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Course Overview: U.S. History

"History is a pack of lies about events that never happened told by people who weren't there."

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

-- George Santayana

Content

U.S. History is a year long component of the Humanities Focus Area that explores the history of the American peoples with an emphasis on the modern era. The course seeks to foster an appreciation for the complexity of historical analysis and an understanding that there is *no single history* of the United States, but rather a *set of histories* reflecting distinct emphases, perspectives, and cultural experiences. Students develop skills in interpreting primary source documents and in detecting perspective and bias in the works of professional historians. Students are also encouraged to develop their own critical perspectives on key historical events and to draw connections between the past and present. Coursework emphasizes analytical reading, critical thinking, persuasive writing, and oral presentation.

Evaluation

Student grades are based on the successful completion of a variety of in-class and homework assignments including quick writes, reading questions, reflective and analytical essays, quizzes, and individual and collaborative group projects. Classroom discussions and debates are also an extremely important part of the coursework and are critical to the overall quality of our shared learning experience. Accordingly, class participation constitutes 20% of your final course grade. **Late work is ordinarily not accepted**, but students are encouraged to speak with the instructor in the event that extraordinary circumstances arise.

Texts and Required Reading.

The primary readings for this course consist of selected book excerpts and newspaper articles assembled by the instructor, as well as select chapters of the textbook *The Americans*. Students are expected to complete required reading assignments and to come prepared to engage in classroom discussions.

Topic Outline

1. **Setting the Stage: American Identity**

Essential Question: What does it mean to be an American?

- Core Values: *The Declaration of Independence*.
- The Citizenship Process & the Debate Over Modern Immigration.

2. The Writing of History

Essential Questions: What is history? How is history written?

- Readings in Historiography.
- Perspective and Bias in Historical Writing: The “Columbus Legend.”

3. The European Colonization of North America

Essential Questions: Why did early European colonists come to America?
What is the colonial legacy for modern America?

- Jamestown, Puritan New England, Penn’s Colony, Native American Relations, and the Slave Trade.
- Religious Liberty: The 1st Amendment.
- Modern Parallels: The Berkeley Free Speech Movement.

4. The Dawn of Modern America

Essential Questions: How was America transformed at the turn of the 20th Century?
What is the American Dream?

- Immigration, Urbanization, Industrialization and the Rise of Big Business.
- Social Reformers, Muckrakers and Union Activists.
- Imperialism, Laissez-Faire Capitalism and Progressive Era Reforms.

5. With Liberty & Justice For All: The Struggle for Equal Rights

Essential Question: How have Americans struggled to protect civil liberties and extend civil rights to all people?

- The Women’s Rights Movement.
- Balancing Civil Liberties and National Security During War Time.
- The Civil Rights Movement.

6. The Great Depression and the New Deal

Essential Question: What role should the government play in economic affairs?

- The Great Depression – Its Causes and Consequences.
- The New Deal Transforms the American Economy.

7. The “Good War” – World War II and its Aftermath

Essential Question: Under what circumstances should America go to war?

- The Geopolitical Context of World War II.
- “The Greatest Generation” – Oral Histories and the War at Home.
- The A-Bomb Controversy.

8. The Fifties: Cold War Tensions & Domestic Social Responses

Essential Question: How did the 1950's reflect the hopes and fears of the post-war generation?

- Cold War Skirmishes: Korea, Cuba, and Beyond.
- McCarthyism and the Red Scare.
- Suburbia, Social Conformity and the Beat Generation.

9. The Vietnam Conflict & the 1960's Counterculture

Essential Question: What role should the U.S. play in International Affairs? What were the values, triumphs and failings of the 60's Counterculture?

- The Origins and Course of the Vietnam War.
- *Letters Home:* The War's Impact on GIs and Civil Society.
- The Anti-War Movement and the Counterculture.

10. Final Reflection & Synthesis

Essential Question: What lessons can we, as a people, learn from the study of American History?