

History 615: *The Personal Presidency*

Wednesdays 7:20-10:00 p.m.

Founders Hall, Room 308, Arlington Campus

This course examines the evolution of the American presidency, an office widely thought of as the most powerful on earth. It might be more accurately described as one of the most personal and dynamic. As its title suggests, the course addresses the ways in which individual leaders have put their stamp on the presidency. We will not neglect institutional changes. For example, we'll examine the evolving role of mass media, and how the bully pulpit made famous by Theodore Roosevelt has struggled for relevance in the world of YouTube and Twitter.

The course may differ from others you have taken at the graduate level. To begin with, there is the *Reading List*. As you'll readily note, it consists primarily of biographical and historical works aimed at a non-academic audience. *These are not to be confused with textbooks*. Rather, they are meant to inform class discussion, stimulate your thinking, and demonstrate that scholarly rigor and popular accessibility are not mutually exclusive – quite the contrary. Broadly speaking, the assigned reading stresses “real world” experience over classroom theory – which accounts for the inclusion of White House memoirs by David Gergen and George W. Bush, as well as Robert Schlesinger's definitive work on White House speechwriters. *The American Presidency*, edited by Alan Brinkley, will be of special interest as you prepare your final research paper (of which more later).

In the course of our meetings, I look forward to lively discussions reflecting your own ideas, theories, and conclusions about presidential leadership. This is a subject which adheres to no single model, if only because it mirrors the character, experience, temperament, and political talents of each chief executive within the context of his times.

Course requirements include 1) class attendance and appropriate contributions to the dialogue there 2) one 10-12 page paper, which can be either a book review or an examination of a particular

presidential decision, and its implications for those who follow 3) a mid-term examination in which you can choose from several questions, to be answered in essay form 4) a final research paper, of 20-25 pages, that will develop your own ideas of what contributes to presidential success – and failure - drawing on the figures covered in class, and supplemented by individual research (starting with the aforementioned *The American Presidency*).

Grading: Course grades will be based on these elements: 1) 25% on class participation 2) 20% on first paper 3) 20% on mid-term examination 4) 35% on final research paper.

January 25: *Defining an Office.* George Washington breathes life into the presidency, establishing precedent with virtually every decision he takes – especially in his embrace of the Hamiltonian economic program and his hands-off approach to Europe’s murderous quarrels.

Readings: Richard Norton Smith, *Patriarch*, pp xiii-297.

February 1: *Less is More.* Jefferson remakes the presidency, at least in its externals, even as he exercises a personal authority (purchasing Louisiana, embargoing U.S. trade with hostile European powers) that is breathtakingly at odds with his small government philosophy. Jackson personalizes presidential power as never before, making war on the Second Bank of the United States, and threatening it to rebellious South Carolina.

Readings: Noble Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, pp 238-320; Jon Meacham, *American Lion*, pp 52-279; (optional 3-51).

February 8: *Commander-in-Chief.* Perhaps the most skillful politician ever to occupy the office, Lincoln pushes its powers to the limit under the wartime “doctrine of necessity.” In the process he creates precedents that will be used, and abused, by subsequent presidents in time of war and national emergency.

Readings: James McPherson, *Tried By War* (entire volume).

February 15: *Empire Builders.* William McKinley, traditionally overshadowed by his flamboyant successor, Theodore Roosevelt, is here presented as the first truly “modern president,” father of the American imperial enterprise. TR the

Trustbuster takes on JP Morgan, inserts himself into a dispute between coalminers and their employers, and encourages a Panamanian revolution in pursuit of his cherished “path between the seas.”

Readings: Lewis Gould, *McKinley and the Spanish-American War* (entire volume); Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex*, pp 70-338.

February 22: *The Pitiless Light of Publicity*. Woodrow Wilson employs his oratorical gifts, along with his professorial knowledge of American government, to secure a host of first term legislative triumphs. The same skills help to make him an inspiring war leader – and a failure at postwar negotiations over the map of Europe and a peacekeeping League of Nations.

Readings: H.W. Brands, *Woodrow Wilson*, (entire volume).

February 29: *The Age of Roosevelt*. Spurred by the twin crises of economic depression and a global war, FDR stages a (mostly) peaceful revolution in the relationship between the average American and his government. At the same time, Roosevelt’s personal magnetism, public advocacy, and his sheer guile all combine to make him arguably the most important president of the twentieth century.

Readings: H.W. Brands, *Traitor to His Class*, pp 248-635.

March 7: *The Cold Warrior*. Harry Truman presides over the end of World War II and the start of the Cold War. The presidency is reorganized as a national security state takes shape, and a policy of Communist containment finds expression in the Marshall Plan, NATO, and Korea.

Readings: James Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, pp 82-242.

Mid-term exam (essay format, multiple choice)

March 21: *Appearances Can Be Deceiving*. Dwight Eisenhower brings a very different approach to the presidency. Insisting that his job is “to persuade, not publicize,” he practices a “hidden hand” style of leadership that avoids Rooseveltian dramatics while inviting contemporary criticism for alleged complacency. It is to “get America moving again” that voters in 1960 turn to the charismatic John F. Kennedy, whose relatively brief presidency is notable for his personal evolution on the era’s two overriding issues: U.S.-Soviet relations, and civil rights for black Americans.

Readings: Fred Greenstein, *The Hidden Hand Presidency*, pp 57-99; 155-248; Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, pp 407-441; Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy*, pp 65-106, 349-425, 507-532.

March 28: *Tumultuous Decade*. Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon – arguably two of the most polarizing figures ever to occupy the White House – struggle with cultural as well as political forces unleashed in the 1960s; the Vietnam War; and the abuse of power that went by the general name of Watergate.

Readings: Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, pp 524-790; David Gergen, *Eyewitness to Power*, pp 33-104.

April 4: *The Bully Pulpit*. We take a break from chronology to examine in depth how modern presidents have used their office, and the mass media, in seeking support from Congress and the country. A former White House speechwriter is tentatively scheduled to describe the process of presidential persuasion from his own, highly personal vantage point.

Readings: Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts*, pp 1-229; 456-94.

April 11: *Reagan’s Revolution*. A new era of conservatism comes to dominate American politics, embodied by a former movie star turned California governor, who emulates FDR in his personal detachment, and in his paradoxical ability to inspire passionate support.

Readings: Gergen, *Eyewitness to Power*, pp 151-247; Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, pp 127-287.

April 18: *The Unlikely Polarizer*. Bill Clinton was a moderate Democrat, whose balanced budgets and embrace of welfare reform might well have recommended him to voters across the spectrum. Yet his presidency was marked by controversy from the start – revealing perhaps more about the modern media than Clinton himself.

Readings: Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, pp 323-407; Gergen, *Eyewitness to Power*, pp 251-342.

April 25: *The Decider-in-Chief*. George W. Bush was, if anything, an even more divisive figure than his predecessor. Is *every* president in the 24/7 news cycle-cable TV-internet universe destined for diminishment? We examine Bush's rationale for the decisions he made, as well as their still-unfolding consequences.

Readings: George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, pp 65-271; 308-32; 355-94; 439-72.

May 2: *Where Do We Go From Here?* A thematic review of what we have learned, coupled with discussion of the current presidency, and its future challenges. This is also the final date for submitting a 20-25 page research paper.