

## Course Description

This course is a survey of U.S. history from the beginning of European settlements in North America in the 16<sup>th</sup> century up through the year 2019. Students will be tasked with both developing a knowledge of the foundational events, processes, and figures of American history, and also developing a deeper appreciation for specific fields of study that fall within the bounds of U.S. History. The assigned reading materials will be used as a springboard for productive in-class discussions and for writing an analytical essay that will give students an opportunity to grapple with major historical problems in an informed and rational manner, and which will encourage them to engage in constructive and civil arguments with their colleagues and the course instructor. Students will therefore be confronted by competing historical narratives and viewpoints throughout the course. This approach is intended to not only impart a basic familiarity with the broader context of significant events, figures, and processes in American history, but to also enable students to understand how rational and intelligent people can approach the same factual evidence and yet reach startlingly different conclusions.

## Course Objectives

1. To provide students with knowledge of foundational events, figures, and processes in U.S. history from 1500 A.D. to the present day.
2. To acquaint students with a coherent narrative and argumentative framework for understanding American history and modern debates surrounding that subject as a foundation for both personal growth and responsible citizenship.
3. To familiarize students with the critical philosophical knowledge necessary for analyzing historical narratives and arguments on the basis of evidence and reason.
4. To foster students with a love of history (“*historia*” – “inquiry”) for its own sake.

## Course Content Disclaimer

Students *should* be forewarned that this course will cover controversial topics, including matters relating to violence, religion, race, and even some sex. The reality is there are fundamental issues in American history which touch on all these difficult aspects of human existence, and it is impossible to develop a healthy and well-rounded knowledge of even basic U.S. history (much less modern life) without addressing them. We will *not* approach these difficult issues simply to delight in controversy for its own sake, but *rather* as means for developing a mature and thoughtful perspective on the United States and its history.

## Course Rationale:

The Roman statesman and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero (first century B.C.) observed that a human being who is ignorant of history lives in a state of permanent adolescence. What Cicero meant is that a person who lacks knowledge of a common past has no sense of communal identity and responsibility towards their fellow human beings. A historically ignorant person is therefore prone to live selfishly, thinking only of themselves and taking no consideration of their obligation to pass on a meaningful inheritance for future generations, and their capacity to make wise or prudent decisions is impoverished by their inability to draw on past experiences to help guide them. From this reasoning, Cicero declared that human life is utterly worthless “unless it is woven in the life of our ancestors by the records of history”: for, without history, each individual life becomes like a solitary atom that bounces aimlessly through the vacuum of space, lacking both purpose and understanding of its place in the universe.

What Cicero meant by “history” was not merely the memorization of facts and dates, but of the intimate knowledge of the human condition gained from inquiring into and contemplating examples drawn from the lives of real men and women in the past. From this ancient perspective, the study of history is an essential component of a good education. The student that gains an understanding of their own nation’s

history can act as a responsible and informed citizen and also acquire the necessary intellectual foundation for understanding the histories of foreign peoples. It is the stories of history that empower human beings to develop a sense of community (literally, a life that is common or shared), and in turn gain an awareness of higher collective purposes that can transcend selfish interests. Left strictly to our own devices, however, we will find ourselves (in the words of an ancient Greek poet) “without clan, without sacred law, without hearth” – that is, friendless, ungoverned and ungovernable, and spiritually homeless within the walls of our own homes.

The truth of Cicero’s statement is neither widely recognized or acknowledged in the contemporary United States, and it is accordingly difficult for younger students to acquire a solid grounding in the fundamentals of their own national history. Contemporary Americans of all political backgrounds are divided not merely by petty partisan differences over policy, but perhaps most importantly by fierce disagreements over fundamental questions about the nature of human life, and these disputes ultimately affect our ability to interact with our country’s history. What is it to be human? What is freedom? What is justice? And, of greatest importance to this course (but not unrelated to the preceding questions), how can modern Americans relate to or admire a national history that was marked by such inhumane cruelties as the genocide of Amerindian peoples by European-descended colonists, African slavery, and Jim Crow discrimination, to name but a few prominent evils? Should we not, as a prominent Pulitzer-prize winning history project sponsored by the New York Times (and widely adopted by contemporary high schools) has argued, condemn the history of the United States entirely as a hypocritical, fundamentally unjust, and irredeemably terrible story of cruelty in the name of freedom? Should we not instead seek to build an entirely new social and political order free of the follies of our ancestors? What can twenty-first century Americans learn from a past tainted by such evils?

This class is predicated on the assumption that we must take Cicero’s position to heart and approach our national history both critically and fairly, in a spirit of humility and humane generosity. In examining the historical foundations of our country (cultural, social, economic, political, religious, and so forth), we must not let our investigation be governed by either our personal prejudices or by rose-tinted nostalgia. Rather, we must seek to evaluate the past on the understanding that it was populated by people fundamentally like us: good, bad, or (more often than) a mixture of both. Their lives, struggles, loves, hatreds, their great triumphs and terrible mistakes are all part of a story that is greater than the individuals that constitute the sum of its parts. In learning this shared history, we must seek to find the good while simultaneously acknowledging (and, even more importantly, learning from!) the worst mistakes of our national history, so that we can each of us be prepared to contribute responsibly and thoughtfully to our country’s posterity. It is in this spirit of moderation, civility, and (friendly!) constructive criticism that this course will seek to examine the history of the United States. Most important of all, this course aims to give students a gateway to learning to love history for its own sake: that is, it is hoped that students will learn to approach the events and people of the past on their own terms, rather than on the basis of our various (and not always rational) prejudices.

### **Textbooks and Other Reading Assignments**

The primary textbook for this course is Dr. Wilfred McClay’s *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story* (2019). This book has been chosen because it provides an engaging and intelligent narrative survey of the entirety of United States history that is largely free of the pervasive cynicism and/or narrative blandness that pervades most of the widely-available survey textbooks on the market. Another virtue of *Land of Hope* compared to other textbooks is that it does not pretend to be a strictly neutral recitation of facts: rather, Dr. McClay articulates reasoned *arguments* (supported by *evidence*) throughout his narrative. The story told in *Land of Hope* will serve as the foundation for a thoughtful introductory survey. Additional readings by your course instructor, professional scholars, or from primary

(eyewitness) sources will be assigned each week that either support or call into question various points made by the main textbook, in the hopes that such a dialectic approach will enrich the quality of students' engagement with the course material and give them a greater depth of understanding than they would have if they had only read a single textbook. The primary sources and other supplemental readings will be hosted on a companion website (currently in-production) that will be set up by your course instructor.

Students will also be required to pick one (out of three) content areas that they will engage in deeper study with over the course of this class. These content areas are as follows: 1. Colonial / Revolutionary America; 2. The American Civil War and Reconstruction; 3. The United States and the World Wars. Students will select one of these overall topics and read a pair of books (pre-selected by the instructor) focused on their chosen content area; these books may be acquired in either digital or hard copies, so long as they are the correct edition for the course. During class periods that cover relevant periods to a student's chosen content area, that student will function as an "expert" who will help guide the discussion and chime in with additional information that may not have been covered in the main reading. The final project for the course will be an analytical historiographic assignment, in which students will draw on the relevant sections of their main textbook and their chosen pair of readings (as well as any supplementary materials they may feel are relevant) that evaluates the narratives, arguments, and evidence used by their respective authors. This paper will demonstrate the student's overall mastery of the course content and their chosen content area specialization.

These books have been chosen on the basis of their quality and readability, as well as the substantial disagreements that emerge in the historical interpretations proffered by their authors. Students are advised to take these disagreements seriously and they should weigh the evidence offered by opposing sides before making a judgement in favor of either position. It is also expected that students' readings leave some questions unanswered, and they are encouraged to raise those questions during their weekly class meetings, as well as to e-mail their course instructor to help resolve any unresolved difficulties that they may have with their assigned readings.

These topical fields and paired books are as follows:

**Colonial / Revolutionary America:**

The American Revolution: A History. New York: Modern Library, 2003. [Edition 1], Author: Gordon S. Wood. ISBN: 0812970411

The Colonists' American Revolution: Preserving English Liberty, 1607-1783. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019. [Edition 1], Author: Guy Chet. ISBN: 1119591864

**The American Civil War / Reconstruction:**

The American War: A History of the Civil War Era, 2nd edition. State College, PA: Flip Learning, 2019. [Edition 2], Authors: Gary Gallagher and Joan Waugh. ISBN: 0991037537

A Short History of Reconstruction. New York: Harper, 2015. [Edition 2], Author: Eric Foner. ISBN: 0060964316

**The World Wars:**

The Path to War: How the First World War Created Modern America. Oxford University Press, 2016. [Edition 1], Author: Michael S. Neiberg. ISBN: 0190464968

The American People in World War II: Freedom From Fear, Part II. Oxford University Press, 2003. [Edition 1], Author: David M. Kennedy. ISBN: 0195144031

## **Assignments**

Students will be asked to turn in a weekly reflection on their readings for each week. Prompts and technical requirements for these will be released at the end of class on Thursday each week of class (see schedule below) and will be due by 5pm on Sunday of that week. A good reaction paper will highlight key aspects of the relevant course content and will provide a substantive and concise answer (and reasoning behind it!) to the questions raised by the prompts. As we go further in the course, students are advised to start drawing reasoned connections, comparisons and contrasts between what they see in a later section of course content with what they have studied earlier in the semester. These papers will be submitted via Moodle on the weeks specified in our course schedule below.

This course will have an essay-based final exam at the end of the Fall semester. This final will consist of two parts. Part one will consist of an analytical paper answering a specific historical question relevant to course content (topics TBD by the instructor). Students will be able to choose from a selection of historical topics provided by the instructor. Part two will be a personal reaction paper in which the student will be asked to discuss an event (or events), figures, or other historical material of their choice (so long as it was covered in this course). Students will need to provide a reasonable summary of their chosen topic, explain its significance within the context of this course, and demonstrate substantive reasoning and knowledge in explaining why they found their chosen topic to be of particular personal/historical interest to them. Each of these submissions should be in the ballpark of 1200-1500 words. In the spring there will be an essay-based midterm exam encompassing US History from the Gilded Age to the World Wars (specific topics TBD). Students will need to answer two prompts that will be effectively identical in structure to the fall final, differing only in content.

The final assignment will consist of an analytical historiographical paper that combines a student's chosen pair of "expert" readings for the semester with the relevant sections of their textbook and of their supplemental reading assignments to demonstrate mastery of their chosen content area. Students will need to show that they fully understand the narratives, arguments, and evidence employed by their chosen scholars, and then articulate an intelligently reasoned position vis-à-vis their readings. This paper should be about 2000-2500 words in length. More details and writing advice for this paper will be forthcoming later in the semester.

## **Attendance and Participation**

Students are advised that, as an online discussion-based course, it is absolutely imperative that you attend consistently and punctually. You will also need to interact with your course instructor and your colleagues, and you must do so respectfully. One of the key goals of this class is to help students learn to analyze historical arguments, and that means you should always be trying to think through a particular claim or idea. Never attack the person making a statement (*ad hominem*), but rather seek to criticize *ideas* on reasonable and evidentiary grounds. Excused absences will be permitted, but you need to give me some sort of prior warning (unless there's an absolutely dire emergency) before class.

## **Grading**

Your final grade for this course will be based on the following categories:

- Attendance & Participation: 15%
- Weekly Reaction Papers (cumulative total): 25%
- Midterms and Finals (cumulative total): 25%
- Final Project (due end of Spring Semester): 35%

Details on the specifics of each assignment will be released at a later date. Final grades for the course will be distributed on a scale of A-F. As reflect excellent work and diligence in all of the above categories

(90-100%). Bs are respectable, but with some room for improvement (80-89%). Cs are solidly passable (70-79%) but less desirable than a B or A. A D (60-69%) is passable but \*far less\* desirable than a C, B, or A grade. I will work with students who are struggling in the course to try and find some satisfactory way to help accommodate any difficulties or disabilities to help them succeed in the course. Be forewarned, however, that I am not going to artificially inflate grades for students that do not put in the work to succeed in this course. In general, I will not accept late work unless students contact me in advance to make reasonable arrangements if they cannot meet a deadline.

### **Tentative Class Schedule/Assignments**

**Week 1: Introduction to US History.** No class on September 1<sup>st</sup>, but we will meet on Thursday, Sept. 3<sup>rd</sup>. Read syllabus and the introductory chapter of *Land of Hope*, “One Long Story” (pgs. xi-xiv). Be prepared to introduce yourselves and ask questions about course content, as well as to discuss the goals of this course and figure out what content areas students are interested in specializing in (see above). No weekly reflection paper due this week (we’re just getting started!).

**Week 2: The End of the European Middle Ages and the Beginnings of Modernity.** Class meetings on September 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>. Read chapter 1, “Beginnings: Settlement and Unsettling,” and supplemental website materials (TBD). Experts for Colonial / Revolutionary America should start reading their books in preparation for the next few class sessions. First reflection paper due at 5pm on Sunday, September 13<sup>th</sup>.

**Week 3: The Empires of Early Modern Europe and British Settlement in North America.** Class meetings on September 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 2, “The Shaping of British North America” and supplementary website materials (TBD). Be prepared to start being an expert this week if you are a Colonial/Revolutionary America reader! Reflection paper due at 5pm on Sunday, September 20.

**Week 4: The Seven Years War, British Imperial Reforms, and the Origins of the American Revolution.** Class meetings on September 22<sup>nd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 3, “The Revolution of Self-Rule,” in addition to supplementary website readings (TBD). Only one more week left for Colonial / American Revolution experts (you’re almost free!). Reflection paper due at 5pm on Sunday, September 27<sup>th</sup>.

**Week 5: The American Revolution – War, Society, and the Birth of American Constitutionalism/Nationalism.** Class meetings on September 29<sup>th</sup> and October 1<sup>st</sup>. Read Chapter 4, “A War, A Nation, and a Wound,” plus supplementary website readings. Last week for Colonial / Revolutionary America experts – you’ve got this! Reflection paper due at 5pm on Sunday, October 4<sup>th</sup>.

**Week 6: The Constitution, The War of 1812, and Andrew Jackson.** Class meetings on October 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 6, “From Jefferson to Jackson: The Rise of the Common Man,” as well as supplementary website materials (TBD). No experts – take it easy! Reflection paper due at 5pm on Sunday, October 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Week 7: Democratic Republican Politics and Society in the Pre-Civil War U.S.** Class meetings on October 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 7, “The Culture of Democracy,” plus supplementary online readings (TBD). Experts for Civil War / Reconstruction are advised to start reading their books (esp. *The American War*) this week and next week (Week 8) in preparation for Week 9 class periods. Reflection paper due at 5pm on Sunday, October 18<sup>th</sup>.

**Week 8: The Old South, Slavery, and Industrialization in Pre-Civil War America.** Class meetings on 20<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>. Read Chapter 8, “The Old South and Slavery,” as well as supplemental website materials.

No experts this week (Civil War / Reconstruction experts – keep prepping or get started if you haven't already!). Reflection paper due at 5pm on Sunday, October 25<sup>th</sup>.

**Week 9: Prelude to Secession and Civil War.** Class meetings on October 27 and 29<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 9, “The Gathering Storm,” plus supplemental website readings (TBD). First week for Civil War / Reconstruction experts. Reflection paper due at 5pm on Sunday, November 1<sup>st</sup>.

**Week 10: The U.S. Civil War & the End of Slavery in America.** Classes on November 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 10, “The House Divides,” plus supplementary website materials (TBD). Second Week for Civil War / Reconstruction experts. Reflection paper due at 5pm on Sunday, November 8<sup>th</sup>.

**Week 11: Reconstruction vs. Redemption.** Classes on November 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 11, “The Ordeal of Reconstruction,” plus supplementary website materials (TBD). Last week for Civil War / Reconstruction experts – you're almost done! Reflection paper due at 5pm on Sunday, November 15<sup>th</sup>.

**Week 12: The Gilded Age.** Class on November 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 12, “A Nation Transformed,” plus supplementary website materials (TBD). Reflection paper due at 5pm on Sunday, November 22<sup>nd</sup>.

**Week 13:** Take the week off. It's Thanksgiving. Celebrate, give thanks, and enjoy your time with friends and family – maybe even read a book for fun. No papers due this week.

**Week 14: End of Part 1.** Class meeting on Tuesday, December 1<sup>st</sup>, to tie up loose ends and discuss the final. No class on Thursday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>. Feel free to contact your instructor as you work on your papers for advice and feedback on rough drafts.

The final assignment of the semester is a two-part essay exam. Both papers are due **\*no later than\*** midnight on Sunday, December 20<sup>th</sup>.

### **Christmas Break: Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!**

**Week 1 (Spring): American Imperialism.** Class on January 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>. Read Chapter 13, “Becoming a World Power,” plus supplemental website materials. Experts for the World Wars should **\*absolutely\*** start reading their books at this point. Reflection paper due Sunday, January 31<sup>st</sup>, at 5pm.

**Week 2: The United States & the Progressive Era.** Class on February 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 14, “The Progressive Era,” plus supplementary website materials. Experts for the World Wars should keep getting prepped! Reflection paper due Sunday, February 7<sup>th</sup>, 5pm.

**Week 3: The Great War.** Class on February 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 15, “Wilson and the Great War,” plus supplemental materials. First week for experts on the World Wars (WWI)! Reflection paper due Sunday, February 14<sup>th</sup>, 5pm.

**Week 4: The Roaring 20s & the Beginning of the Great Depression.** Class on February 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 16, “From Boom to Bust,” plus supplemental materials. World War experts prep for WWII. Reflection paper due Sunday, February 21<sup>st</sup>, 5pm.

**Week 5: Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal for America.** Class on February 23<sup>rd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 17, “The New Deal,” plus supplemental website materials. Students reading up on the World Wars should keep prepping for their next (and final) week as experts. Reflection paper due Sunday, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 5pm.

**Week 6: The United States and the Second World War.** Class on March 2<sup>nd</sup> and March 4<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 18, “The Finest Hour: *World War II*,” plus supplemental website materials. Last week for World Wars experts! No reflection paper due this week – prompts for midterm exam will be released at the end of class on Thursday.

**Week 7-8:** No classes. Work on writing midterm essays. Midterm is due Sunday, March 21<sup>st</sup>, by 5pm. (Contact instructor for help with rough drafts!).

**Week 9: The United States, the Soviet Union, and The Cold War.** Class on March 23<sup>rd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 19, “All Thoughts and Things Were Split: *The Cold War*,” plus supplemental website materials. Reflection paper due Sunday, March 28<sup>th</sup>, 5pm.

**Week 10: Easter Break (Western Easter), March 29<sup>th</sup>-April 4.**

**Week 11: Revolutions – Vietnam, Race, Sex, and Politics in the 1960s.** Class on April 6<sup>th</sup> and April 7<sup>th</sup>. Read chapter 20, “Out of Balance: *The Turbulent Sixties*,” plus supplemental website materials. Reflection paper due Sunday, April 11<sup>th</sup>, at 5pm.

**Week 12: The Cold War Ends.** Class on April 13<sup>th</sup> and April 15<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 21, “Fall and Restoration: *From Nixon to Reagan*,” plus supplemental website materials. Reflection paper due Sunday, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 5pm.

**Week 13: The World of Today.** Class on April 20<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>. Read Chapter 22, “The World Since the Cold War,” plus supplemental website materials. Reflection paper due Sunday, April 25<sup>th</sup>, 5pm.

**Week 14: End of Part II – What Does It All Mean?** Class on April 27<sup>th</sup>, but no class on Thursday the 29<sup>th</sup>. Read Chapter 23, “Epilogue: The Shape of American Patriotism,” plus supplemental website materials. No reflection paper due. Rather, I would like to invite students to submit feedback on their experience in the course as a whole. What do you think could be improved? Did you like the readings? What changes would you recommend (and why!) for future iterations of this class?

From here on out: Work on your final papers (see assignments). Submit rough drafts for review by the instructor. Final paper is due **\*no later than\*** midnight on June 11<sup>th</sup>.

**FIN**