University of Virginia

HIST 3854 (College of Arts & Sciences)

PPOL 3559 (Batten School of Public Policy)

**Reasoning from History**

Philip Zelikow

Fall 2016

TTh 11:00 – 12:15

New Cabell Hall 368

**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**

Edward Ayers, In the Presence of Mine Enemies: The Civil War in the Heart of America 1859-

1863 (New York: Norton, 2003)

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

Brookings Institution, 2016)

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**

**No classes on August 23 or 25.**

August 30

1. A World of Stories

No assignment.

September 1

2. Dangerous History

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

158-81

Questions: Come to class prepared to list the different reasons why Butterfield regards historical knowledge as so dangerous. (Fortunately, this class does not require you to wear Hazmat suits.)

**Part One: The Zoom Lens and the Microscope**

September 6

3. Context

Read: Ayers, In the Presence of Mine Enemies, Part 1, pp. 1-92

Questions: If you were teaching high school students about the worlds of the people in these two counties, what aspects of their world would you want to be sure to explain to your students in order to introduce what was different about this place and time? Also, what seems different to you about the way these people learned about or engaged in public life?

September 8

4. Chronology

Read: Francis Gavin, “History and Policy,” International Journal, vol. 63 no. 1 (Winter 2007-

08): 162-77

Questions: After you understand the five ways to reexamine history that Gavin suggests, apply each of them to the history you have reviewed so far in Ayers, going through the election of 1860. Come to class prepared to offer a possible example for each of the five categories from the histories and episodes that his subjects seem to be carrying in their heads from the recent past.

September 13

5. Context, Chronology, and Choice

Read: 9/11 Commission Report (New York: Norton, 2004), chapter 11 “Foresight and

Hindsight,” pp. 339-60

Questions: What seem to be the key points to take away about the context surrounding the terrorism problem before 9/11? How do they relate to critical choices, or non-choices?

September 15

6. 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? How does chronology fit? Why are “soft” generalizations valuable?

September 20

7. Lab Session A: Hiroshima I

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.

September 22

8. Lab Session A: Hiroshima II

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

Hiroshima in History, pp. 7-23

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

171-189

Questions: What are the critical issues of evidence and interpretation? Come to class prepared to be as specific as you can.

September 27

9. Lab Session A: Hiroshima III

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

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

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. First, we will examine the perspective of the Japanese government. Second, we will learn more about the context for various decisionmakers in Washington. You also are taken more deeply into controversies about the use of evidence and interpretive methods.

September 29

10. Lab Session B: Iraq and WMD I

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.

October 6

11. Lab Session B: Iraq and WMD II

Read: Committee of Privy Counsellors [the ‘Chilcot’ inquiry], The Report of the Iraq Inquiry:

Executive Summary (London: House of Commons, July 2016), pp. 1-25, 40-46

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 this added evidence. You need not consult any other sources. Then write a five page paper concisely answering the following question: Based on this material, what seems to have been the most important misjudgment(s) and how would you assign responsibility? Be specific. Papers are due as you arrive in class.

**Part Two: Reasoning from Comparisons**

October 11

12. 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)?

October 13

13. Analogical Reasoning and Decisionmaking

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

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?

October 18

14. 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?

October 20

15. The Problem of Scientific Generalization

Read: Baruch Fischhoff, “For those condemned to study the past: Heuristics and biases in

hindsight,” in Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic & Amos Tversky, eds., Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 335-51

Reread: Zelikow, “The Nature of History’s Lessons,” but only reread pp. 291-98

Questions: Reflecting on what you have learned in other classes, what are the steps needed to convert a past occurrence into the feedstock for building scientific generalizations? What are the philosophical problems an analyst might encounter in each of these steps? Is there any harm in trying?

**Part Three: Causation and Contingency**

October 25

16. Lab Session C: Civil War I

Read: Ayers, In the Presence of Mine Enemies, pp. 93-110

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

March 29, 1861)

Questions: The Ayers chapter and 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 **third short paper**, due before class.

October 27

17. Lab Session C: Civil War II

Read: Ayers, In the Presence of Mine Enemies, pp. 111-60

Questions: We usually tend to think that beliefs drive events. How did the events of the spring of 1861 reverse this sequence and drive beliefs?

November 1

18. Historical Determinism

Read: 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**

November 3

19. 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.

November 8

20. 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.

November 10

21. 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

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.”

November 15

22. 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 **fourth 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 November 15.

**Part Five: Backstories**

November 17

23. Issue History

Read: Neustadt & May, Thinking in Time, chapter 6, pp. 91-110

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: Understand the “Goldberg rule.” Then apply it to the case of Confederate symbols and memorials, using some of the evidence offered in the podcast. What is the value of the ‘backstory’ to public debate?

November 22

24. The Second Amendment

Read: Michael Waldman, “How the NRA Rewrote the Second Amendment,” Politico, May 19,

2014

If you would like to read more, I have posted the lead opinions in District of Columbia v.

Heller, 554 U.S. 570 (2008)(majority opinion of Justice Scalia and dissenting opinion of Justice Stevens). Also, on the modern history of the NRA, you might view the PBS Frontline program, “Gunned Down: The Power of the NRA,” telecast on January 6, 2015 and available here: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/gunned-down/>

Questions: What are the contesting backstories for the Second Amendment? What about that 18th century context still seemed to be relevant in 2008? Why did the issue of “individual rights” reemerge nearly two hundred years after the Amendment was adopted? What lesson would emerge from this backstory for advocates of a “right to marry”?

November 29

25. Fighting Tuberculosis

Read: Christian McMillen, Discovering Tuberculosis: A Global History, 1900 to the Present

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), Introduction, pp. 1-14

Questions: Why could this backstory be so relevant to global health policy and saving millions of lives in today’s world?

December 1

26. Placement

Read: Neustadt & May, Thinking in Time, chapters 9 and part of 10, , pp. 158-89

Questions: You use ‘backstories’ all the time in learning about your friends and acquaintances. How can historical reasoning help you test stereotyped presumptions about people in public life or encountered on the job?

December 6

27. Placing Institutions and Going Back to First Questions

Read: Neustadt & May, Thinking in Time, chapter 12 & 14, pp. 212-31, 247-70

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). Can you think of any institutions that you know well to which these methods can be applied?