

**Introduction to the History of the United States****Professor Benjamin Schmidt**[benschmidt.org/US2017](http://benschmidt.org/US2017)Email: [b.schmidt@northeastern.edu](mailto:b.schmidt@northeastern.edu)

Office Hours: Wednesday, 1-3pm 413 Nightingale Hall

**Teaching Assistants****James Robinson** ([robinson.jame@husky.neu.edu](mailto:robinson.jame@husky.neu.edu))**Debra Lavelle** ([lavelle.de@husky.neu.edu](mailto:lavelle.de@husky.neu.edu))**Overview**

An Irishman once defined a nation as “the same people living in the same place.” That may do pretty well for some people in some countries; but it’s never made a lot of sense for the United States of America. For centuries, debates about what America *is*, and who counts as American, have been shaped instead by debates over the countries past. Is America the nation of immigrants? Of frontier settlers? Of democracy and freedom? Of slavery and Jim Crow? If there is a single “American people,” who gets to be part of it?

Studying the history of the United States helps you participate in and advance these concurrent debates about the nation’s past and its future. This course surveys the history of the United States; in each period, we will look at through the various conceptions of the nation that have dominated in its history, and explore the reality of what happened as well as engaging the ever-more vital issues of what’s at stake in how we talk about the past.

By the end of this course, you should be able to articulate your own vision of the history of the United States, and to better uncover its traces in the world you walk through every day.

**Course Goals**

By the end of this course, you will:

1. Be familiar with the major eras and events of American history, and understand how interpretations of those events have changed over time.
2. Improve your ability to interpret a wide variety of primary source materials, from newspaper articles to movies to buildings, by placing them in their original context;
3. Clearly and concisely describe a primary source, and provide your own interpretation of it, and describe why that interpretation might interest others.
4. Improve your ability to place current-day events, texts, images, graphics and maps in their historical context, and vice-versa.

This course is an introductory survey; as such, it aims more than most history courses to ensure that you have a base of *knowledge* as well as some of the basic *skills* you need to think historically and an understanding of the things historians and others who study the past disagree about.

## Requirements

### Course attendance and engaged participation.

You must attend every class having completed all assignments for that day and prepared to discuss them. Working through readings and projects in person is every bit as important as being able to answer questions on a test or write essays.

We will engage with primary source material in the classroom. **These primary sources may appear on the exam.** Your work in digesting them in class will be invaluable in contextualizing them later.

### Readings

#### Primary and Secondary Sources

Each week, there are required readings (or in a few cases, videos or audio files) listed on the syllabus. These give you a chance to see historical themes reflected in primary sources, to hone your ability for critical thinking, and to see real-life examples of how historians interpret and argue about the past.

You must do these readings **by the day they are listed on in the syllabus**: they may be the prompts for discussion or pop quizzes on that day in class. Tests will include identification excerpts.

Most weeks have about 20 to 60 pages of reading; there are a few longer texts throughout the semester.

### Textbook

This course uses the online textbook *The American Yawp*. The syllabus lists chapters to read. The textbook and lectures in this class are *complementary*, rather than covering the same ground: there is not enough time in the classroom to adequately cover 400 years of American history, and the lectures will focus on a series of progressive themes that help you integrate knowledge and general course themes.

There are a **lot** of details in the textbook. You will not be able to memorize them all, and I don't expect you to. (If you want to memorize loads of facts using flash cards, try taking organic chemistry). We will talk in week 2 about how to read a textbook like this. If you have a deep background in American history (say, a yearlong course in your junior or senior year of high school) you may merely need to skim to refresh your memory and reflect on how the textbook differs from what you were taught. If you know less, this will provide the necessary backbone for the rest of the course. The text will provide you with the basic background and scaffolding on which to grapple with more interesting and complicated questions. There will not be pop quizzes or test IDs about names mentioned once deep in the text; but if you do not know something mentioned in the introduction to the chapters or one of the section titles, that is a sign that your background knowledge on the period may not be up to snuff.

### In-class exercises

We will have a few pre-scheduled exercises (eg., the map quiz in week 3).

We may also periodically begin the class with an unannounced short assignment (pop quiz!) focusing on the day's reading(s); these will be turned in by the end of class. They will be graded leniently. There are no excused absences, but everyone occasionally has a sick day, a huge project, or a missed alarm. To accommodate this, your two lowest grades on these assignments will be dropped before calculating grades.

**Assignments****Exams**

This class will have two midterms and a final. Each of the midterms will occupy a single class session and focus on one of the two class units. The final will include material from all three sections of course. Material covered on the midterm may include materials handed out in class, lectures, readings, or the midterms.

Tests will include identification questions in which you are given a name, image, or textual passage to identify and contextualize, and short essays.

**Writing**

There will be a short-ish writing (opinion) assignment in this course, making an argument for a memorial to a person in a place that you think should be erected. Details will be distributed after the first midterm.

**Grading**

Your grade will come from the following sources:

- Attendance, participation, and in-class responses: 30%
  - Any student missing 5 or more classes will receive a zero for this score.
  - In-class responses may not be made up; if you miss a class with a response, you receive a zero for the day. Your two lowest in-class scores are dropped.
- Written work: 15%
- First Midterm: 15%
- Second Midterm: 15%
- Final: 25%

The end of this syllabus includes a longer description of what sort of work will receive an “A,” a “B,” and so forth.

**Policies****Academic Integrity**

Your instructor and Northeastern University are intolerant of any form of academic dishonesty. Cheating or plagiarism of any form will result in an automatic F for the course, and a referral to the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution. You are expected to have read, and to follow at all times, the University’s [Academic Integrity Policy](#).

**Reasonable Accommodation**

Students with documented learning disabilities are entitled to reasonable accommodation in this class. If you need any such accommodation, please be in touch as early as possible.

**Electronic devices**

Electronic devices are not allowed in this class with the exception above. Using laptops or cell phones to access the Internet distracts you from learning and diminishes the collegiate experience for everyone. Research has shown that even notetaking on a laptop produces inferior learning outcomes to writing out notes by hand (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). Permission to record lectures or discussions or to take notes via laptop will only be granted for the purposes of accommodating students with document disabilities for their personal educational use, and only upon written request.

Please set your phone to silent (not vibrate) before lectures begin. Anyone checking a phone in class may be asked to leave.

**Can I have a grade reviewed?**

If you're unhappy with a grade, please do the following. Wait two days before doing anything. Re-read the assignment instructions. Write down a list of the reasons you are unhappy with the grade, and then a list of reasons you think that grade is given. Then come to see a TA or instructor in their office hours to discuss.

**Schedule**

**NOTE: This schedule is subject to change. Some readings will be added; others may be removed or rescheduled. Please pay attention to the web page and course e-mails. As a rule, unless you have received an e-mail since the last class meeting, the latest version at the web site (or printed from [benschmidt.org/US2017/syllabus.pdf](http://benschmidt.org/US2017/syllabus.pdf)) is the correct one.**

**Topic 1: The Nation and the Land**

For all that America is a "nation of ideas," its patriotic image draws heavily on the land itself: schoolchildren sing about "amber waves of grain," "from sea to shining sea." How has the nation shaped its landscape? How natural is the land itself, and the borders of the nation?

**Wed Sep 06 Introduction**

- No reading.

**Thu Sep 07 The land was ours: Geography and post-contact Indian Life**

- Textbook: 1.1 to 1.2
- Secondary: Start reading Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."

**Mon Sep 11 Settler Colonialism and American Nature**

- Finish Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."

**Wed Sep 13 Moving West**

- Textbook: 2.1 to 2.7; 3.1 to 3.2, 3.3 to 3.6, 4.2 to 4.4

**Topic 2: Self Government**

Political figures as different as Paul Ryan and Barack Obama (used to?) agree that America was fundamentally a “nation of ideas,” as Lincoln put it: “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” What were the *institutions* and *norms* that the first generation of independent Americans thought necessary for the nation to flourish?

**Thu Sep 14 Why leave?**

- Richard Hakluyt, “Reasons for Colonization,” (1585)
- John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” (1620)
- J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, “What is an American?” (1782)

**Mon Sep 18 The radical revolution**

**Map Quiz** (Note: Textbook readings listed on Monday this week). - Textbook: 5.1-5.7, 6.1-6.10

**Wed Sep 20 The constitutional republic**

- Declaration of Independence (not on Blackboard, but you can find this).
- Federalist Papers, Numbers 10, 14, 51
- Contemporary echoes: Jill Lepore, “The Constitution and its worshippers”

**Thu Sep 21 The Early Republic**

- Washington Irving, “Rip Van Winkle” (1820)
- Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, selections
- Thomas Jefferson, “The Agrarian Ideal” (1787)

**Mon Sep 25 Jacksonian Politics****Topic 3: Slavery: The American Institution**

Of all America’s evils, the legacy of slavery is the one with the strongest present strain, and the one that cuts most directly against both its self-image and the reputation of its founders. How did American slavery work? Is it possible to imagine an America without slavery? What needs to be done about slavery’s legacy today?

**Wed Sep 27: American Slavery as it was.=**

- Textbook: 7 to 11 (Of all weeks, if you know *nothing* this is the most skimmable; don’t worry too much about the ins and outs of political machinations not covered in class over the next week.)

**Thu Sep 28: The politics of compromise**

- William Lloyd Garrison Introduces The Liberator, 1831
- William Lloyd Garrison On the Constitution and the Union (1832)
- Reading: Shackles and Dollars: Historians and economists clash over slavery (Chronicle of Higher Education, December 8, 2016)

**Mon Oct 02: The politics of radicalism**

- Reading: Autobiography of Frederick Douglass (Note: this is long!)

**Wed Oct 04: The Civil War, 1861-1865**

- Textbook: 12 to 15

**Thu Oct 05 The Civil War, 1866-2017**

The Freedman's Bank The Memory of the War

- Read: David Blight on Memorial Day
- Read: Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address

**Mon Oct 09 – No class, Columbus day****Wed Oct 11 First midterm (Previous 13 lectures and readings)****Topic 4: The Empire of Capital**

To much of the world, America isn't unique for its freedom; it's distinguished by its state as the economic powerhouse of the world. Why did America grow so furiously? How rich can we get?

**Thu Oct 12 Steel rails**

- William Graham Sumner, "What Social Classes owe to each other"
- Andrew Carnegie, "The Gospel of Wealth"
- (Contemporary echoes: how powerful should Silicon Valley get) [https://www.buzzfeed.com/bensmith/theres-blood-in-the-water-in-silicon-valley?utm\\_term=.tqgDlb8gr#.uebvVg7yJ](https://www.buzzfeed.com/bensmith/theres-blood-in-the-water-in-silicon-valley?utm_term=.tqgDlb8gr#.uebvVg7yJ))

**Mon Oct 16 The Labor Crisis**

- "Preamble to the Constitution of the Knights of Labor" (1878)

**Wed Oct 18 The Farmer is the man who feeds them all**

- (Moved from Monday to Wed) The "Cross of Gold" Speech.
- (Moved from Monday to Wed) Hamlin Garland, "Under the Lion's Paw"
- Textbook: 16-17, 20.

**Thu Oct 19 Reconstitution**

- Roosevelt on the New Nationalism

**Mon Oct 23 Strangers in the Land**

- Wilson, “Monopoly or Opportunity,” from *The New Freedom*, 1912.

**Topic 5: The Melting Pot****Wed Oct 25 Immigrants and cities****Chronology Quiz** (List to be distributed)

Textbook: 18

**Thu Oct 26 The Strange Career of Jim Crow**

(heavier reading day)

- DuBois *The Souls of Black Folk*.
- Read Introduction, the Forethought, and chapters
  - VI (Of the training of black men)
  - VII (Of the black belt)
  - VIII (Of the quest of the Golden Fleece)
  - IX (Of the Sons of Master and Man)
  - XIII (Of the coming of John)
  - The Afterthought.

**Mon Oct 30 Three borders, three approaches.**

- Randolph Bourne, *Trans-national America*

**Topic 6: The Leader of the Free World****Wed Nov 01 The American Empire**

Textbook: 19, 21, 22

**Thu Nov 02 The Consumer Society and the Great Depression**

- Studs Terkel, *Hard Times*

**Mon Nov 06 The New Deal**

- Berle on the New Deal
- Listen online: FDR's Madison Square Garden speech, 1936

**Wed Nov 08 The Good War**

- Textbook: 23, 24

**Thu Nov 09 Second Midterm (Previous 12 Lectures and readings)****Mon Nov 13 The Nation of Suburbs**

- Lizbeth Cohen, "From Town Center to Shopping Center."
- Ruth Schwartz Cohan, *More Work for Mother*, intro and chapter 4. (Optional: will not appear on the Final)

**Wed Nov 15 The Cold War**

- Textbook: 25 to 27

**Thu Nov 16 The Movement**

- King, Letter from Birmingham Jail

**Mon Nov 20 From Counterculture to Cyberculture**

- (Hayden et al), Port Huron Statement (1961)
- Steve Jobs, Commencement address (2005)
- Whole Earth Catalog, Excerpts (Skim this to get an idea of what the catalog was like.

**Wed Nov 22 & Thu Nov 23 – Thanksgiving Break**

While you're on the boat home, knock off textbook: 28

**Topic 7: The Age of Fracture**

If the period of American ascendance after the war consolidated its identity, it's easy to see the history of the country since 1989 as a coming apart. What happened to bipartisanship? Do more Americans think the country is on the wrong track? Can you find the silver lining?

**Mon Nov 27 Feminist Waves**

- Casey Hayden and Mary King, "Sex and Caste: A kind of memo"
- Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Excerpt and letters
- Phyllis Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman*, Excerpt.

**Wed Nov 29 Nixonland or the Age of Reagan?**

Textbook: 29

**Thu Nov 30 Freedom from what?**

- Barbrook and Cameron, "The Californian Ideology"
- Milton Friedman, "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits" (1970)

**Memorial Essay due Friday December 1**



**Mon Dec 04 Terror and Collapse****Wed Dec 06 What's next?**

- George Packer, *The Unwinding: an Inner History of the New America*, selections (on Tampa).

**Final Exam Thursday 12/14**

1:00 pm-3:00 pm KN 010

Cumulative. Roughly half the material will come from the last third of the course (which wasn't covered under a midterm); and half will come from the first two-thirds.

**Acknowledgements**

HIST 1130 was taught last year by Gretchen Heefner; this syllabus incorporates readings and language from her iterations. Other ideas and readings for this syllabus are taken from the courses of Rebecca Rix, Kevin Kruse, Jon Levy, Victoria Cain, and Dael Norwood.

Some language on electronic devices in classes is from <http://ctl.yale.edu/Using-Electronic-Devices-in-Class>. Thanks also to Andrew Goldstone for his syllabus template.

## Grading guidelines

**Written Work** An **A** or **A-** thesis, paper, or exam is one that is good enough to be read aloud in a class. It is clearly written and well-organized. It demonstrates that the writer has conducted a close and critical reading of texts, grappled with the issues raised in the course, synthesized the readings, discussions, and lectures, and formulated a perceptive, compelling, independent argument. The argument shows intellectual originality and creativity, is sensitive to historical context, is supported by a well-chosen variety of specific examples, and, in the case of a research paper, is built on a critical reading of primary material.

A **B+** or **B** thesis, paper, or exam demonstrates many aspects of A-level work but falls short of it in either the organization and clarity of its writing, the formulation and presentation of its argument, or the quality of research. Some papers or exams in this category are solid works containing flashes of insight into many of the issues raised in the course. Others give evidence of independent thought, but the argument is not presented clearly or convincingly.

A **B-** thesis, paper, or exam demonstrates a command of course or research material and understanding of historical context but provides a less than thorough defense of the writer's independent argument because of weaknesses in writing, argument, organization, or use of evidence.

A **C+**, **C**, or **C-** thesis, paper, or exam offers little more than a mere a summary of ideas and information covered in the course, is insensitive to historical context, does not respond to the assignment adequately, suffers from frequent factual errors, unclear writing, poor organization, or inadequate primary research, or presents some combination of these problems.

Whereas the grading standards for written work between A and C- are concerned with the presentation of argument and evidence, a paper or exam that belongs to the D or F categories demonstrates inadequate command of course material.

A **D** thesis, paper, or exam demonstrates serious deficiencies or severe flaws in the student's command of course or research material.

An **F** thesis, paper, or exam demonstrates no competence in the course or research materials. It indicates a student's neglect or lack of effort in the course.

**Discussions and Seminars** A student who receives an **A** for participation in discussion in discussions or seminars typically comes to every class with questions about the readings in mind. An "A" discussant engages others about ideas, respects the opinions of others, and consistently elevates the level of discussion.

A student who receives a **B** for participation in discussion in discussions or seminars typically does not always come to class with questions about the readings in mind. A "B" discussant waits passively for others to raise interesting issues. Some discussants in this category, while courteous and articulate, do not adequately listen to other participants or relate their comments to the direction of the conversation.

A student who receives a **C** for discussion in discussions or seminars attends regularly but typically is an infrequent or unwilling participant in discussion.

A student who fails to attend discussions or seminars regularly and adequately prepared for discussion risks the grade of **D** or **F**.

–Taken from [the department of history at Princeton University](#).

**Full Citations**

DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co, 1903.