

“Learning objectives” for individual courses: some examples

(McCole)

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT TO LEARN IN THIS COURSE

- a basic knowledge of the history of Europe in the twentieth century, including events and key dates; ideologies and ideas; political, social, and cultural movements; and major economic developments (a basic mastery of this knowledge is necessary, but not sufficient to do well);
 - how to think about history in terms of political, economic, social, and cultural forces and how they interact;
 - how historians and others go about explaining why things happened the way they did and not otherwise; let's call this historical reasoning (history is more than just "what happened");
 - some of the main controversies about Europe's twentieth-century history;
 - skills in evaluating primary source documents; and
 - basic visual literacy in the images and iconography of twentieth-century Europe.
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(Weisiger)

By the end of the term, you should be able to:

- Trace the history of changes to the American environment over time
 - Trace the history of environmental politics over time
 - Analyze and interpret “primary” sources of historical information
 - Identify an author’s argument or thesis
 - Write an essay and develop your own argument
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(Dracobly)

Aims of course

When I first started teaching “The Iraq War” in the summer of 2007 (the height of the civil war that was tearing Iraq apart, as we will see), I would often get the question, “The Iraq War? But that’s not history.” Increasingly, however, the war is history. Each passing year gives us the distance necessary to create the historical narratives that we use to order our memory of the past, even the very recent past.

A central contention of this class is that if some aspects of the war remain difficult to understand, other dimensions have come into a tolerable degree of focus. One of the aims of this course is to distinguish between those questions that can be answered, at least provisionally, and those that must remain open, whether because the necessary materials are not yet available, or because we lack proper perspective. Another issue is how the history of current and on-going events can be done at all. What kinds of assumptions must be made to stake out historical claims about events that might not have ended? What might we conclude about the validity of such claims? We are constantly being told what the war was “about” and whether it was “worth it.” On what basis can we evaluate such claims?

Those are just some of the issues lurking in the background of this course. We will address them as they come up but the organizing principle of the course is much simpler. The central argument is that the origins of the war lay in the Bush administration's decision to depose Saddam Hussein but that U.S. aims and actions can only go so far in explaining the dynamics of the conflict. Any account of the war must take into account the actions of Iraqis and other regional agents. We will thus begin with U.S. decision-making and planning and then bring in other factors as we get to the invasion and occupation. We will try to draw some conclusions regarding three fundamental issues:

- 1) The U.S. administration's decision to invade Iraq (How did it arrive at the decision? When? By what process? What were the administration's aims? How did it hope to achieve them?)
- 2) The subsequent course of events (Why did the situation in Iraq deteriorate so quickly? To what extent was the situation in Iraq due to U.S. policies and actions on the part of the occupational authority? To what extent was it due to forces within in Iraq itself? To what extent was it due to foreigners other than U.S. agents? What happened in 2007-2008 to improve the situation? Was there any realistic possibility that the occupation might have turned out differently?)
- 3) More generally what is/was the Iraq War about? (How does it fit into the larger "war on terror"? What is its significance for Iraq? For the Middle East more generally? What might the future hold?)

(Herman)

THINKING REQUIREMENTS AND COURSE OBJECTIVES

History is a discipline that requires discipline, no less than music, neuroscience, or architecture. That means you should expect this course to require real time and effort. But history repays those who devote time and effort to it many times over. If you work hard in this course, you will end the term knowing something about the chronology and significance of the various topics listed on this syllabus. You can also expect the following tangible benefits, all applicable in a wide range of occupations and careers:

- the habit of asking critical questions frequently
- improved reading, writing, and analytical skills
- the ability to recognize and evaluate primary and secondary source documents, with special attention to interpreting multiple and conflicting sources of information
- practice in thinking about how economic, political, cultural, and social forces interact over time

My hope is that you will also experience the pleasure of learning. History promises to make us more interesting people and better, more insightful citizens of our communities and our world.