

## **Clemente Course in the Humanities Spring, 2010**

### **United States History**

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#### **Course Theme:**

A unifying theme for this year's Clemente Course is "The Pursuit of Happiness: Power, Authority, and Liberty." The history of the United States provides many opportunities to explore this theme. Eric Foner, the author of our textbook *Give Me Liberty*, states, "no idea is more fundamental to Americans' sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation" than liberty. (p. xxi) He also argues that the "very universality of the idea of freedom, however, can be misleading. Freedom (used interchangeably with liberty) is not a fixed, timeless category with a single unchanging definition" (p. xxi), nor is the concept of how one pursues happiness. As we read and discuss primary sources during our time together we'll try to keep the course theme as our focus. .

#### **History & Historical Thinking:**

History can be simply described as the story of the past. Many of our readings for this course are primary source documents that introduce you first hand to the material used to construct this story or rather parts of many stories. By reading, discussing, and writing about these primary sources you will gain a clearer understanding of the fundamental values and ideals of the nation and its people as well as how these have been both promoted and resisted over the years. We will also try to develop the idea of and skills associated with "historical thinking."

While I started out above with a brief and simple description of history, creating that story or narrative is not a simple process. Not everyone seems to realize this however. Rush Limbaugh, for instance, on October 4, 1994, declared: "History is real simple. You know what history is? It's what happened." He got it partly right. While history does require a description of what happened, it also involves an interpretation of why it happened and an explanation of what it means. The evidence one examines, the questions explored, the personal perspective of the author all contribute to the story or history that is written. To gain an appreciation for the constructed nature of history I've included a textbook by a historian who discusses and interprets prominent events, themes, and ideas that have shaped American history. The historian's analysis, by focusing on liberty and freedom and their changing meaning over time, challenges the simplistic notion that history is just a bunch of facts strung together ("one damn thing after another") and instead introduces you to the fundamental role of interpretation and to the practice of historical thinking.

Our class sessions include brief introductory lectures but most of our time is spent discussing the primary source documents. You should come to class prepared, having read and thought about the material, and ready to discuss the readings. Pages in the textbook will not actually be assigned but instead you may want to read relevant sections to help with background and context for the primary sources we read.

#### **Textbook:**

Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty*

Primary Source Documents, handed out in class.

## **Class Schedule:**

### **Session 1**

Date: February 25, Thursday

Class: US History

Topic: Historical Method & Practice; Creation Stories

Text: Sam Wineburg, "Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts," pp. 3-7,22-24  
(handout)

Eric Foner, Give Me Liberty, pp. xix-xxiv

History & Historians excerpts (handouts)

Russell Baker, "Stuck on Ourselves" (handout)

### **Session 2**

Date: March 30, Tuesday

Class: US History

Topic: Puritan Mission

Text: John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," focus on the first five or six paragraphs and the last three or four paragraphs

### **Session 3**

Date: April 8, Thursday

Class: US History

Topic: Declaration of Independence & the Pursuit of Happiness

Text: Declaration of Independence

Mahoney, Declaration of Independence (handout)

### **Session 4**

Date: April 13, Tuesday

Class: US History

Topic: Thomas Jefferson on Race & Religion

Text: Jefferson, On Slavery (handout)

Jefferson, Virginia Statue for Religious Freedom (handout)

### **Session 5**

Date: April 27, Tuesday – Paper #1 Assigned

Class: US History

Topic: Women & Authority in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Text: Catherine Beecher, "Domestic Economy" and Seneca Falls Convention, "Declaration"

### **Session 6**

Date: May 11, Tuesday

Class: US History

Topic: Wealth & Happiness

Text: Andrew Carnegie, "On Wealth" (handout)

**Session 7**

Date: May 13, Thursday

Class: US History

Topic: The “People’s” pursuit of power

Text: Populist Party Platform (handout)

**Session 8**

Date: May 25, Tuesday – Paper #2 Assigned

Class: US History

Topic: Liberty & America in the World

Text: Woodrow Wilson, War Message (handout)

Franklin D. Roosevelt, Four Freedoms (handout)

Barack Obama, Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech (handout)

**Session 9**

Date: May 27, Thursday

Class: US History

Topic: Civil Rights versus Authority

Text: Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from a Birmingham Jail (handout)