

History 615: *The Personal Presidency*

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

Founders Hall, Room 466, Arlington Campus

This course examines 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, reflecting as in a mirror the character, experience, temperament, and political talents of each chief executive within the context of his times. As its title suggests, the course addresses the ways in which individual leaders have put their stamp on the office. We will not neglect institutional changes - for example, the 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 that combine scholarly rigor and popular accessibility. These, in turn, will provide the basis for lively discussions reflecting your own thoughts about presidential leadership and its evolution over more than two centuries. Why are a Jackson or Polk considered "near-great" leaders for much of the twentieth century, only to more recently fall in academic as well as popular esteem? What factors contribute to an upward revision in U.S. Grant's presidential reputation after a century of scholarly scorn?

Course requirements include 1) class attendance and appropriate contributions to the dialogue there 2) one 10-12 page paper, examining a particular presidential decision, and its long range implications 3) a final research paper, of 20-25 pages, on a subject of your choosing (alternatively you might want to develop more fully your own ideas of what contributes to presidential success – and failure). In addition, there will be a visit/class session at a local presidential site.

Grading: Course grades will be based on these elements: 1) 35% on class participation 2) 25% on first paper 3) 40% on final research paper.

Week One

August 27: *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; Brinkley, pp 1-32.

Week Two

September 3: Labor Day Holiday – no class

Week Three

September 10: *Less is More*. Jefferson remakes the presidency, 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. His continuing influence defines his party and shapes national politics through the Civil War.

Readings: Noble Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, pp 238-320
Jon Meacham, *American Lion*, pp 52-279; Brinkley, pp 33-138.

Week Four

September 17: *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); Brinkley, pp 152-99.

Week Five

September 24: *Rethinking the Gilded Age*. A fresh examination of the post-Lincoln presidency, with special emphasis on the Grant years – when the warring sections reunited, but the races did not, with consequences that bedevil us to our own time. Special emphasis will be placed on Grant's historical reputation, and what its evolution says about the old – and treacherous – parlor game of Ranking the Presidents.

Readings: Jean Edward Smith, *Grant*, pp 408-605; Brinkley, pp 200-256.

Week Six

October 1: *The Nation's Steward*. Theodore Roosevelt re-imagines the presidential office for himself, imparting a strong dose of moral advocacy to the traditional administrative responsibilities. 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: Edmond Morris, *Theodore Rex*, pp 70-338; Brinkley, pp 251-96.

Week Seven

October 9: *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 – only to desert him at postwar negotiations over the map of Europe and a peacekeeping League of Nations.

Please note: This class will take place at 7:30 p.m. at the Woodrow Wilson House, 2340 S. Street NW, in Washington. Nearest Metro stop is DuPont Circle – a 15 minute walk from Wilson's post-presidential residence, where you will gather in the Wilson's sitting room, before enjoying a special tour of this beautifully preserved historic time.

Readings: H.W. Brands, *Woodrow Wilson*, entire volume; Brinkley, pp 247-313.

Week Eight

October 15: *The Twenties*. Postwar disillusionment provokes an anti-Wilson backlash, inspiring calls for smaller government and less executive domination. A dominant figure throughout the decade is Herbert Hoover, who when confronted with the Great Depression, struggles to adapt to changed circumstances the very ideas that raised him to the presidency in 1928.

Readings: David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, pp 1-30; Brinkley, pp 314-343.

Week Nine

October 22: *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 sheer guile combine to make him arguably the most important president of the twentieth century.

Readings: David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, pp 131-515.

Week Ten

October 29: *Cold Warriors*. 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. Dwight Eisenhower brings a very different approach to the job. Promising “to persuade, not publicize,” he practices a “hidden hand” style of leadership that avoids Rooseveltian dramatics while inviting contemporary criticism for alleged complacency.

Readings: James Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, pp 82-275
Fred Greenstein, *The Hidden Hand Presidency*, pp 57-99; 155-248.

Week Eleven

November 5: *The Liberal Hour*. 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. Lyndon Johnson, arguably one of the most polarizing figures ever to occupy the White House – struggles with cultural as well as political forces unleashed in the Sixties. His Great Society remains hotly debated, as does his conduct of the Vietnam War.

Readings: Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, pp 407-441 (optional); Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy*, pp 65-106, 349-425, 507-532; Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, pp 524-709.

Week Twelve

November 12: *Conservative Comeback*. After the tumultuous, transforming 1960’s a conservative counter-reformation takes hold, first expressed with the triumph of Richard Nixon and his “Silent Majority in 1968; and gaining force with Ronald Reagan’s two terms. The old consensus about the role of the federal government starts to unravel; overseas, the Cold War ends, not with a bang, but with a whimper.

Readings: Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, pp 710-790 (optional)
David Gergen, *Eyewitness to Power*, pp 33-104; 151-247
Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan, 1974-2008*, pp 127-287.

Week Thirteen

November 19: *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.

Week Fourteen

December 3: *Lessons of Leadership*. The Clinton Years – when a centrist Democrat nevertheless became a highly polarizing figure, anticipating in many ways the red/blue divisions that define our permanently gridlocked politics of today. An opportunity as well to assess some conclusions reached concerning presidential leadership. This is also the due date for the final research paper.

Readings: Gergen, pp 251-352; Wilentz, pp 323-407.

Reading List for History 615 – The Personal Presidency

1. Richard Norton Smith, *Patriarch: George Washington and the New American Nation*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1997, (paperback edition).
2. Alan Brinkley and Davis Dyer, editors, *The American Presidency*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 2004 (paperback edition)
3. Noble E. Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, Louisiana State University Press, 1987 (paperback edition).
4. Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House*, Random House, New York 2009 (paperback edition)
5. James McPherson, *Tried By War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief*, Penguin, New York, 2009 (paperback edition).
6. Jean Edward Smith, *Grant*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2001 (paperback edition).
7. Edmond Morris, *Theodore Rex*, Modern Library Paperback, New York, 2002. Random House, (paperback edition).
8. H. W. Brands, *Woodrow Wilson*, Times Books, New York, 2008.
9. David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1996 (paperback edition).
10. James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations, America 1945-74*, Oxford Press, New York 1996 (paperback edition).
11. Fred L. Greenstein, *The Hidden Hand Presidency, Eisenhower as Leader*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1994 (paperback edition).
12. Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy*, Profile of Power, Simon and Schuster, (Touchstone paperback edition) New York, 1994.
13. David Gergen, *Eyewitness to Power*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2000 (paperback edition).
14. Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan, 1974-2008*, Harper Collins, New York, 2008.
15. Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2008 (paperback edition).