History 3653, America and the 1960s: History and Legacy

Fall 2018

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Office Hours: Monday, 5:30-6:30, Tuesday, Thursday, 4:30-6:30, or by appointment (or just stop by—I’m usually there in the afternoons.)

This long decade profoundly influences contemporary America life and culture, but our grasp of its historical significance is clouded by myth, distortion, and ideology. This course seeks to strip away some of those misconceptions so that we can better understand the defining political and cultural developments of the turbulent 1960s. It also seeks to examine “the sixties” in its historical context. We aim to explain the economic and demographic forces that made this era possible, and to understand how this tumultuous period fit into the longer saga of American democracy, social reform, the struggle for individual liberties, and foreign intervention. The rise of student protests, the emergence of the New Left, the development and impact of the black freedom struggle, the coalescence of the counterculture, and the descent into the quagmire of Vietnam form the key historical landmarks of our investigation. Just as important, however, is the “other 1960s”—the rise of a conservative movement that would dominate American life in the late twentieth century. There was more than one “1960s,” and this course will explore those distinctions. It will examine cultural developments, but it is not simply an excursion into popular culture. Most importantly, it will investigate the social and political upheavals that defined the era. Our ultimate objective is to understand the legacy of the 1960s and why it continues to be so divisive in contemporary America.

A few important caveats are in order. First, considering that this course relies extensively on lectures, it is vital that you take detailed notes. I cannot emphasize this enough. Relying exclusively on the brief notes made available to you on the powerpoint slides will yield disappointing results and a shallow education. You should quickly get into the habit of taking 2 and ½ to 3 single-spaced pages of notes in each class. These will be indispensable to you on assignments and the final exam. Second, please be advised that the use of the laptop for any other reason than note-taking is strictly prohibited. The illicit use of the laptop—or cellphone or tablet or text-messaging device—in class invites distraction, irritates the professor, and detracts from the atmosphere of intellectual inquiry that should prevail in each class. Please respect this guideline.

Finally, while lectures are important, they are necessarily interactive. That requires your participation, and your participation is only made possible by reading the assigned material. Class discussions provide an exceptional opportunity for active learning. In order to benefit fully, you must read for class and arrive prepared to discuss the ideas you encounter. Class interaction is also the key route to earning class participation marks. The professor reserves the right to make minor adjustments to the reading schedule. Finally, requests for a re-write will be considered on a case-by-case basis and only during a live visit to office hours.

Required Books

Tom Hayden, Hell No: The Forgotten Power of the Vietnam Peace Movement

Cathy Wilkerson, Flying Close to the Sun: My Life and Times as a Weatherman
Assignments
Midterm Test, 15% (October 8th).

Book commentary: 25% (750-1000 words) Using Wilkerson’s Flying Close to the Sun, write a commentary that explains the origins of the author’s perspective, the formative events and intellectual influences in her life, the achievements and insights of the New Left, and its limitations as a vehicle of genuine democratic liberation, particularly with reference to women in the movement. Strive to situate the author in the appropriate historical context. Your commentary should focus on chapters one to six. Your commentary should also make reference to at least two other peer-reviewed articles or books. Due October 15th.

Writing assignment: Imagine that you are writing an article for Politico, Slate, Harper’s Magazine, or the New Republic about the antiwar movement and the fate of the New Left from 1967-1970. What do want contemporary readers to understand about these historical phenomena? What enduring insights or lessons do they have to offer? Which misconceptions or distortions do you wish to challenge? Conversely, which popular conceptions about these movements do you think stand up to scrutiny? Using Wilkerson’s Flying Close to the Sun (chapters seven to ten), Fendrich’s article on the antiwar movement (see reading schedule), Tom Hayden’s The Forgotten Power of the Vietnam Peace Movement, as well as two additional scholarly sources, formulate your own conclusions about the historical significance and enduring importance (if any) of the antiwar movement and the New Left. Should be 5-7 pages, due on November 19th.

Final exam 30%.

Class participation: 10%. This will include class discussions, class activities, debates, presentations, and reading responses.

Please note: all assignments should be double-spaced using normal margins, feature proper academic citations (preferably according to the Turabian Manual of Style), and be accompanied by a title page. Late assignments are assessed at 2% the first day and increase by increments of 2% for each subsequent day. Please be advised: the instructor reserves the right to modify and adjust the reading schedule as needs be.

Reading schedule and course plan:

September 5th: Welcome to the class and an introduction to the pre-history of the 1960s.


October 10th: The Fire This Time: The Summer of Love, the Long Hot Summer of 1967, and the Kerner Commission; the challenge of black power and the white response. Readings: James Hijiya, “The Conservative 1960s.”


October 29th, 31st: The international 1960s; environmental awakenings, the rise and repression of black power. Ryan Kirby, “‘The Revolution Will Not Be Televised’: Community Activism and the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971”.

November 5th, 7th: The rise of Richard Nixon, the fate of the New Left, the counterattack on American dissent on university campuses.

November 12th-16th: reading week.

November 19th, 21st: the economic crisis of the 1970s, Descent into Watergate, retreat from Vietnam.


December 3rd, 5th: the American 1960s in historical memory; the persistence of reform and social change in the 1970s.

*If you are a student with a documented disability who anticipates needing accommodations in this course, please inform me after you meet with Disability Access Services.*