University of Virginia

College of Arts and Sciences

HIST 3559

**Reasoning from History**

Philip Zelikow

Spring 2016

MW 2:00 – 3:15

Clark G004

**General Course Description**

Much of what passes for common sense involves historical reasoning – inference from experience. Much of what passes for social science also involves historical reasoning. Futures are projected on the basis of supposed patterns or trends in the past.

In fact, trying to state what actually happened in the past – even to you, yesterday, let alone to long ago wages and prices, social conditions, or “the balance of power” – is extraordinarily tricky business. Some of the most intricate debates among philosophers concern questions of how to define, evaluate, compare, or explain historical facts.

This course reviews some common traps in historical reasoning and suggests ways of avoiding them. It also deals with the reality that beliefs about history are often among the most powerful and tenacious beliefs shaping public debates – and that those beliefs are often conveyed more through pictures than through words. The course is thus designed to strengthen ability to analyze both particulars and contexts.

Most, but by no means all, readings deal with the United States. The conceptual issues are universal.

Class attendance is mandatory. Grades will be based on short papers, class participation, and a take-home final exam. Since a presidential election occurs during 2016, we will use post-election transitions into governance as our equivalent of a large-scale laboratory experiment.

Graduate students from any School or department may enroll in the class, taking it under a graduate-level listing and with some different requirements.

**Required Readings**

Hal Brands & Jeremi Suri, eds., The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft (Washington:

Brookings Institution, 2016)

John Lewis Gaddis, The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past (New York:

Oxford University Press, 2002)

Robert James Maddox, ed., Hiroshima in History: The Myths of Revisionism (Columbia:

University of Missouri Press, 2007)

Richard Neustadt & Ernest May, Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decisionmakers

(New York: Free Press, 1986)

Other readings will be posted on the class website.

**Class Schedule**

January 20

1. Introduction to the Course

No assignment.

**Part One: What is History?**

January 25

2. Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped

No assignment. In class you will view an award-winning ABC News Special, “Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped,” telecast on July 31, 1995. You will be asked to write **a short paper** analyzing what you have seen.

January 27

3. Hiroshima: The Historical Battlefield

Read: Robert Newman, “Enola Gay at Air and Space,” in Maddox, Hiroshima in History, pp.

171-189

 Sadao Asada, “The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan’s Decision to Surrender: A

Reconsideration,” in Maddox, Hiroshima in History, pp. 24-58

Questions: What are the critical issues of evidence and interpretation? How does more information about the Japanese deliberations affect the debate?

February 1

4. Hiroshima: Sifting the Evidence

Read: Robert Maddox, “Gar Alperovitz: Godfather of Hiroshima Revisionism,” in Maddox,

Hiroshima in History, pp. 7-23

 Edward Drea, “Intelligence Forecasting for the Invasion of Japan: Previews of Hell,” in

Maddox, Hiroshima in History, pp. 59-75

 D.M. Giangreco, “’A Score of Bloody Okinawas and Iwo Jimas’: President Truman and

Casualty Estimates for the Invasion of Japan,” in Maddox, Hiroshima in History, pp. 76-115

 Robert Newman, “Hiroshima and the Trashing of Henry Stimson,” in Hiroshima in

History, pp. 146-170

Questions: We now widen your view of this episode to see the broader context of the war and to examine the perspective of various decisionmakers in Washington. You also are taken more deeply into controversies about the use of evidence and interpretive methods. How do these different perspectives affect your view of how to analyze historical scholarship?

February 3

5. Piecing Together What Happened

Read: 9/11 Commission, Report, (July 2004), pp. 31-34

 John Farmer, The Ground Truth: The Untold Story of America Under Attack on 9/11

(New York: Riverhead, 2009), pp. 272-290

 William Safire, “The Zelikow Report,” New York Times, June 21, 2004

 9/11 Commission, Report, (July 2004), pp. 60-61, 66, and 228-229

Questions: Consider this pair of controversies about ‘what happened’ in the 9/11 story. What seem to be principal difficulties in reconstructing what happened? For leaders at the time? For later investigators?

February 8

6. Iraq and WMD: What Went Wrong?

No assignment. In class you will see part of an award-winning PBS Frontline report, “Bush’s War,” telecast in 2008. A transcript will be distributed in class.

February 10

7. Iraq and WMD: Post-Mortems

Read: Condoleezza Rice, No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington (New York:

Crown, 2011), pp. 166-199

 Michael Morell, The Great War of Our Time: The CIA’s Fight Against Terrorism from

Al Qa’ida to ISIS (New York: Twelve, 2015), pp. 77-107

 Robert Jervis, Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq

War (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 123-155

Questions: For your **second short paper**, study these added testimonies and think hard about Jervis’ reflections about the major official post-mortems. Then write a three page paper concisely answering the following question: Based on the material available to you, who should be held responsible for the misjudgments surrounding Iraq and WMD? Be specific. Papers are due as you arrive in class.

 **Part Two: Reasoning from Comparisons**

February 15

8. Past Precedents and Presidents

Read: William Imboden, “Statecraft, Decision-Making, and the Varieties of Historical

Experience: A Taxonomy,” Journal of Strategic Studies, vol. 37 no. 2 (2014): 291-318.

If you are interested in more extended illustrations of Imboden’s argument, you can find

much more in the Brands & Suri book, such as the essay on the Gulf War of 1990-91 by H.W. Brands or the contribution from Peter Feaver and Imboden about their experiences in the White House of George W. Bush. The Steinberg essay in that book is another kind of example; we will examine it specifically later in the course.

Questions: Try out Imboden’s taxonomy on some of the varieties of historical experience you have used in making important decisions in your own life or in situations you have experienced firsthand. Then reflect: How did your own varied uses of history improve the quality of thought (if they did)?

February 17

9. A Future President

Read: UVA Miller Center, “First Year 2017,” Issue #1: Why the First Year Matters, at

<http://firstyear2017.org/issue/why-the-first-year>, the six short essays by Sidney Milkis, Stephen Skowronek, H.W. Brands, Elaine Kamarck, Peter Wehner, and Michael Nelson.

Questions: Suppose you were on the staff of one of the current candidates, preparing for a possible transition process. Your busy boss has heard about this Miller Center project and has asked you to write a summary of the key points, a summary which he might pass on to the candidate and other top members of the candidate’s staff. For your **third short paper**, write that summary in no more than three pages. Since your boss may also have reviewed the Miller Center essays, be prepared to explain to your boss why you chose to spotlight some of the points in these essays and not others.

February 22

10. Analogical Reasoning and Decisionmaking

Read: Neustadt & May, Thinking in Time, chapters 3-5, pp. 34-48, 58-90

 Herbert Butterfield, History and Human Relations (New York: Macmillan, 1952), pp.

158-181

Questions: In the work you have already done in the course, can you think of examples as analogies as the tempting “seducer”? Do you find Neustadt & May’s approach workable? How do Neustadt’s and May’s treatment of analogies compare with that of Butterfield?

February 24

11. The Problem of Context

Read: Arthur Imhof, Lost Worlds: How Our European Ancestors Coped with Everyday Life

and Why Life Is So Hard Today, trans. Thomas Robisheaux (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), pp. 1-10

Bernard Bailyn, “Context in History,” in Sometimes an Art: Nine Essays on History

(New York: Knopf, 2015), pp. 18-52

Questions: Why is it so hard to reimagine the kind of world that Imhof describes in his introduction to his important work? Bailyn comments on the objections, posed by some philosophers, to the work of Quentin Skinner, applying a contextual interpretation to understanding the works of thinkers like Hobbes and Locke. Do you agree with Skinner or with his critics? And be prepared to discuss the “moral” problem that Bailyn describes.

February 29

12. The Problem of Scientific Generalization

Read: Gaddis, The Landscape of History, chapters 3-5, pp. 35-89

Questions: Be able to outline, in a simple form, a few of the steps used to convert historical comparisons into the feedstock to build scientific generalizations. What are the principal problems an analyst might encounter in each of these steps? Is there any harm in trying?

**Part Three: Learning to Use a Historian’s Microscope**

March 2

13. A Model and a Method

Read: Philip Zelikow, “The Nature of History’s Lessons,” in Brands & Suri, The Power of the

Past, pp. 281-309

Questions: How can someone thinking historically attempt to separate the compound of judgments in a choice? How does context fit into this model? Why are “soft” generalizations valuable? In applying this model, how can a historian add in the dimension of time, to understand a set of choices made over a period of time?

March 14

14. Lab Session: Trouble in America

Read: “Secession A: Foreign Reports,” Harvard Kennedy School Case C14-82-435 (as of

March 29, 1861)

Questions: The primary source readings place you in the position of a very well informed, and somewhat detached, observer of events in the United States in early 1861. That country seems to be on the verge of a civil conflict. You will need to be familiar with these reports about what is going on in the United States to perform an exercise, which I will give you, that will become your **fourth short paper**, due before class.

March 16

15. Lab Session: Trouble with Iraq

Read: Zachary Karabell & Philip Zelikow, “Iraq, 1988-1990: Unexpectedly Heading toward

War,” in Ernest May & Zelikow, eds., Dealing with Dictators: Dilemmas of U.S. Diplomacy and Intelligence Analysis, 1945-1990 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 167-202

Questions: Among U.S. leaders thinking about Iraq between 1988 and 1990, identify key judgments about reality, values, and action. How did these judgments evolve at different time periods in these years? Which institutions took the lead for making these different judgments?

March 21

16. Historical Determinism

Read: Gaddis, The Landscape of History, chapters 6-7, pp. 91-128

 Jeremi Suri, “Henry Kissinger, the Study of History, and the Modern Statesman,” in

Brands & Suri, The Power of the Past, pp. 27-47

Questions: We now have some tough questions to wrestle with, about the extent to which the past dictates the future and the way in which our beliefs about the past create presumptions about behavior, and the way these two issues mingle with each other. So we will step back and consider the problem of determinism. What do you think of Kissinger’s refinement of the ‘great man’ theory of history?

 **Part Four: Prisoners of History**

March 23

17. Presumptions

Read: Neustadt & May, Thinking in Time, chapter 8, pp. 134-156; chapter 1, pp. 1-16; and

preface, pp. xi-xxii. Read in that order.

Questions: Distinguishing what is taken for granted from what is known, or is simply unclear, becomes essential for effective reasoning. So are distinctions among types of presumptions. Come to class ready for an exercise in which you will be asked to identify presumptions you hear used during an actual conversation that occurred between President Lyndon Johnson and his mentor, in 1964. Be prepared to remember the distinction between what is known, what is unknown, and what is presumed. Again pay careful attention to the way past events influence the presumptions.

March 28

18. Understanding Others

Read: James Steinberg, “History, Policymaking, and the Balkans: Lessons Imported and

Lessons Learned,” in Brands & Suri, The Power of the Past, pp. 237-251

Questions: In this class we consider the relation of history to how we define others. Note that Steinberg raises several kinds of historical influences and the question of how they drive presumptions about how others will behave. Think about how these reflections, though they are about the Balkans, might be applied to other challenges in understanding “others,” including issues of race or ethnicity in America and beyond.

March 30

19. Shared Presumptions

Read: William McNeill, “The Care and Repair of Public Myth,” in Mythistory and Other

Essays (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 23-42

 Ernest May, “The Structure of Public Opinion,” in American Imperialism: A Speculative

Essay (Chicago: Imprint Publications, rev. ed., 1991), pp. 17-43

Questions: We move from one side of determinism to the other: the large shadows cast across whole societies by the way they choose to interpret their history. Look at how stories in the life of a nation or other community produce “public myths” and “shared presumptions.” As you think about May’s analysis of the origins of public opinion in 1890s America, consider how you would update his sketch to describe the origins of public opinion in today’s America.

April 4

20. Origins of Presumptions

No reading assignment.

Questions: The class will have been divided into small groups. Each will be assigned to a different movie based on historical events. For your **fifth short paper**, you and other members of the group must both watch the movie and do some research about the events being depicted. Then, in no more than three pages, your paper should answer this question: What are the shared presumptions found or fostered in the film? The paper is due by 9:00 a.m. on April 4.

April 6

21. Vietnam Myths and Shadows

Read: Mark Atwood Lawrence, “Policymaking and the Uses of the Vietnam War,” in Brands &

Suri, The Power of the Past, pp. 49-70

Questions: How do people and countries make sense of large, collective traumas? What can citizens do to aid or improve this process?

 **Part Five: Issue Histories and Placement**

April 11

22. The Confederate Flag

Listen: Podcast -- Backstory with the American History Guys (Ed Ayers, Brian Balogh, and

Peter Onuf), “Contested Landscape: Confederate Symbols in America,” November 20, 2015, at <http://backstoryradio.org/shows/contested-landscape/>.

Questions: The podcast reviews the history of the relevant symbols, like the Confederate battle flag, and also another history, the “issue history” of how these symbols have been displayed. How should an understanding of the history of public displays of Confederate symbols help citizens influence recent debates about which governmental displays are appropriate?

April 13

23. Pursuing Issue History

Read: Neustadt & May, Thinking in Time, chapters 6-7, pp. 91-133

Questions: Following on the previous class, now we go further into a use of history that is different from analogical reasoning. This is to pursue the direct history of the issue at hand. Then stand off and seek perspective, insights, ‘do’s,’ and ‘don’ts.’ Be sure you understand how to apply the “Goldberg Rule” adduced by Neustadt and May. (It assumes you have figured out which issue truly concerns you, which is harder to do than it seems.)

April 18

24. The Right to Keep and Bear Arms

Read: District of Columbia v. Heller, 554 U.S. 570 (2008)(majority opinion of Justice Scalia

and dissenting opinion of Justice Stevens)

Questions: Now let’s study a concrete application of “issue history.” What are the contesting backstories for the Second Amendment? What about that 18th century context still seemed to be relevant in 2008? And another ‘issue history’ question: Why do you suppose this issue seemed to lie dormant for so long, then revive?

April 20

25. Placement

Read: Neustadt & May, Thinking in Time, chapters 9-11, pp. 158-211

Questions: Another sort of historical reasoning “places” people encountered on the job – as friends, allies, foes, or subordinates – against the backdrop of the public history they’ve lived through and the available detail of their lives. Then, with that background about the people, this form of reasoning conjures inferences about their predispositions and likely behavior. Like reasoning from the history of the issue, individual placement also cuts against the dominant influence of generally held public presumptions.

April 25

26. Placing Institutions

Read: Neustadt & May, Thinking in Time, chapter 12, pp. 212-231

Questions: As with people, institutions (indeed organizations of all sorts, formal and informal) can be “placed” against their public histories and the recorded detail of their structural development (operating procedures included). Think about how you can apply this insight to explain particular institutions you know well.

April 27

27. The Future President’s First Year

Read: Essays on “Power” and “Finances” developed for the UVA Miller Center’s First Year

Project.

Questions: Notice the use of analogies in these essays, but also of direct history of issues and institutions (though not of relevant people). Your take-home final exam will be an extension of this project.

May 2

28. Back to First Questions

Read: Neustadt & May, Thinking in Time, chapters 2 & 14, pp. 17-35, 247-270