

Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government

API-701
(History 1683)
Reasoning from History

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T 2-4, Rm. 352

W 4-6, Rm. 343
new bldg.

T. 2-4, Rm. 339

Fall 1996

T 11-30-1-SC

TTh, 10-11:30

Course Assistant: Catherine Vlachos

W 12-15-2-15 (3rd fl. with)
864-0356

Purpose of the Course

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 these 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.

The first section of the course uses the examples of Hiroshima and Vietnam to illustrate problems in recreating and interpreting past events. The second section considers various instances in which beliefs about the past have effectively controlled terms of debate about current issues. Section three addresses the knotty question of how to compare historical events. Section four concerns some particular rule-of-thumb techniques for applying historical reasoning in policy analysis or political analysis.

Since a presidential election occurs during this semester, we use post-election transitions as our equivalent of a laboratory experiment. On the basis of readings and discussions about past shifts from one president to another, or from a president's first term to the second one (ranging from FDR to the present day), students will be asked, in a concluding exercise, to

develop historically-based advice for the transition of 1996-97.

The detailed outline below indicates both reading assignments and writing assignments.

Graduate students and upper-level undergraduate students from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences may enroll in the class, listed in FAS as History 1683, with the permission of the instructors.

Course Requirements

Books recommended for purchase are:

Lou Cannon, President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991)

Edward Hallett Carr, What Is History? (New York: Random House, 1961 or 1967 reissue)

Mark C. Carnes, ed., Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies (New York: Henry Holt, 1995)

Michael J. Hogan, ed., Hiroshima In History and Memory (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

David Lowenthal, The Past Is A Foreign Country (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985)

Richard Neustadt & Ernest May, Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decisionmakers (New York: Free Press, 1986)

Class attendance is mandatory. Grades will be based on five short papers (30%), an exercise (20%), class participation (20%) and a take-home final exam (30%).

Course Outline and Assignments

I. WHAT IS HISTORY?

Tuesday, September 17

1. Introduction to the Course

No assignment.

Thursday, September 19

2. Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped

No assignment. In class you will view an award-winning ABC News Special, "Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped," telecast on July 31, 1995. A transcript will be distributed in class. You will be asked to write a short paper in class analyzing what you have seen.

Tuesday, September 24

3. Hiroshima: The Historical Battlefield

Read: J. Samuel Walker, "History, Collective Memory, and the Decision to Use the Bomb," in Hogan, Hiroshima In History and Memory, pp. 187-99
Barton J. Bernstein, "Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender: Missed Opportunities, Little-Known Near Disasters, and Modern Memory," in Hogan, Hiroshima in History and Memory, pp. 38-79
Robert P. Newman, Truman and the Hiroshima Cult (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), pp. xi-xv, 1-31

Questions: What are the critical issues of evidence and interpretation? Has Walker accurately summarized the views of those historians who have studied this episode?

Thursday, September 26

4. Hiroshima: Chapter in a Larger Story

Read: Gerhard Weinberg, A World At Arms (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 568-581, 558-560, 866-893
Herbert Bix, "Japan's Delayed Surrender: A Reinterpretation," in Hogan, Hiroshima in History and Memory, pp. 80-115
"American Intelligence and Japan, 1945," draft KSG Case (by Douglas McEachin)

Questions: We now widen your view of this episode to see the broader context of the war and to examine the perspective of decisionmakers in Tokyo. We also probe in greater depth into the intelligence about Japan being supplied to American leaders. How do these different perspectives affect your view of the historical arguments discussed in the previous class?

Tuesday, October 1

5. The Killing of Ngo Dinh Diem: The Documentary Evidence

Watch: "The Last Mandarin," episode from PBS video series, "Vietnam" (copies of the videotape placed on reserve)
Read: Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States: 1961-1963,

volume 3, document #s 196, 199, 202, 205, 234, 236, 237, 246, 273-276, 278-282, 284-286, 289-291, 293-294, 301-303, 307-308. And from volume 4 of the same series, document #s 1-3, 5-8, 11-12, Memorandum of Conference with the President 29 Aug 63 (from JFK Library), 17-19, 31-32, 36-37, 39, 50-52, Saigon cable 398, 2 Sep 63 (from JFK Library), 57, 66-67, 70, 86-87, 91, 94, 104, 125, 130, 172, 177-178, 182, 215-216, 225-226, 234-236, 240, 242, 244, 247-249, 259, 264, 267, Memorandum of Conference with the President 1 Nov 63 (from JFK Library)

Questions: What were the issues that troubled Washington decisionmaking on Vietnam, and Diem, in the summer and fall of 1963? What information do you want to have, but cannot find in the documents?

Thursday, October 3

6. The Killing of Ngo Dinh Diem: The Witnesses Testify

Read: Robert S. McNamara, In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam (New York: Random House, 1995), pp. 51-87 D5558.M44
Roger Hilsman, "McNamara's War -- Against the Truth: A Review Essay," Political Science Quarterly 111 (Spring 1996): 151-63 (especially 155-59)
Tran Van Don, Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam (San Rafael: Presidio Press, 1978), pp. 87-99 D5556.A.T75 - Wid.

Questions: For your second short paper, study these three testimonies and reexamine the documentary evidence for yourself. Then write a three page paper concisely answering the following question: Who should be held responsible for the killing of Ngo Dinh Diem? Be specific. Papers are due as you arrive in class. After you have finished the paper, reflect on this: Why does this question seem to matter so much to McNamara and Hilsman (and many others)?

II. PRISONERS OF HISTORY?

Tuesday, October 8

7. Individual 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.
Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, volume 3, document #s 83, 67, 71, 72, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 85, 93, 94, 96, and 97.

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. After considering the illustrations in Thinking in Time, try to identify the critical presumptions for President Johnson as he makes fateful decisions in the summer of 1965. Remember the distinction between what is known, what is unknown, and what is presumed. Pay careful attention to the way past events influence the presumptions.

Thursday, October 10

8. Shared Presumptions

Read: Lowenthal, The Past Is A Foreign Country, pp. 105-24
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 the debate over one historical episode to larger shadows cast across whole societies. Look at how stories in the life of a nation, or community, powerfully influence what some historians call "public myths" and which we call "shared presumptions."

Tuesday, October 15

9. Origins of Presumptions

Read: Lowenthal, The Past Is A Foreign Country, pp. 185-238
Carnes, Past Imperfect (for assignment)

Questions: The class will have been divided into small groups, each assigned to a different movie and essay in the Carnes collection. For your third short paper, do your own research along with other members of your group and then, in no more than three pages, answer this question: Does the historian/commentator's essay help the viewer understand the shared presumptions found in the film? That paper is due by noon on Tuesday, October 15. For class, reflect on the mighty shared presumptions that originate in collective stories of their Founding Fathers. Does Lowenthal challenge any beliefs that you held dear?

Thursday, October 17

10. Shared Presumptions and Contemporary Politics

Read: Ian Buruma, The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan (New York: Penguin, 1994), pp. 92-111, 239-61
David Remnick, "Hammer, Sickle, and Book," New York Review of Books, May 23, 1996, pp. 45-51

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Read: [For 1960-61] Stephen Ambrose, Eisenhower the President (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), pp. 605-17; Richard Reeves, President Kennedy (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), pp. 21-57
[For 1968-69] Carl Brauer, Presidential Transitions: Eisenhower Through Reagan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 121-69
[For 1980-81] Cannon, President Reagan, pp. 65-119

Questions: Can you draw lessons from these examples of presidential transitions? If so, what lessons would you draw from these examples for Dole, if he is elected on Tuesday?

Thursday, October 31

14. Presidential Transitions: Starting Over

Read: [For 1936-37] James McGregor Burns, Roosevelt, The Lion and the Fox (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956), pp. 264-315
[For 1984-85] Cannon, President Reagan, pp. 553-88 (and, if possible, pp. 589-652)

Questions: What lessons would you draw from these examples for Clinton, if he is elected?

Tuesday, November 5

15. The Nature of Analogical Reasoning

Read: Douglas Hofstadter and the Fluid Analogies Research Group, Fluid Concepts and Creative Analogies: Computer Models of the Fundamental Mechanisms of Thought (New York: Basic Books, 1995), pp. 62-63, 71-75, 179-182

Questions: Why is it so hard to program computers to imitate human thinking?

Thursday, November 7

16. Analogical Reasoning and Public Affairs

Read: Neustadt & May, Thinking in Time, chapters 3-5, pp. 34-48, 58-90
Herbert Butterfield, History and Human Relations (New York: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 158-181

Questions: Review your own experience -- in school, in the world, or wherever: Can you think of instances in which you either suffered or benefited from analogical reasoning? If so, write your fifth short paper describing your experience. If you cannot come up with an

example -- at least observed if not experienced, write your short paper explaining why.

Tuesday, November 12

17. The Problem of Scientific Generalization

Read: Ernest May, "History-Theory-Action," Diplomatic History
Philip Zelikow, "Scientific Generalizations and International Policies,"
manuscript

Questions: If no two historical events are ever comparable, at least in the way in which observed physical phenomena may be comparable, how can we draw general lessons from experience?

IV. ISSUE HISTORIES AND PLACEMENT

Thursday, November 14

18. The Right to Bear Arms

Read: Garry Wills, "To Keep and Bear Arms," New York Review of Books,
September 21, 1995, pp. 62-73 and "To Keep and Bear Arms: An
Exchange," New York Review of Books, November 16, 1995, pp. 61-
64

Questions: If you worked for a political consulting firm, some of whose clients were in districts where gun control is a hot issue, what use -- if any -- would you make of these readings?

None

Tuesday, November 19

19. Pursuing Issue History

Read: Neustadt & May, Thinking in Time, chapters 6-7, pp. 91-133

Questions: Now we switch back to the individual's use of history with another, better use than analogical reasoning, one less likely to burden the user with the weight of public presumptions. This is to pursue the history of the particular issue back to its beginning, then stand off and seek perspective, insights, "do's," and "don'ts." This is to apply the "Goldberg Rule" adduced by Neustadt and May. (It assumes you have figured out which issue truly concerns you, which is harder to do than it seems.)

Thursday, November 21

20. Placement

Read: Neustadt & May, Thinking in Time, chapters 9-11, pp. 158-211

Questions: Another sort of historical reasoning "places" people encountered on the job -- as friends, allies, foes, bosses, or subordinates -- against the backdrop of the public history they've lived through and the available detail of their lives -- then conjures inferences about their predispositions and likely behavior. Like reasoning from the history of the issue, placement too cuts against the dominant influence of previous public presumptions.

Tuesday, November 26

21. Placing Institutions

Read: Neustadt & May, Thinking in Time, chapter 12, pp. 212-231
Theda Skocpol, Social Policy in the United States: Future Possibilities in Historical Perspective (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 136-166

Questions: 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). Skocpol provides an extended illustration of this placement in understanding the distinctive development of American social policies.

Tuesday, December 3

22. Presidential Transitions Exercise

Thursday, December 5

NO CLASS (Presidential Transitions Exercise)

Tuesday, December 10

23. Presidential Transitions Exercise

Thursday, December 12

24. Back to First Questions

Read: Neustadt & May, Thinking in Time, chaps 2 & 14, pp. 17-33, 247-70