

America at 250: A History - Public Syllabus

Fall 2025, Yale University

Professors Joanne Freeman, David Blight, Beverly Gage

This one-time-only course examines U.S. history from 1776 to the present, in advance of the nation's semiquincentennial (or 250th birthday) in 2026. Taught jointly by Professors Joanne Freeman, David Blight, and Beverly Gage, the course emphasizes the history of the nation-state and the contested nature of American national identity. The class explores U.S. political history broadly conceived—not just as a realm of presidents, elections, and wars (though there will be plenty of those) but as a conversation across time between citizens about what the United States is, was, and was meant to be. It proceeds from the premise that the American Revolution was the first but not the last radical act of reimagining in U.S. history.

COURSE RESOURCES

In addition to this syllabus, the twice-weekly lectures may be viewed, for free, on the [Yale Courses YouTube channel](#), in addition to a [weekly podcast discussion](#) hosted by Professors Freeman, Blight, and Gage, also on the Yale Courses YouTube channel.

COURSE READINGS

Each week's course assignments will focus on in-depth readings of primary sources, including articles, letters, manifestos, books, and films. It is also suggested that students supplement each week's lectures with contextual reading from a U.S. history textbook. We recommend Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty*; and Mary Beth Norton, et. al. *A People and a Nation*. There are many other fine textbooks as well.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Thursday, August 28: The Road to 250

PART 1: THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT, JOANNE FREEMAN

Tuesday, September 2: Revolutionary (and Not So Revolutionary) Beginnings

Thursday, September 4: Declaring Independence

Main Reading:

Thomas P. Slaughter, ed., *Common Sense and Related Writings*, (Bedford; orig. 1776), Introduction and "Common Sense."

Additional Documents:

- [Letter written on behalf of “our fellow slaves” to Taunton representatives](#)
- [The New-England Chronicle: or, the Essex Gazette, 28 March 1776](#)
- [This newspaper](#) is from the collection of Harbottle Dorr, Jr., a merchant and member of the Sons of Liberty, who collected and annotated (mostly) Boston newspapers and pamphlets from between 1765 and 1776. You’ll have a chance to see a typical newspaper of the period.
- [John Adams “To Do” List](#)

Tuesday, September 9: What Kind of Union?

Thursday, September 11: Framing a Nation: The Constitution

Main Readings:

Clinton Rossiter, ed., *The Federalist Papers* (Signet Classics; orig. 1787), vii-xxxi, lix, #1-10, 15, 21, 33, 70, 84-85

Ralph Ketcham, ed., *The Anti-Federalist Papers And the Constitution Convention Debates* (Signet Classics; orig 1787), ix-xxvi:

- Speeches of Patrick Henry (June 5 and 7, 1788): 199-219
- Additions Proposed by the Virginia Convention: A Proposed Bill of Rights (June 27, 1788): 222-25
- The Address and Reasons of Dissent of the Minority of the Convention of Pennsylvania to their Constituents (December 18, 1787): 243-65
- Brutus I, October 18, 1787: 282-93

[The Articles of Confederation](#)

[The Constitution](#)

Tuesday, September 16: Republican Precedents and Presidents: The Placement of Power

Thursday, September 18: What Kind of Nation? Democracy, Hamilton, Jefferson, and More

Main Readings:

Joanne Freeman, ed., *The Essential Hamilton* (Library of America):

As Secretary of the Treasury:

- From Report on Public Credit, January 9, 1790
- Opinion on the Constitutionality of a National Bank, February 23, 1791

Federalist Leader and Attorney, 1795-1804:

- To George Washington, July 30, 1796, "A Draft of the Farewell Address"
- To James A. Bayard, January 16, 1801, "Burr has 'No Fixed Theory'"
- To Theodore Sedgwick, July 10, 1804, "Our Real Disease; Which is Democracy"

Additional Documents:

- [Washington to Hamilton – August 26, 1792](#)
- [Washington to Jefferson -- August 23, 1792](#)
- [Jefferson to Washington – September 9, 1792](#)
- [Jefferson to John Taylor -- June 4, 1798 \(on the "reign of witches"\)](#)
- [Jefferson to James Madison -- November 17, 1798 \(Kentucky Resolutions\)](#)
- [Madison, "Virginia Resolutions," -- December 21, 1798](#)

Tuesday, September 23: Jacksonian "Democracy"

Thursday, September 25: Whose America? Protest and Reform

Main Readings:

Michael Kammen, ed., *Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America* (Bedford; orig. 1835, 1840):

- Introduction: Tocqueville and His Tour de Force (pp.1-29)

Volume I

- Author's Introduction (pp.37-43)
- Chapter 4: The Need to Examine What Happens in the States before Discussing the Federal Government (pp.56-61)
- Chapter 5: Why It Is Accurate to Say That in the United States, the People Govern (pp.62-63)
- Chapter 6: The Real Advantages Derived by American Society from Democratic Government (pp.63-69)
- Chapter 7: The Omnipotence of the Majority in the United States and Its Consequences (pp.69-81)
- Chapter 10: A Few Remarks on Present and Probable Future Conditions of the Three Races Living within the United States (pp.91-96)

Volume II

- Preface (pp.96-98)
- Chapter 18: The Role of Voluntary Associations in America (pp.116-120)
- Chapter 19: The Relationship between Associations and Newspapers (pp.120-122)

- Chapter 20: Connections between Voluntary and Political Associations (pp.122-126)
- Chapter 21: Americans Overcome Individualism through the Doctrine of Self-Interest Well Understood (pp.126-129)
- Chapter 23: Why Americans Appear So Restless amid their Prosperity (pp.131-134)
- Chapter 26: Education of Girls in the United States (pp.140-142)
- Chapter 27: The Young Woman as Wife (pp.142-145)
- Chapter 29: What Americans Mean by Equality of Men and Women (pp.149-152)
- Chapter 30: American Society Appears Both Restless and Monotonous (pp.152-154)
- Chapter 33: The Type of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear (pp.162-167)

PART 2: AMERICAN DISUNION, DAVID BLIGHT

Tuesday, September 30: The Mexican War and its Aftermath: Compromise or Armistice

Thursday, October 2: The Road to Disunion: Politics, Dred Scott, and the Crisis of the 1850s

Main Reading:

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845)

Additional Readings:

- Stephanie McCurry, "Why do we love our Civil War?" *Civil War Times*, (2012).
- John C. Calhoun, "The Cords of Union are Snapping One by One" (1850)
- Daniel Webster, "I Speak Today for the Preservation of the Union," (1850)
- Chief Justice Robert Taney Rules against Dred Scott (1857)

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Tuesday, October 7: Two Constitutions, Secession and War, 1860-1862

Thursday, October 9: Union Victory, Confederate Defeat, and Emancipation

Main Reading:

Charles Dew, *Apostles of disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War*, (University of Virginia Press, 2001).

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Tuesday, October 14: Reconstruction: Andrew Johnson vs. the Radical Republicans

Thursday, October 16: Fall break

READINGS:

Stephen Prince, ed., *Radical Reconstruction: A Brief History with Documents*, (Bedford, 2016), selections

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Tuesday, October 21: The Defeat of Reconstruction, 1870-1877 and Beyond

Thursday, October 23: Gilded Age and the Aftermath of Reconstruction, South, North, and West

Main Reading:

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), selected chapters

Tuesday, October 28: A Violent Reunion: The Lost Cause, New South and Origins of Jim Crow

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PART 3: THE AMERICAN CENTURY, BEVERLY GAGE

Thursday, October 30: Immigration and its Discontents

Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (1912), intro, chapters 1, 7, 9, 11, 16, 19, 20

FILM: [*The Birth of a Nation* \(1915\)](#)

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Tuesday, November 4: Money, Power, and Progressivism

Thursday, November 6: A New Deal for America

Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1922), chapters 1, 6, 7, 13, 15-21

FILM: [*The Grapes of Wrath* \(1940\)](#)

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Tuesday, November 11: A New Deal for the World

Thursday, November 13: Anticommunism and the American Way

Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), intro, preface, chapters 1-3, 5, 6, 11, 16

FILM: [Why We Fight: War Comes to America](#) (1945)

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Tuesday, November 18: Race, Rights, and Resistance

Thursday, November 20: Reagan's America

Bayard Rustin, *Strategies for Freedom* (1976)

FILM: [Debate: James Baldwin v. William F. Buckley. Cambridge Union. \(1965\)](#)

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Tuesday, November 25: THANKSGIVING BREAK

Thursday, November 27: THANKSGIVING BREAK

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Tuesday, December 2: Making Sense of the Millennium

CONCLUSION

Thursday, December 4: Meanings on the Eve of 2026

* Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *The National Interest* (Summer 1989)