a historical framework. The guest speakers joined students in considering similarities and differences between these three Days That Defined America, linking the nation's past and present.

Class Meeting #15

Chronological Period: The American Past, Present, and Future

Issue: The Defining Attributes of the American Civilization

For our final meeting, each of the thirteen students was paired with a different chronological period, selected from those previously covered in the course. I asked students to identify those attributes from the era for which they were responsible that had an enduring impact on American civilization. They were instructed to provide evidence and a rationale for their choices in a final essay and in an oral report. Interpretive essay #4, collected during this last meeting, called upon students to consider: "What and who were the distinctive and defining attributes, phenomena, events, trends, and people in the chronological period for which you have responsibility? What people and what characteristics of your period have had an enduring influence on American culture, civilization, and/or character?" Thus, in the last meeting, the class—drawing from the past and present—collectively sought to define "American civilization." The discussion was intelligent, energetic, and engaging. Although the topic defied definitive answer, the quest was enlightening, and by emphasizing the significance of the historical to the contemporary, it provided a fitting conclusion to the course.

Student feedback suggests that the honors course in modern American history was a success. People vote with their feet: Despite rigorous grading and a substantial work load, no one dropped the course. During the entire fifteen weeks of the semester, there was not a single unexcused absence. In an age of informality, I was moved when several students asked if they could dress up for our final session. And, in that last meeting, each of the oral reports by students was followed, quite deservedly, by applause. Without exception, students indicated an interest in taking other honors courses.

The success of the course gave an important boost to the fledgling honors program, still modest in scope, with courses initially rotating, semester by semester, among

academic disciplines. The Director of the Honors Program indicated that in the future I would have the opportunity to repeat the honors offering in modern American history. In a subsequent incarnation of the course, I would address two concerns: the request of students for further integration of audio-visual material into class proceedings and additional discussion to augment historiographical disputation. Extension of the meeting time would ameliorate these problems, suggesting the desirability of converting a three-credit course into a four-credit offering, with another hour of class per week.

In both their statistical and written evaluations, students gave the honors course in modern American history high marks. As the following representative excerpts from course evaluations illustrate, student comments were enthusiastic:

- "Class provided a valuable learning experience."
- "The course was interesting and informative. I learned a lot and enjoyed it much more than a typical survey course. Much more in-depth."
- "The class was a very rewarding experience ... I liked doing the papers rather than having tests."
- "It was by far the most interesting history class I have taken."

Echoing points made in discussion and papers, student evaluations credited the course with illuminating a process of renewal and change that connected, yet rendered distinct, the present from the past.