

HISTORY 902  
RESEARCH SEMINAR IN U.S. HISTORY

Fall 1989

Mr. Kutler

This seminar presents an opportunity for you to design, research, and write an "original" paper. Originality is a rare species if it involves doing something absolutely new under the sun. We have few Einsteins. But you can conceptualize a new problem or approach, work through largely unexplored materials, and offer a "contribution to knowledge." Along the way, I hope you will manage that presentation in a clearly written paper. I cannot expect you to produce a publishable paper. On the other hand, I will not re-write the paper for you to make sense out of it.

Because we offer only a limited number of research seminars, I recognize the need to broadly define the range of topic possibilities. Frankly, I prefer a seminar where we work in common on a general subject, each with his or her own slice of pie. That runs the risk of narrowness, I realize, yet the benefits of community and shared concerns overshadow whatever disadvantages are present. (Of course, if someone wishes to do something cosmic, you have a space vehicle at your command. But you better make sure it flies.)

My most interesting and successful research seminars have resulted from the common approach. We have worked on Reconstruction legislation, political trials, legislative intent, judicial power, and Watergate, to name a few. I wish to suggest two broad areas for your consideration. But let me be "perfectly clear," as one former president, who happened to be an unindicted co-conspirator, would have said: you are free to operate outside these boundaries. I will not enforce them. "That," the man would have said, "would be wrong."

1) Political history heavily focuses on what presidents say or do; sometimes we give a bow to Congress. To my mind, the political history of the past fifty years is administrative history and bureaucratic history. So let me suggest something along that line. Start with a time when we have a Republican President and a Democratic Congress. Find a sub-committee that links directly to an executive agency -- often a bureau or a division in a Cabinet department. (You may, of course, work with a full committee.) Take a focused time period -- say the first two years of Nixon's presidency. Read the legislative materials on a particular topic, as they relate to the concerns and works of an executive agency.

What are the issues? To what extent is the President able to work his will? Is that will supported or undermined by his underlings? What are the legislative interests? What evidence can you find of links between staff/members and the bureaucracy? To what extent does the end product reflect the Administration's desires? the bureaucracy's? the congressmen's and/or their staff's?

2) My current work involves tracing and analyzing what I call 200 years of mugging the judiciary, a blood sport passionately enjoyed by presidents, congressmen (witness the recent hue and cry over flag-burning), and affected interest groups. My thesis is that it is largely sound and fury resulting in very little -- but signifying much. If anything, judicial power is augmented and expanded; at a minimum, the aggrieved parties in effect endorse and legitimize the judicial activity. Meanwhile, we have some fascinating exercises in political/social posturing

Take any of a number of issues: race, reapportionment, rights of the accused, prayer, anti-subversive legislation. What issues did the judiciary raise? What was the reaction? What was done?

Again, I will consider other topics, provided you justify them with some measure of -- what was it? Originality?

I will be happy to entertain you with my own cosmic views of what U.S. history since 1945 is all about -- the first being is that we really must start thinking more in global dimensions, and not just for "foreign policy." But for your own enlightenment, I suggest you scan any of a number of textbooks in the field. I particularly like the ones by Norman & Emily Rosenberg and by James Gilbert. Fred Siegel has a worthy entries. Others are good, as well.

In addition, I have had the bookstore order Richard Marius, A SHORT GUIDE TO WRITING ABOUT HISTORY (Scott, Foresman). There are numerous such books, but Marius is a superb writer and he has managed to make a rather mechanical subject fairly interesting. Read the book and we will discuss it.

Our schedule will be flexible. For the second week, September 13, you will meet at 10:00 a.m. in the State Historical Society. John Peterson, the documents librarian, will show you around, and Harry Miller will help you with manuscripts. Meet John at the main desk at 10:00 a.m. The following two weeks we will discuss possible topics. We then will schedule meetings for the presentation of our findings.