American Dreams/ American Realities

History 130D                               Gerald L. Wilson
gerald.wilson@duke.edu

Spring 2021  

Class will not meet on Wednesday January 20th: Assignment- Watch the Inauguration

This course examines the role of such myths as “success, “agrarian”, “city on the hill”, “frontier” and the “foreign devil” in defining the American character and determining our hopes, fears, dreams and actions throughout American History. Attention will be given to the surface consistency of these myths as accepted by each immigrant group versus the shifting content of the myths as they change to reflect the hopes and values of each of these groups and cultural and economic changes.

I. REQUIRED READING

BOOKS – available at the Textbook Store
Appy, Christian, American Reckoning
Deparle, Jason, American Dreams
Egan, Timothy, The Worst Hard Time
Miller, Arthur, Death of a Salesman
Moody, Anne, Coming of Age in Mississippi
Potter, David, People of Plenty
Rosenbloum, Robert and Gerald Wilson, Course Pak: The Value of Myth
Schlesinger, Arthur M., The Disuniting of America

COURSE DOCUMENTS- available on Sakai: https://sakai.duke.edu/

II. Discussion Groups and Written Assignments

Each student will enroll in one discussion section. Discussion sections will meet at the designated times approximately every week and will focus on specific assignments related to course readings. For some of these sessions, papers on assigned readings and topics will be required. If a student is absent for a group discussion session, excused or unexcused, the student will be required to hand in a 3 page (double-spaced) analytic essay on the assigned readings prior to the next discussion group meeting.

Late papers will be accepted with a penalty of one-half letter grade per class period. Dates and Assignments for Discussion Groups (all course documents are available on Sakai)

January 22 Introduction- Bagehot’s “The End of History”

January 29 – Whither the Myths?
Book: Schlesinger, The Disuniting of America
Sakai: Jeremy Rifkin, “The European Dream”

February 5 – Success Myth
Course Pak: Chapters I and II

February 12 – Success Myth
Book: Deparle, American Dreams
Book: Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

February 15 – Frontier Myth  
**Book:** Potter, *People of Plenty*, Chapters III, VII and IX  
**Sakai:** Amley, “Politics and the Myth of the Frontier”

February 26 – Agrarian Myths  
**Book:** Potter, *People of Plenty*, Chapter VII  
**Sakai:** Becker, “Ideal Farms vs. Industrial Farms”; Goldman and Dickens, “The Selling of Rural America”

**Midterm Exam: Wednesday, March 3rd**

March 5 – Foreign Devil Myth  
**Sakai:** Worth, “A Nation Defined By Its Enemies- Conspiracy Within”; Senator Joseph McCarthy, “Conspiracy Within” (The Wheeling WV Speech), Newsweek, “Papal Court”

March 12 – City on a Hill Myth  
**Book:** Potter, *People of Plenty*, Chapters V & VI  
**Sakai:** President Ronald Reagan, “Farewell Address” (Speech); Governor Mario Cuomo, “Convention Speech” (Governor Mario Cuomo Challenges President Reagan’s Portrayal of Americans as Shining City on a Hill); Winston, “From Theological Tenet to Political Password”

**First Paper Due: Friday March 19, 2021**

March 19 – Myths: Transitions and Transformations  
**Book:** Potter, *People of Plenty*, Chapter IV  
**Course Pak:** Chapter III

March 26 – Myths: Transitions and Transformations  
**Sakai:** Shubach, “Dr. Seuss and the American Myths”

April 2 – The 20’s: The Clash of Myths- From Poor Richard to Jay Gatsby  
**Sakai:** “A Map of New York”; “I Lift My Lamp Beside The Golden Door”; “A Test of Opportunity”

April 9– The 30’s: The Dream Falters, The Myths Fail – Temporarily  
**Book:** Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*  

April 16 – The Post-war Years, 1945-1963 Recovery and Triumph – For Some  
**Book:** Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*  
   The 60’s The Fabric of Society “Rent Asunder”

**Second Paper Due: Friday, April 16, 2021**

April 22—Vietnam and the Home Front – “America’s Vision of Itself as Benevolent, Wise, and Invincible Drained Away in the Jungles of Vietnam”

**Book:** Christian Appy, *American Reckoning*

**Sakai:** Cavan, “Uncovering Vietnam: War Journalism and Its Impact on American Mythology”

**III. Examinations**

- **Mid Term** – Wednesday, March 3, 2021
- **Final** – Friday, April 30th, 2:00-5:00pm

**IV. Evaluation of Performance**

Evaluation of a student’s performance will be based primarily on three factors:

1. Performance on the mid-term and final examination
   - **Midterm:** 20%
   - **Final:** 30%

2. Quality of the written assignments
   - **Paper #1:** 15%
   - **Paper #2:** 15%

3. Attendance at and participation in discussion sections
   - **Attendance / Participation:** 20%

Please note that classes will meet every Monday and Wednesday for lecture. Discussion sections will meet as indicated. **Excessive absences from lectures or discussion group meetings will weigh heavily in the assignment of the final grade.**

**V. Questions/Problems**

The Instructor will seek to be available to students form discussion of matters pertaining to the course. Please email: Gerald.wilson@duke.edu

Your TA’s for the course are graduate students in History:

- Arthur Braswell arthur.braswell@duke.edu section 01 and 04
- Sam Schmidt samantha.l.schmidt@duke.edu section 02 and 03

“**Textbooks for this course are available for 3-hour checkouts at the Duke Libraries. Search the Libraries’ Top Textbooks program here:** https://library.duke.edu/course-support/course-reserves/textbooks.”