

History 4396G: Selected Topics in U.S. History
Trump's America
Winter 2027



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Office Hours: **TBD**

Trump's America

Donald Trump's election in 2016 surprised the world—including most U.S. historians. His re-election in 2024 makes it harder to treat his rise as an aberration or a fluke. Trump has now been the dominant figure in American politics and life for over a decade. Those years have brought an exhausting series of shocks and crises: assaults on American institutions and beliefs; reckonings with race, gender, and justice; a global pandemic; and escalating trade wars, culture wars, and actual wars. What is the United States living through? An authoritarian slide towards fascism? A welcome revolt against a neoliberal deep state? Or just history as usual?

This course is not simply a chronological history of the United States since 2016, nor will it focus solely on Donald Trump. Instead, we'll use "Trump's America" as shorthand for the deep-seated currents Trump rode into power and the latent forces he and his followers have unleashed. We'll take a longer view of U.S. history, looking back to the 19th and 20th centuries (and maybe earlier) for lessons and precedents. We'll ask: how can history help us to understand the current moment? And are the traditional narratives of U.S. history adequate to explaining where we are today?

Prerequisite(s): Registration in third year or above, any module.

Learning Outcomes

Students in History 4396G will:

- collaborate in a term-long investigation of United States history
- situate contemporary issues in historical context, identifying and assessing the present-day relevance of the history covered in this course
- read selected secondary source works and engage that literature in both class discussion and written work
- locate, interpret, and evaluate primary sources, identifying their meaning and demonstrating awareness of their historical context, significance, and audience
- write a substantial research paper in support of a sustained historical argument, supported with evidence from primary and secondary sources, presented in clear and compelling prose
- engage with peers and professor in constructive discussion of both the course content and the process of doing and writing history

Evaluation

This is a seminar class, and it depends on your active **participation** every week, in the form of reading, discussion, and engagement with historical sources. Participation includes, but is not limited to, coming to class every week, having done the readings, and engaging in constructive, respectful discussion with the class.

Attendance will be taken each week, and does count toward your participation grade. You may miss two classes without penalty or explanation. (Given this flexibility, requests for further accommodation may be denied.)

You will write one substantial **research paper** in this class; it should be between 4000-6000 words long, including footnotes (approximately 15-20 pages). A paper of this length should not be written overnight, or even in a one week burst at the end of term. You should plan to work on this paper a little at a time, all term long. All of the written assignments for the course represent stages of this project. A short **proposal** outlining your topic and sources is due January 27. A **rough draft** of your paper is due

on March 3. In mid-March, you will read and provide **feedback** on some of your classmates' papers; the **final draft** is due March 31. There is no midterm or final exam.

Your final grade will be calculated as follows:

Proposal , 500-750 words, due January 27	10%
Rough Draft , 4000-6000 words, due March 3	20%
Peer Feedback , 500-750 words, due March 17	10%
Final Draft , 4000-6000 words, due March 31	30%
Participation and attendance in seminar, every week	30%

Seminar Expectations

This course demands maturity and a high level of **intellectual empathy**. We will frequently discuss heated issues where passions can run high. I do not want our seminar to be an ideological echo chamber, but I do insist on collegiality and respect for all. You will be expected to read, contemplate, and debate a range of ideas—including some you personally reject—and to maintain a respectful, constructive environment where we make a genuine effort to understand positions we disagree with.

Due Dates

More information on the written assignments will be available after term begins. Written assignments in this course are generally due on Wednesdays but they will all have a 2-day grace period: that is, they can be submitted up to two days after the due date (so, before midnight that Friday) without penalty. For one week after that grace period, late assignments will be subject to a 10% penalty. After that week (ie, after midnight on the second Friday after the due date), that penalty will increase to 20%. Given this flexibility, requests for further accommodation will generally be denied. Assignments may not be accepted after April 9, the last day of classes for the term.

AI Policy

I confess my thinking about the use of generative AI tools is still evolving. I recognize the power and appeal of these suddenly ubiquitous tools but I am also suspicious of their effects on teaching and learning, especially on research and writing, which I consider the core skills of history as a discipline. **For this reason, we will work together as a class to discuss and agree upon a detailed AI policy for our course.** (If we can't all agree, it will be my prerogative to make any final decisions.) Once we have agreed on a policy, it will be added to our syllabus and strictly enforced.

Office Hours

I will hold drop-in office hours every week (time TBD). What I mean by “drop-in office hours” is just that: I should be in my office every week at that time, and you are welcome to drop in there without making an appointment, sending an email, or even having a good reason. This doesn’t mean we can’t talk at other times! You are always welcome to email me with questions about the class; we can also schedule other meeting times, in person or on Zoom.

Course Materials

I am considering the following books as required materials, but **this is not yet final**; do not purchase any books until term begins and you receive the final course outline.

- Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era* (Oxford, 2022).
- Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, revised edition (Cornell, 2017).
- Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (Knopf, 2023).
- Kathryn Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (Oxford, 2009).

All books should be available through Western’s libraries, as well as [the campus bookstore](#) and other book sellers. There will also be **additional readings**, both primary and secondary sources, not listed here. These will be available through OWL.

Course Schedule and Readings

Our exact list of topics and readings is still under construction. My goal each week will be to pair a modern flashpoint (and a primary source like a speech or news article) with historical studies that suggest the long-term roots or precursors of that issue.

Sample Week 1: “Heritage Americans”: Civic and Racial Nationalism from Teddy Roosevelt to J.D. Vance

- J.D. Vance, Speech at Claremont Institute, July 5, 2025.
- Colin Woodard, “Opponents of J.D. Vance’s Story of America Need to Speak Up,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2025.
- Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (2017), Introduction, Chapters 1 & 2.
- Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (2004), Chapters 1, 2, & 11.

Sample Week 2: “Many People are Saying”: The Paranoid Style from the JFK Assassination to QAnon

- Adrienne LaFrance, “The Prophecies of Q,” *The Atlantic*, June 2020.
- J. Oliver Conroy, “The Epstein Files Reveal that a Vast Global Conspiracy Actually Exists—Sort Of,” *The Guardian*, February 7, 2026.
- Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper’s Magazine*, November 1964.
- Kathryn Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (2009), Introduction and Chapter 4.

Additional Statements

Please review the Department of History’s [Undergraduate Policies and Statements](#) for important information regarding accessibility options, health and wellness, medical accommodations, academic integrity, and more.