HIST 3854

**Reasoning from History**

Philip Zelikow

Fall 2016

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, reading deal with the United States. The conceptual issues are universal.

Grades will be based on short papers, an exercise, 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 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 will include various book excerpts and articles; required books include Richard Neustadt & Ernest May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decisionmakers*; Hal Brands & Jeremi Suri, eds., *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft*;and John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*.