

Teacher: Patrick Culhane

Course: Modern American History

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WELCOME!

In this course you will DO history, not merely take a history class. This means no matter your level of interest or knowledge you will all immerse yourself in the activities of the historian. You will become comfortable with argument and interpretation, asking 'so what?' of anything and everything we do, and beginning to think just as historians do. I promise you that if you attend and participate in class regularly and commit to do all of the work at my level of expectations then you will receive a good grade. My expectations for you are high, and you should have equally high expectations of me.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is a survey of the United States from roughly the end of the nineteenth century to the present. The most difficult challenge in covering such a large breadth of time is the balance between performing deep investigations of the past while maintaining a perspective on the entire section of time. To create this balance we will attempt to look at specific events and ideas within each unit that epitomize the time period under investigation. In this manner we will be able to see the entire forest while studying individual trees.

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|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1) Introduction & Review: Introduction to Historical Thinking | |
| 2) Industrialization | (1865-1914) |
| 3) <i>Emergence as a World Power</i> | |
| • <i>Spanish-American War</i> | (1898-1914) |
| • <i>World War I</i> | (1914-1919) |
| 4) The Roaring Twenties & Great Depression | (1905-1939) |
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| 5) <i>World War II</i> | (1939-1945) |
| 6) Post-War America | (1945-Present) |
| • Conformity & Conservatism | (1945-1965) |
| • Criticism & Counterculture | (1965-1980) |
| • Conservative Revolution | (1980-Present) |
| 7) <i>The Cold War</i> | (1945-1989) |
| 8) <i>A New World Order?</i> | (Present) |

GOALS of this COURSE:

1. **Develop resourceful critical thinking skills**—The primary goal of this course is to make you a more resourceful thinker with sophisticated critical thinking skills such as evaluating interpretations, reasoning to a conclusion, and making logical decisions.
2. **Develop your understanding of historical thinking skills**—Historians think about the past differently than most people. We will focus on six different skills that allow historians to think about history in a sophisticated way: historical significance, evidence, change & continuity, cause & effect, historical perspectives, and historical empathy.
3. **Expose you to broad currents in American History**—This is a survey course, which means we cover a great deal of material quickly. Because we try to look with considerable depth as well we cannot possibly learn

everything about American History between from the late nineteenth century to the present. We will instead focus on the big ideas and movements.

What this course is NOT about:

- Teaching you the ‘truth’ or ‘what really happened’—Of course we will do our best to accurately examine historical evidence. However, the study of history is intrinsically subjective with many interpretations & perspectives. The idea of ‘truth’ in history is problematic. Our focus will be on learning to evaluate interpretations.
- Teaching you how great America is—Although there is much to be proud of in American history, it is not a goal of this course to instill in you a sense of civic pride. A critical thinker will come to his/her conclusions on their own terms.
- Teaching you how evil America is—Accordingly, there are also shameful aspects of American history, it is not my job to inculcate in you a disgust of America. Again, a critical thinker will come to his/her own conclusions.

THEMES & VALUES:

Trying to find unity & continuity in such a vast curriculum is challenging. To help bind our wide-ranging curriculum, we will be following some common skills & values. Below are the skills & values that we will follow.

Historical Thinking Skills:

- *Historical Significance*: No person or book can describe everything that happened in the past. Historical significance asks the historian to determine what is worth remembering and why. Some events, like the bombing of Pearl Harbor seem to have obvious significance, while others, such as the life of an individual slave or my own grandparents are more oblique.
- *Evidence*: The remnants of history--letters, documents, drawings, newspapers--are pieces of gold to historians. Historians learn to read these sources for evidence, not simply for information. A phone book is read for information, a boot-print outside a murder scene is read for evidence.
- *Change & Continuity*: History is often misunderstood as a list of events on a timeline. Once a student recognizes that many things were happening simultaneously in the past, it unlocks a new door of understanding. The pace and degree of change in history is not uniform or one-directional.
- *Cause & Effect*: A budding historian’s questions about an event usually revolve around ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions; this sets the student on the path of cause and effect. Causation thinking involves a multi-layered mix of long and short term ideologies, institutions, and conditions that lead to different effects.
- *Historical Perspectives*: “The past is a foreign country” and thus is difficult to understand. This statement by L.P. Hartley sums up the idea of historical perspective. Can we, living in the 21st century, imagine life in 17th century colonial America? Historical perspective means taking the cultural, social, and intellectual settings that shaped others in the past and understanding the gulf that lies between them and us.
- *Historical Empathy*: What responsibilities do historical crimes and sacrifices mean for us today? Does the US government owe reparations to Native groups for the wrongs it committed throughout the nation’s history? This question and others like it, is part of historical empathy, but it also asks us, as historians, to make ethical judgments about historical actors while still trying to understand the universe that they lived in.

Values:

- *Individualism* ←→ Communalism
- *Equality* ←→ Hierarchy
- *Freedom* ←→ Order
- *Democracy* ←→ Authoritarianism
- *Capitalism* ←→ Centralization

TECHNOLOGY

Here at Bedford we are lucky enough to have a 1:1 technology ratio. Technology can be a boon when used properly and can be detrimental when abused. I will make all of my files available through an online database, through my course website, www.bhsculhane.weebly.com however much of the work, including note taking and journaling will be done the old-fashioned way. Handwriting notes and responding to prompts in writing leads to better cognitive results and ultimately my goal is for you to become a more advanced thinker.

GRADING

The categories below breakdown how your grade will be assessed. For further information on grading, please see the separate Grading Procedures handout.

Grading Categories

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|------------------------------|-----|
| ● Effort | 40% |
| ● Historical Thinking Skills | 25% |
| ● Citizenship | 20% |
| ● Historical Knowledge | 15% |

CONTACT INFORMATION

I prefer face-to-face communication above all else. I think that it removes a lot of the ambiguity of emails and can clear up any issues much quicker. Students at this age, barring any unusual circumstance, should always feel comfortable to approach me regarding class dynamics, questions about assignments, or grades. I only check my email once or twice daily, please allow 24 hours to respond. My address is patrick.culhane@bedford.k12.ma.us.

SIGNATURES

By signing below, I certify that I have read this syllabus and understand the expectations for this course.

Student Signature

Parent/Guardian Signature