**SYLLABUS**

**ISSS 3810 Section 101 THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY Wednesdays, 7-10 PM, August 24 to Nov. 30**

**INSTRUCTOR: ROBERT BRENT TOPLIN**

**WELCOME TO OUR COURSE ON THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS!**

We will focus on presidents of the Twentieth Century – leaders from Theodore Roosevelt to Bill Clinton. We’ll do more than just expand our knowledge about history. We seek insights that can help us to understand our society and ideas that can help us make progress in our personal lives. Since the BIS program emphasizes inter-disciplinary study, we’ll employ knowledge from a variety of subjects, including psychology, sociology, economics, and political science. I will offer perspectives on the topics throughout our discussions, but you are an important player in this enterprise as well. I hope you will share ideas you have gained in school, work and in life –thoughts that can help us to examine the topics under study in unique and interesting ways.

Above all, we will strive to make our class meetings INTERESTING. I am a firm believer in the importance of making university study an intriguing and exciting experience. If you enter the classroom each evening with a bounce in your step and an eagerness to investigate, we will succeed in our mission.

In class and before and after the meetings I will look for opportunities to speak with each of you and get to know you better. During the first class, I’ll explain how I will attempt to facilitate these one on-one meetings with you.

Before we meet, however, I should introduce myself briefly. I have been serving as a university professor for many years. Originally I taught History at Denison University (in Ohio) and later taught for many years at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington as well as an occasional course at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Since moving to Charlottesville, I have taught courses at the University of Virginia, both in the History Department and in the BIS program. I enjoy research and writing. Over the years I have published several books and articles, and I have been involved in the development of dramatic films programs that appeared on nationally broadcast television programs. I like research and writing, but the professional experience I most enjoy is working directly with students.

Regarding contact, my email is [rt2b@virginia.edu](mailto:rt2b@virginia.edu).

**THE BOOK: HOW I’VE MADE IT EASY TO USE (AND SAVED YOU TIME)**

**Note: I recommend that you purchase the actual book (in paper) rather than a Kindle or other edition that you read electronically with a tablet, phone or computer, because I will indicate specific pages in the book where key points for discussion can be found. If you purchase the book in electronic form, you will not be able to access those pages precisely. In short, by owning an old-fashioned book printed on paper, you will find it much easier to prepare for class work, including discussions.**

The principal book for class study and discussion is a new release by the author, William E. Leuchtenburg: *The American President: From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton* (Oxford University Press). The scope of Leuchtenburg’s writing covers our class subjects perfectly. Our focus will be on the American presidency in the Twentieth Century, precisely what Leuchtenburg examines. At first glance, the book seems large and contains a lot of information. But I have I worked through the entire book and identified just a few main questions about each chapter. In class we will focus on those questions. So . . . rather than confronting a whole bunch of information and wondering how you can deal with it, you will have a very clear idea each week of the main points that will receive our attention.

You will note that I have tried to make these questions provocative and interesting. I don’t just ask for information. Instead, I ask you to make personal judgments about some fascinating and controversial issues. You may need a few weeks to get used to this approach to the topics, but I’m willing to bet that eventually you will discover that our procedure is a lot of fun. We will see how we can draw lessons from this history – and apply some of those lessons to life today.

When deciding on your position regarding these questions, you will want to consider your values, feelings, and impressions. I believe you will find it exciting to offer an opinion on these controversial subjects. Also, before each class meeting you will have heard a lecture (a presentation from me). I will identify some of the key issues. In those lectures I will try to frame and clarify these controversies. In other words, I will offer suggestions about those controversies in advance of your discussion.

How will I give you that kind of lead before we discuss a president’s leadership in class? The previous week you will have heard my introduction to the president. In that presentation I will raise some of the key questions and point to some of the major controversies that will be under discussion in the next week’s meeting. You will get an introduction to the topic the week before we look into it in a class meeting. By the way, the author of the book, a friend of mine, is somewhat a “policy wonk.” In other words, he gives a lot of attention to the presidents’ policies – what they did about the economy, international affairs, etc. I will add some personality profiles in my introductions. I’ll talk about the individuals’ early lifetime experiences. In short, I will try to give you some intriguing biographical background. Through those discussions, we will offer a psychological perspective on the presidents. In other words, we’ll seek insights on why they thought and acted as they did.

We have a challenge for our first meeting, of course. As you will see in our schedule, the subject is the presidency of Theodore (Teddy) Roosevelt. To get ready for that meeting, please try to look into some information about Roosevelt. Check the Internet. Look at Wikipedia. And if you have the time, look at the chapter in our book, *The American President*. But since this is our first meeting, I recognize that some students will not have a chance to give a lot of attention to the first chapter in the book. So please look into the record of Theodore Roosevelt to the extent that you can. During that first meeting I will present an introduction to the subject, launch some discussion with you about Teddy Roosevelt, and set up the following week’s meeting with some initial comments about Woodrow Wilson.

That first meeting will not simply involve listening to me. I will encourage a discussion of the presidency by asking what you think about the current race for the White House. Through that discussion, we’ll try to identify the kinds of questions that ought to concern us as we look into earlier presidencies (and the election contests that put leaders in the White House). In other words, we will explore conditions in the present to better understand conditions in the past. We will look for insights into today’s news as a means for developing a better understanding of our nation’s history.

**SOME PRINCIPAL QUESTIONS YOU WILL WANT TO CONSIDER WHEN READING ABOUT EACH PRESIDENT**

In which ways did the president make an impact on conditions in the United States and its people? Was that impact positive or negative? Explain. Provide some notable examples to illustrate your argument.

How did the president react to international issues and challenges? What do you think of those actions? Provide a few some examples to illustrate your argument.

Which lessons can we draw from the history of this president’s leadership and experiences? In which ways is this history relevant to our times? How do some of the issues of earlier times or ideas and actions of the president resonate because we are dealing with related matters today? How is the situation today different from those the president under study faced? Does this history give you any insights on how you ought to judge present day political topics?

**CLASS FORMAT**

As mentioned, I will identify a variety of interesting questions about the presidents, and you will have these questions for consideration in advance of the class meeting (in the form of a handout made available on Collab). Usually these questions will ask for your opinion. The questions will encourage you to weigh in on a controversial subject. It is likely that many of your classmates will have a different judgment to offer. That is good – we want to encourage a lively and thoughtful exchange of viewpoints. We welcome the challenge of rendering judgments about controversial topics, and we want to draw some lessons from those judgments for today. By taking this approach, you will see that the study of history is not a stale and boring exercise. Instead, it is a fascinating task that asks you to take a stand on some provocative and fascinating questions.

There will be several parts to the meetings:

1. We will hold discussions about the questions that were assigned for the day.
2. We will ask about other topics regarding the president under study that interest you.
3. I will present some interpretations in lectures.
4. We will view some videos that deal with the president and his times (during several but probably not all of our class meetings).
5. I will provide more explanations about the class discussions after I see how many students are enrolled in the class. That part of our activities will focus on “relevance” – what we can take away from this history. We will ask: does our study throw some light on events and issues of our own lives and times?

**BI-WEEKLY PAPERS**

The paper should be about 2 to 3 pages, double-spaced. Half the class will be assigned to write them one week, and the other half of the class will turn in their papers the next week. You will learn which weeks you have been assigned to write on the first day of class.

The assignment is important and it needs to be on-time. Please do not report that you have to turn in the assignment late because your dog ate the paper!

To explain further: every other week please turn in a paper that focuses on a topic of interest about the president under study. In these papers you will explore one of the interesting controversies that characterized the presidency and offer your strong-minded opinion about it. Take a stand. Make judgments. Express your approval, disapproval, or other strong feelings about the topic. Explain why you have presented this point-of-view. These papers should not be painful exercises. Have fun! Enjoy the experience of taking a stand on a lively topic. In a sense, you are writing an op-ed about a historical subject (I’ll explain the idea of an op-ed the first day of class), and somewhere in this little essay you will probably want to point out the relevance of your judgment to the situation in America or the world today.

**TERM PAPER**

Please consult directly with me to discuss your interests. Together, we will try to find a topic that excites you. The topic will need to be something that came up during the administration of one of the presidents under study. Perhaps the topic will relate to an issue that had to be addressed by two or more of the presidents we studied (that is, the matter overlapped across presidencies). The subject may relate to a topic we addressed in class, or it may relate to something that interests you, but a subject we did not talk about in class. I’ll say more in class about the nature of this paper. It will constitute your final project. It needs to be at least seven double-spaced pages of narrative. Again, I will provide more information about this during the semester.

The paper is due the week we talk about President George H.W. Bush I will return the paper to you with comments by the last day of class.

**EVALUATION: EQUAL WEIGHT (25% EACH)**

Bi-papers (bi-weekly): 2 to 3 pages each

In-class exams (mid-term and final). They are essay exams that relate directly to our presentations and discussions in class. No surprises! A week before each exam I will give you a list of possible questions, and on the evening of the exam I will choose a few from that short list.

Research Paper

Class discussion, contributions, progress (explained on the first day of class)

**MORE INFORMATION AVAILABLE THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS**

This syllabus offers just a broad overview. I will explain all matters addressed in this syllabus during the first day of class and I will be happy to answer any questions that you wish to ask.

**THE TOPICS (ALONG WITH THE RELEVANT PAGES FROM OUR BOOK, *THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT*): Please see the separate list of suggested questions from each chapter (It is in Collab) By consulting that list of questions, you will have a clear each week of the main points of our study.**

August 24: Introduction to the Course; Theodore Roosevelt, 23-58 and 64-69 (we’ll skip the material about President Taft)

August 31: Woodrow Wilson, 70-116

September 7: Harding Coolidge and Hoover, 117-142. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Part I: 143-166.

September 14: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Part II: 143-242

September 21: Harry Truman, 243-326

September 28: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 327-385

October 5: John F. Kennedy, 386-424 Quiz: Teddy Roosevelt to Eisenhower

October 12 : Lyndon B. Johnson, 425-469 [Exam during the first hour of class}

October 19 : Richard Nixon, 470-540

October 26: Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, 541-578

November 2: Ronald Reagan, 579-673

November 9: George H. W. Bush, 674-712 (Term Paper due)

November 16: Bill Clinton, 713-802 (Quiz: Quiz: John F. Kennedy to George H. W. Bush)

November 30: President Obama, the 2016 Elections, and the Lessons of History