ROOSEVELT TO REAGAN

Clayton Koppes
Professor of History
Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, two of America’s most influential presidents, bookend a distinctive period in United States history. Grappling with an unprecedented economic crisis, Roosevelt through his New Deal reshaped the role of government, introducing rudiments of a welfare state. He also prosecuted the United States’ greatest war, which left his country poised at the pinnacle of world power but existentially threatened as never before. In tandem with his policies, FDR generated a political realignment that endured until the late 1960s, when Lyndon Johnson, seeking to outdo his political hero, saw his presidency come to grief on the shoals of the Great Society and the American war in Vietnam. The history of this period is written not only from the Oval Office, but from the street-wise insurgencies of African Americans, women, and gays and lesbians who demanded rights the state had not previously extended – and thereby created new political constituencies and altered old ones.

If economic crisis and assertions of rights stimulated governmental responses, so too the shifting parameters of national security shaped and were shaped by American politics. The Cold War served as constraint and goad in domestic politics and, by the same token, domestic politics shaped the conduct of foreign affairs.

When liberalism and détente seemed to reach a crisis in the late 1970s, Ronald Reagan seized the moment to advance his alternate vision of the state, even as he invoked Franklin Roosevelt, his erstwhile political hero. Courting the white working class was central to both Roosevelt’s and Reagan’s successes. Reagan also reoriented foreign policy and yet was able to seize a unique moment to collaborate in ending the Cold War – a grand paradox since he had been the personification of the Cold Warrior. When he left office, the United States and the Soviet Union enjoyed happier relations than at any time since Roosevelt’s presidency.

As a counterpoint to the political narrative, the course also assesses changing American culture. We will screen two landmark films -- *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and *The Graduate* (1967).

**Consultation and Special Needs**

Consistent with the Americans for Disabilities Act (itself a significant political statement), I will make all reasonable accommodations. Please confer with me if you have needs in this area.

I’m always happy to meet during office hours. If they aren’t convenient, we’ll schedule at a mutually convenient time.
My office hours are Tu 11 00 to 12 00 and 1 30 to 3 00. I'll announce additional office hours. My office is Rice 305. I'm always available by email.

Discussion

Active, respectful, informed participation is expected in discussion. I anticipate — and welcome — disagreement. Showing respect does not mean dissembling in the face of others’ point of view. Respect often involves expressing disagreement, with sensitivity and civility. It is through disagreement that we grow. Robert Heinlein, the science fiction writer, once said, “I never learned anything from anybody who agreed with me.”

Writing assignments

There are four writing assignments, each of which counts 25 percent of the final grade. Three assignments are essays of approximately six pages on key themes in the class. I’ll give you prompts.

The fourth assignment involves reading a classic novel or play from the 1940s/1950s and writing an essay in which you discuss what the work says about American life and culture at the time. While each work has considerable literary merit, I’ve chosen them primarily for how they capture aspects of American life when they were written. Each is readily available in libraries and in inexpensive paperback editions (they are worth owning). In an essay of approximately eight pages, analyze the work’s theme and what it says about American life in its time period. You may do additional research on the novel or play, but you should be able to write a good essay by relating it to material covered in class. I’d urge you to read the novel or play in conjunction with our coverage of its time period in class. The essay may be turned in at any time. The final deadline for this assignment is class time on Oct 16 (right before fall break). You may choose from the following works:

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939. The saga of the Joads, dusted out in Oklahoma during the Depression, traveling Route 66 to the promised land of California, encountering hostility and death and having a political awakening.

Carson McCullers, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, 1940. Characters in search of love in a Southern town, with attention to race unusual for the time.

Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 1940. Bigger Thomas, trying to negotiate between black and white worlds, caught up in forces beyond his control on South Side Chicago.

James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*, 1956, and Gore Vidal, *The City and the Pillar*, 1948. Early gay male novels. (Though set in Paris, where Baldwin chose to live, the European setting of *Giovanni’s Room* also makes a point about America; many American artists have used Europe as a counterpoint to understand the U.S.)


Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, 1944, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1947, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, 1958. Explorations of the inner life, and particularly desire in its multifaceted forms, in three ground breaking plays by the man who may be America’s greatest playwright.


Mary McCarthy, *The Group*, 1963. The intertwined lives of “the group,” seven graduates of Vassar in 1933, one of whom is a lesbian, during the 1930s.

Lorraine Hansbury, *Raisin in the Sun*, 1959. The first play by a black woman to be produced on Broadway. Based on an actual court case involving housing discrimination. (Since reading this one play involves less time than the other novels and plays, you should also do outside research on Hansbury and the play.)

Class discussion will be useful in resolving borderline grades.

The midterm grade will be based on all work through Oct. 16.

*All work in the class is governed by the Oberlin College honor code. Please review it. Suspected violations will be referred to the Honor Committee.*

**Required Texts**


The additional readings listed are on Blackboard and are an integral part of the course.

**CLASS SCHEDULE**

**Sept. 2, 4** THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE NEW DEAL

The United States in 1930  
The Great Depression and Herbert Hoover  
“Fear Itself”

Chap. 1  
Kennedy, prologue and chaps. 1-4  
William E. Leuchtenburg, “Franklin Delano Obama,” chap. 10, and  

**Sept. 4** *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) to be screened at 6:30 p.m. in King 306. The film runs about two hours.

**Sept. 9, 11**

Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Realignment of American Politics  
Franklin and Eleanor: A Unique Partnership  
New Deal Mythology: What It Did – and Didn’t Do  
The New Deal and Race  
Constitutional Crisis and the New Deal Constitutional Revolution

Kennedy, chaps. 5-9  
Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, chap. 5  
Edward Berkowitz and Larry DeWitt, “Social Security from the New Deal to the Great Society: Expanding the Public Domain,” in Brian J. Glenn and Steven M. Teles, eds., *Conservatism and American Political Development* [2009], pp. 53-85  

**Sept. 16**

NEW DEAL ENVIRONMENTALISM
The Dust Bowl: “The Worst Hard Time”
Conservation and Preservation
The Mythos of Dam Building

Kennedy, chaps. 9-12
Donald Worster, Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s [1979], Chap. 1
Siegfried D. Schubert et al., “On the Causes of the 1930s Dust Bowl,” Science, 303 (March 19, 2004), 1855-1859 (recommended)
Clayton Koppes, “Efficiency, Equity, Esthetics,” in Donald Worster. ed., The Ends of the Earth [on New Deal environmentalism]

Excerpts from documentary The Plow That Broke the Plains (1936) to be shown in class.

Sept. 18 1930S CULTURE

The Literature of Protest
Hollywood Gloss and Glamour

Sept. 23, 25 THE U.S. IN WORLD WAR II
From “Isolation” to Super Power
War: Loss, Prosperity, Freedom
War, Propaganda, and the Creation of Myth and Meaning

Wartime documentary Wings for This Man and excerpts from Hollywood feature Tender Comrade (1943) to be shown in class

Kennedy, chaps. 13-15 (Blackboard and hard copy reserve)
Koppes and Black, Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies [1987], chap. 4

Sept. 25 – ESSAY ON NEW DEAL DUE AT CLASS TIME

Sept. 30 THE COLD WAR: FROM YALTA TO THE YALU

Origins of the Cold War: The Clash of Interpretations
The Militarization of the Cold War
Culture and the Cold War
John Gaddis, *The Cold War*, chap. 1
Melvyn Leffler, “What Do We Now Know?” *American Historical Review*
Sheila Miyoshi Jaeger, *Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea* [2013] Chap. 3
Lawrence, pp. 1-86

Recommended:
Tim Scholl, essay on Oberlin College choir tour of USSR, 1964

**Oct. 2 POSTWAR**

**Liberalism in a New Key**
**The Rise of the National Security State**
**The Affluent Society / The Age of Anxiety**
**Red Scare/Lavender Scare**
**The New Language of Sex**

Katznelson, *Fear Itself,* epilogue
Jonathan Bell, *The Liberal State on Trial: The Cold War and American Politics in the Truman Years* [2004], pp. xiii-xix
Rosen, part 1
Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* [1953], Pp. 56-68 and intro [1967]

On gays and lesbians at midcentury; read posted excerpts from one of the following:
David Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*
Margot Canaday, *The Straight State*
Michael Sherry, *Gay Artists in Midcentury America*

**Oct. 7 KENNEDY AND JOHNSON**

John F. Kennedy: *New Frontiers and Old Realities*
Kennedy and Camelot: *Personality, Style, Myth*
Kennedy and Crisis: *Berlin and Cuba*


LBJ: The Southerner as National Leader
Extending the New Deal: Liberalism’s Triumph and Its Limits
The New Immigration
The Great Divorce: The South Leaves the Democratic Party

Self, prologue and chap. 1
Additional readings to be announced

**Oct. 8 (Wednesday) 4 30 pm**

Guest lecture by Kunal Parker, a legal historian at the University of Miami Law School, on immigration history

**Oct. 9**

Special visit and discussion with Kunal Parker about immigration history

**Oct. 14, 16 THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FREEDOM MOVEMENT**

*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* [1954]
Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail” [1962]
James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* [1963], 82-end

Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, pages TBA

Recommended:
Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound*
Freeman, *American Empire*, chap. 6 (helpful on early phases of civil rights Movement)

**Oct. 16 Essay on Period Novels Due at Class Time**

**Oct. 21, 23 NO CLASS – FALL BREAK**
Oct. 28, 30  THE AMERICAN WAR IN VIETNAM

Vietnam and the Collapse of Cold War Consensus
Origins of U.S. Commitment
“Stop the Bombing”
Working Class War

Lawrence, chaps. 4-end; review earlier chapters
Self, chap. 2
Jaeger, *Brothers at War*, chap.15 (recommended)

Nov. 4  MIDCENTURY MODERN: *meeting at Allen Memorial Art Museum to view and discuss art related to the course*

Nov. 6, 11  THE SIXTIES

“Like a Spaceship” / The Fifties: Where the Sixties Came From
Sex, Drugs, and Rock ‘n’ Roll
The Counter-Culture and the Challenge to Conventional Authority
Searching in the Debris of Modernity

Self, chap. 7
Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*,
Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland*, pages TBA.

Recommended:
Mark Harris, *Pictures at a Revolution*, [2008], pp. 380-426
Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp*
Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, chap. 1
*Berkeley in the Sixties*, three-part documentary film

Nov. 18  WOMEN’S LIBERATION

Rosen, parts 2 to end; review earlier chapters
Self, chaps. 4-6

**Nov. 18 – Essay on African American freedom movement or Vietnam due at class time**

Nov. 20  *The Graduate* (1967) shown in place of class.

Nov. 25  No Class
Dec. 2 LGBT LIBERATION

The Rights Revolution, continued: Gay and Lesbian Insurgency
AIDS: Hostility, Indifference, Organizing
From Sexual Rebels to Gay Marriage

Self, chap. 8
Christopher Capozzola, “A Very American Epidemic: Memory
Politics and Identity Politics in the AIDS Memorial Quilt, 1985-
1993,” in Van Gosse and Richard Moser, eds., The World the 60s
Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America [2003], pp. 219-241
George Chauncey, Why Marriage, chaps. 1 and 2 (recommended)

Dec. 4, 9 THE REAGAN REVOLUTION

The Seventies and the Collapse of the Liberal Paradigm
Reagan and the Right Against the Great Society and the Sixties
Rise of the Religious Right
Not With a Bang or a Whimper: The Cold War Ends

Self, chaps. 9-end
Godfrey Hodgson, The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the
Conservative Ascendancy in America [1996], pp. 268-276
Leuchtenburg, “Ronald Reagan,” in In the Shadow of FDR, pp. 225-235
Van Gosse, “Postmodern America: A New Democratic Order in the
Second Gilded Age,” in Van Gosse and Richard Mosers, eds.,
The World the 60s Made [2003], pp. 1-15

Recommended:
Working Class [2010], pp. 1-20, 313-369
Connie Schultz, Life Happens and other unavoidable truths [2005],
Chap. 5, “Blue Collar Blues”
Owen Jones, Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class [2011]

Dec. 11 Conclusion: Economic (In)security, Rights, War, and the State from
Roosevelt to Reagan

Leuchtenburg, “Waiting for Franklin D.,” chap. 8, in In the Shadow
of FDR (recommended)

FINAL ESSAY DUE AT 11 A.M DEC. 19 (THE TIME SCHEDULED FOR THE FINAL EXAM)