

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN  
Department of History  
Winter/Spring, 1989

HISTORY 398  
The History of the United States, 1945-1988

Professor John Sharpless  
History Department  
263-1800

COURSE CONTENT:

The intent of History 398 is to provide an overview of economic, political and social trends since World War II. Naturally, the course will draw heavily on other social science disciplines (economics, political science and sociology) for much of its material. However, we will attempt to chart cultural and artistic trends as well.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS:

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(\* = purchase optional)

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#### EXAMINATIONS AND GRADES:

In order to avoid any confusion over the direction and content of the course, we will be distributing the questions for midterms and the final (in class) on January 28. It should be stressed that these are not simply study questions. They are the examination questions just as they will appear on the examination.

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## OFFICE HOURS:

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## DATE AND TIME OF THE FINAL EXAMINATION:

The final examination is scheduled for May 15 at 7:25 p.m. The location will be announced the final week of class.

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HISTORY 398  
America, 1945-Present

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LECTURE OUTLINE

- WEEK 1 (Jan. 23) Historical Background: The Great Depression and the Great War  
(Jan. 25) Postwar Trends: An Overview
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- WEEK 6 (Feb. 27) The Political Economy of Urban America  
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- WEEK 7 (Mar. 6-8) The Kennedy Years: A Thousand and One Knights
- WEEK 8 (Mar. 13) Social Trends, 1958-1972: Courtship, Marriage, and the Family in Transition  
(Mar. 15) \* \* \* \* \* MID-TERM EXAMINATION (IN CLASS) \* \* \* \* \*  
(SPRING RECESS--MARCH 17-27)
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- WEEK 10 (April 3) Civil Rights and Black America, 1955-1965  
(April 5) Vietnam: Victory without Honor, Honor without Victory

WEEK 11 (April 10) Lyndon Johnson's Politics of War  
(April 12) Domestic Politics and Policies, 1963-1968

WEEK 12 (April 17) \* \* \* \* \* TAKE HOME EXAM DUE IN CLASS \* \* \* \* \*

(April 17) The Nixon Presidency: A Man Without a Past?!

(April 19) The Nixon Presidency: Domestic and International Policies

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(April 26) The American Economy, 1957-1988: The Rise and Fall of the "Fine-tuned" Economy

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(May 3) Foreign Policy in the Eighties: "Its better to be dead than..."

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Spring, 1989

American History, 1945-Present

John Sharpless

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- I. The questions on the first mid-term examination will be taken from the following:
  - A. One expert has argued, "When the American foreign policy elite adopted the 'philosophy of containment,' they accepted the notion that the Cold War would go on forever and forever..." How did it come to pass that the Cold War seemed so much a permanent state of affairs? How did this presumption shape our foreign policy in the years before 1963? How did each President in this era seek to reinforce the "pattern of policy" already in place? (Refer directly to specific foreign policy issues or crises; e.g., Berlin, Middle East, CIA, NSC 68, etc.)
  - B. At first glance, Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy would seem to be three very different people. Although both Eisenhower and Kennedy presented themselves as repudiating the preceding administration, promising a new and different approach to national problems, in reality all three men pursued essentially similar programs once in office. At most, style, not substance, set these men apart from each other.

Assess the validity of this statement, focusing only on foreign policy and events between 1945 and 1963. (Refer directly to the readings by Burk, Rosenbergs, and Ambrose.) You may accept, reject or modify the proposition as you see fit. Select an issue area to compare these men in terms of both substance and style.

- C. The period from 1946 to 1963 is often seen as a time of prosperity and domestic security. This image is not without some factual basis. Indeed, many Americans found it possible to attain a level of wealth and security that would have been beyond their parents' imagination even twenty years earlier. The "middle class life style" became synonymous with the American "way of life." Behind this prosperity, however, was the hidden hand of ongoing government intervention. While people had the impression of "doing it themselves," they were actually assisted through a wide range of direct and indirect subsidies.

Describe the ways in which the federal government assisted the rise of the white urban middle class in the post-war era. Focus on specific government and identify the implication for American society.

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- D. Anxiety over the "communist threat" deepened in the early years of the 1950s as Americans sought to provide an explanation for troubles at home and abroad. As we look back from today's perspective, it is often difficult to imagine what all the fuss was about. It is one thing to be concerned about spies but to view all dissent as unpatriotic seems a bit paranoid. Could it really be true that all deviance away from the "mainstream" (artistic, literary or political) was communist inspired? After all, we have long cherished individual freedom of expression. It now seems ironic that some Americans went so far as to demand not only the suppression of basic civil liberties but also enforced conformity and mindless obedience to the State in order to protect the "American Way of Life." [Isn't that what we feared most about communism?] How can we explain this extreme reaction to communism in this era?

Trace the growing concern over "communist infiltration" in America during the period between 1946 and 1956. What events led many Americans to believe that the forces of communism were at work in America? What was done to deal with this "threat"? Who were the leaders in the movement to identify and eliminate subversives? What groups supported their campaigns? Who opposed their efforts? And, finally, what were the "long run" implications of the anticommunism movement in the 1950s?

- E. Clearly, patterns of family life are directly related to the "accepted" definitions of sexual roles both within the family and in the larger social and economic environment. Focusing on the period 1945-1960, chart the major changes the role of both males and females in the economic and social life of America. Identify the interrelationship between forces "external" to the family and the internal processes that affect such traditional "familial" activities as child rearing. What tensions arose from these changes and were they (in your opinion) resolved? (or did they remain unresolved?)
- II. Each student will write a short essay. The essays should not exceed eight (8) typed pages. The problem will be researched and the essay written outside of class. However, these are not to be considered cooperative ventures. Indeed, any evidence that our essay was not totally the result of independent effort will result in a failing grade.

THE MID-TERM ESSAYS ARE DUE IN CLASS (LECTURE HOUR) ON APRIL 17TH. NO EXTENSIONS WILL BE ALLOWED. LATE PAPERS WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.

The 1960s were a time of protest and conflict. The growing divisions in American society broke along four primary dimensions: race, class, gender and generation. Utilize these basic concepts to examine the origins and development of either the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement or the Anti-war Movement. Compare the issues each movement addressed, the tactics they employed, their influence on one another and their visions for America's future. In writing your essay, refer directly to the readings.

III. The questions on the final exam will be taken from the following:

A. Identify and describe the basic values which Americans bring to foreign policy, and how those values shape and influence America's relationship with either Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Draw examples from each of the time periods listed below:

1. 1945-1953 (Compare Truman and Eisenhower)

2. 1964-1973 (Compare Johnson and Nixon)

3. 1977-1985 (Compare Carter and Reagan)

B. There is little doubt that the role of the media in American politics has increased greatly since the forties. The question is, how does the media affect the political process. Compare the presidential elections of 1960 and 1968 with the election of 1988, focusing on the relationship between the candidate, the media and the voter. To what extent were issues of importance? Do "debates" help or hinder the electoral process?

C. Over the last fifty years there has been a radical shift in people's attitude about mortality and ethical behavior. The sources for these changes are many. At one level, changes in economics, science and technology have placed different demands on people as they confront the problems of daily life. At another level, social philosophers, religious leaders and intellectuals have been rethinking age-old philosophical problems of "good and evil." The force of their ideas has been keenly felt as well. Write a short essay reviewing the major trends since 1945 in moral and ethical behavior. Attempt to isolate the reasons why the changes have occurred. Refer directly to Habits of the Heart.

D. In the late 1960s and middle 1970s, political scientists, journalists, historians and, at least, one President of the United States complained of a "crisis of confidence" and loss of public faith in American institutions. First, explain what they meant by this phrase. Identify the key elements of the argument. Second, identify any trends in the 1960s and 1970s which would have contributed to this "crisis of confidence."

E. Both John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon have been described as the prototype of today's media politician. In what ways did they anticipate the television politics of the 1980s? Make specific comparisons to President Reagan's style and presentation. In what specific ways has the media transformed American politics from the 1960s to the present? Assess whether television politics has made it harder to maintain accountability of public officials.

- F. In fashioning foreign policy between 1945 and 1985, American policymakers were determined not to repeat past mistakes, but to learn from history. As a result, each policy proposed during this era was a direct response to the shortcomings (perceived and real) of its predecessor. How did previous experiences influence, for better or for worse, the policies adopted between 1975 and 1985? Were these policymakers good historians, or did they derive the wrong lessons when better alternatives, also based on experience, were readily available? (Refer directly to the readings on foreign policy.)
- G. By the late 1970s and early 1980s the social and economic programs of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" legislation (including the "War on Poverty") has become a symbol of what was perceived to be the failure of government intervention. The notion that these programs had not only failed but had made things worse was instrumental in the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976 and Ronald Reagan in 1980. It is useful, therefore, to evaluate both the goals and content of the "Great Society" program. Select two or three major pieces of legislation to serve as examples. To what extent were the policy measures of the late sixties a departure from earlier approaches to social and economic reform? How successful were these programs? Why did many Americans come to believe that the reforms of the "Great Society" program were failures?