U.S. HISTORY SINCE 1877:
FROM RECONSTRUCTION TO OBAMA

Oberlin College History 104
Spring 2015

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Tu/Th 9 30 to 10 50 a.m.
Office Hours: Rice 305, Tu/Th 11 to 12 30 and by appointment

In the century and a half from the end of Reconstruction to the Obama presidency, American politics, society, and culture have undergone massive changes. In 1877 the United States did not yet embrace fifty states. The country’s population was 50 million; today it is more than 310 million. Half the population made its living through agriculture; today two percent do so. The population was concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest, where big industrial cities, fueled by waves of immigration, grew in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Women could not vote in 1877, and African Americans were increasingly disfranchised in Jim Crow America. Although sometimes considered “the dangerous nation” since its birth, the United States in 1877 played a minimal role in world affairs; today its might spans the globe, and every international crisis has a Washington dimension. A nation that rode on rails, read by lamplight, and communicated by letter has become a nation linked to the globe and the galaxy by air, electricity, and the instantaneous internet. Conventional family relations, gender roles, and sexual norms have given way to understandings and practices which have upended deep seated assumptions about personality and identity, how those are to be enacted, and the rights associated with them.

How have these changes come about? How do we make sense of them? This course attempts to explain some of the major trends of the last 150 years. Such a vast and complex subject requires selectivity. All these play out against a backdrop of one of the most enduring American questions: What does American freedom mean? Eric Foner’s text organizes American history around this very question. Although widely invoked, the idea of freedom has no fixed point. The idea of freedom is as varied as that apotheosized but not defined in the Declaration of Independence (written by someone who owned slaves and did not
imagine women voting) and today's groping for the meaning of freedom by
groups as diverse as the Tea Party, women's rights advocates, LGBT
proponents, religious conservatives, and economic libertarians. The multiple
ways in which ideas of freedom are employed testifies to freedom's enduring
appeal and its ongoing contestation and reassessment.

Consistent with the idea of freedom, my goal is that each of you in the class will
develop your own interpretation of American history since 1877 and craft an
individual idea of freedom, anchored in history, that is applicable to today's world.

Most classes will be a mixture of lecture and discussion. Sessions on the
Triangle shirtwaist fire and the African American experience will be solely
discussion. While most of our source material is written and oral, we will also
pay attention to visual evidence, focusing on American movies and the work of
visual artists represented in Oberlin's treasure, the Allen Memorial Art Museum.

Informed, engaged discussion is essential to learning in this class. You should
expect disagreement, which is critical to clarifying interpretations and honing
arguments. Discussion needs to be carried out in a respectful, civil manner.
Respect for others' opinions necessarily assumes disagreement.

Because history invites us to participate in the lives of those who have gone
before us and experience the lives of people who occupied different positions in
a different society, I hope that by imaginative participation in the lives of our
forbears students will gain some regard for the multifaceted complexity and
wonder of human existence. History often seems a parade of abstractions, but it
is lived by real people in complex ordinary circumstances. People become
actors in the great dramas of history even as they pursue their quotidian
existence.

There are four writing assignments, each counting 25 percent of the final grade.

The first, due on March 3, is a take-home essay of approximately six pages on
the Triangle shirtwaist fire, drawing on the essay and sources in Joanne
Argersinger's book. I will give you prompts.

The second, due on March 19, is a take-home essay exam on material covered
in the first part of the course. I will give you essay questions. Midterm grades
will be based on all work through March 19.

The third, due at class time on April 14, is a take-home essay on the African
American experience, based on your reading of Moody, Angelou, or Ellison. If
you read Ellison with comprehension, I'll raise your semester grade by one-third
of a level (e.g., from B+ to A-).
The fourth, due at 4 p.m. on May 14, is a take-home final essay in which you assess certain major themes in the course, with particular emphasis on material covered since spring break. I'll give you prompts. (This is when the final exam is scheduled.)

Participation in class discussion will be helpful in resolving borderline grades. Please talk!

*All work in the class is governed by the Oberlin College honor code. Please review it carefully. Sign each assignment to indicate that you have observed the code. Suspected violations of the code will be referred to the Honor Committee.*

All reasonable accommodation will be extended to students with documented disabilities. Please confer with me if you are situated in this way.

**Required Texts**

Argersinger, Joanne.  *THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FIRE.*

Foner, Eric.  *GIVE ME LIBERTY!*

Jacobs, Meg and Julian Zelizer.  *CONSERVATIVES IN POWER.*

One of the following:

Angelou, Maya.  *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS.*

Ellison, Ralph.  *INVISIBLE MAN.* (See note above.)

Moody, Anne.  *COMING OF AGE IN MISSISSIPPI.*

1.28.15
Class Schedule History 104 Spring 2015

F3  Living, Working, Dying: Americans in 1880  
Foner, chap. 16

F5  Booming/Gilding/Gifting/Privatizing  
American growth, inequality, and philanthropy  
Foner, chap. 16

F10 Peopling the United States:  
Immigration, its attractions, and its discontents  
Foner, chap. 17

F12 Segregating: The nadir of post-Civil War race relations  
Foner, chaps. 17 & 18

F17 Reforming, I: Populists and Progressives

F19 Working, Dying, Reforming: The Triangle shirtwaist fire  
Argersinger, all

F24 Expanding:  
From the halls of Montezuma to the mirrors of Versailles  
Foner, chap. 19

F26 Consuming: Mass consumption, mass entertainment  
Foner, chap. 20

M3  Visualizing: Hollywood’s golden era

M5  Essay on the Triangle shirtwaist fire due at classtime

M5  No class

M10  Collapsing: The Great Depression  
Reforming, II: The New Deal  
Foner, chap. 21
M12 Winning: World War II
Foner, chap. 22

M17 Icing: The Cold War, from Yalta to Yalu
Foner, chap. 23
John Lewis Gaddis, The Cold War, chap. 1
Melvyn Leffler, “National Security and US Foreign Policy,” in Origins Of the Cold War, 15-41

M19 No class -- Take home exam due at 1 p.m.

M24, 26 No class -- Spring Break

M31 Integrating: African American liberation
Foner, chap. 25

A2 Living: African American lives
Angelou, Ellison, or Moody, all

A7 Visualizing: visit to AMAM

A9 Boring: 1950s politics
Reforming, III: The Great Society
Foner, chaps. 24-25

A14 Take home essay due at class time

A14 Containing: The American war in Vietnam
Foner, chap. 25

A16 Liberating: The sixties -- coming together, coming apart
Foner, chap. 25

A21 Loving, I: Women’s liberation

A23 Loving, II: LGBT liberation

A28 Reversing: Reagan and the Right against the Great Society
Foner, chap. 26
Jacobs and Zelizer, all

A30  De-icing: The end of the Cold War

M5   Diversifying: From Clinton to Obama

M7   Living, Working, Dying, II: Americans in 2015
      Freeing: the course of freedom from 1877 to 2015
      Foner, chap. 28

M14  Take home final essay due at 4 p.m.

1.28.15