

# AMERICAN CIVILIZATION

## American History and Culture Since 1865

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Course Website: [americanciv.wordpress.com](http://americanciv.wordpress.com)  
Location: American Studies Center

This syllabus is for **Section A** (Monday 12:15 to 13:15 and Thursday 9:15 to 10:15).

### COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course is designed to give Belgian students a broad, insider look into American history and culture. Rather than entailing a detailed, chronological account of historical events, this survey highlights major themes, figures, and works essential to the development of the United States in the past 150 years. Through the use of 1) primary sources in diverse media, 2) secondary source analyses of historic events and documents, and 3) active comparison of historic and current events, students will interact with a variety of perspectives on American life and the United States' role in the world today. Students will gain skills in analysis, discussion, cultural comparison, and critical thinking, as well as improve their comprehension, speaking, and writing in the English language.

### TEXTS

Unless otherwise noted, all readings, films, music, art, and links will be available through the course website. This being said, students may want to purchase their own copies of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (ISBN 0872860175) and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (ISBN 0413762408).

### GRADING

- 30%: Short essays (10% each)
- 30%: Final
- 10%: Group presentation
- 15%: Individual presentations (5% each)
- 15%: Participation

Grades will be determined primarily through writing assignments, short presentations by individual students, and one group presentation. Short essays will be 1 to 2 pages in length and compare one or two texts from the course with a current event discussed in an American newspaper article. The final will consist of both a short oral presentation and a written assignment on a theme from the course. At 3 to 5 pages, the final paper must incorporate texts from the course and at least two outside sources. More details on the final will emerge closer to the end of the semester.

Essays must be submitted in class on the due date or by email *before* the start of class on the due date. All written assignments (except for the final) will be returned with corrections and may be re-submitted within one week for the maximum increase of one letter grade.

### PRESENTATIONS

Three times throughout the semester, students will be expected to bring in a recent American newspaper article that relates to the themes discussed in recent classes. (See below for precise dates and suggested themes.) Students should be prepared to give a brief, 3- to 5-minute presentation in which they summarize the contents of the article and explain how it relates to class assignments and discussions.

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Articles should be printed off from their respective newspapers' websites. Acceptable sources include: The Washington Post, The New York Times, USA Today, Los Angeles Times, The Wall Street Journal, New York Daily News, The Denver Post, Chicago Sun-Times, Chicago Tribune, Houston Chronicle, San Francisco Chronicle, and The Kansas City Star. Serious news magazines, such as *Time*, and other major American newspapers are also acceptable.

Students will also be required to work with a small group to create one 10-minute presentation on an aspect of popular American culture. Topics and dates for this assignment will be given the second week of class.

### PARTICIPATION

Staying current on required texts is essential to success in the classroom. Students should plan on printing out every reading assignment, marking passages that were especially interesting, surprising, confusing, or otherwise discussion-worthy, and bringing their annotated and thoroughly read copies to class. For media such as film, music, and art, students should jot down observations and questions to discuss in class. Although questions to guide students' reading and media exploration will be given in advance, students should come to class with their own discussion topics and the readiness to participate in lively, student-led discussion. Students who do not participate in class or appear unprepared will have their participation grades lowered accordingly.

Participation grades are also based on attendance. Two unexcused absences will be permitted; further unexcused absences will result in the lowering of the student's final grade by 1% each.

### GUIDELINES FOR WRITING

All writing assignments should be in Times New Roman, 12-point font, double-spaced, with 1-inch (2.5-centimeter) margins. All sources must be cited. Plagiarism will not be tolerated; this includes using any information, directly quoted or not, from a source and not providing sufficient citation information. The grade for any assignment that includes plagiarism will be a 0. For examples of the type of paper formatting expected for American university students, see the MLA Formatting and Style Guide on the course website.

### COURSE THEMES

American culture and history have been marked by a number of conflicting currents in ideas, values, and beliefs. Consider the following themes from the course when selecting topics for writing assignments and newspaper presentations.

EQUALITY AND PERSONAL LIBERTY (weeks 1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13)

ISOLATIONISM AND INTERNATIONALISM (weeks 1, 3, 4, 7, 10, 13)

RELIGION AND SECULARISM (weeks 1, 8, 11, 12)

RACIAL PREJUDICE AND CULTURAL PRIDE (weeks 2, 3, 5, 8, 9)

IMMIGRATION AND ASSIMILATION (weeks 2, 3, 8, 13)

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### COURSE OUTLINE

#### WEEK 1: Introduction

- Sep 26 In-Class: Cohen, "How Europe Sees America"  
Emily Dickinson: Selected Poems

#### WEEK 2: Reconstruction and the Frontier

- Sep 30 Whitman: Selections from *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1891)  
Blight: "Ending the War: The Push for National Reconciliation"
- Oct 3 Turner: Excerpt from "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893)  
Paintings by Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran  
Limerick: "The Frontier as a Place of Ethnic and Religious Conflict"

#### WEEK 3: Industrialization, Immigration, and Imperialism

- Oct 7 Sinclair: Chapter 14 from *The Jungle* (1906)  
Film: Charlie Chaplin, *Pay Day* (1922)  
**Newspaper presentations**
- Oct 10 Kohler and Wensyel: "America's First Southeast Asian War: The Philippine Insurrection"  
Mark Twain: Comments on the Philippines (1900-1906)

#### WEEK 4: World War I and the Lost Generation

- Oct 14 MacMillan: "'A Tragedy of Disappointment': Woodrow Wilson and the Treaty of Versailles"
- Oct 17 Hemingway: "Big Two-Hearted River" (1925)  
**First short essay due**

#### WEEK 5: The Roaring Twenties and the Harlem Renaissance

- Oct 21 Hughes: Selected Poems  
Music: Bessie Smith, "Back Water Blues"; King Oliver with Louis Armstrong, "West End Blues"; Maurice Ravel, "Blues" from Violin Sonata No. 2 in G
- Oct 24 Hurston: Chapters 1 and 2 from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

#### WEEK 6: The Great Depression

- Oct 28 Film: *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940)
- Oct 31 Crist: "Aaron Copland and the Popular Front"  
Music: Aaron Copland, "Appalachian Spring" (1944)  
**Newspaper presentations**

#### WEEK 7: World War II

- Nov 4 Adams: "Mythmaking and the War," from *The Best War Ever: America and World War II*  
Musical Theater: Scene from *South Pacific* (1958)
- Nov 7 Brinkley: "Legacies of World War II," from *Liberalism and Its Discontent*

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WEEK 8: The Fifties: The best of times, the worst of times

~~Nov 11~~ Television: “Bud’s Encounter with the Law,” from *Father Knows Best* (1954)  
Coontz: “Families in the Fifties: The Way We Never Were”

Nov 14 Ginsberg: *Howl* (1956)  
**Second short essay due**

WEEK 9: The Civil Rights Movement

Nov 18 Hansberry: *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959)

Nov 21 King, Jr.: “I Have a Dream” (1963)  
Demby: “What the March on Washington Called for, and What We Got”

WEEK 10: The Cold War and Vietnam

Nov 25 Schlesinger: “Some Lessons from the Cold War”

Nov 28 Herring: “The Nightmare of Vietnam”  
Music: Bob Dylan, “Blowin’ in the Wind” (1963); Creedence Clearwater Revival, “Fortunate Son” (1969); Jimi Hendrix, “Star Spangled Banner” (1969)  
**Newspaper presentations**

WEEK 11: Counterculture and Women’s Rights

Dec 2 Diverse Media by Andy Warhol

Dec 5 Friedan: “The Problem that Has No Name,” from *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)  
Wolfgang, Miller, & Steinem: Conflicting Testimony on the Equal Rights Amendment

WEEK 12: The Rise of the New Right and “Postmodernism”

Dec 9 Reagan: “Evil Empire” Speech (1983)  
Schulman: “A Rejection of Government: Reagan and the Sunbelt”

Dec 12 Franzen: “St. Jude,” from *The Corrections* (2001)  
Music: Corigliano, “Blowin’ in the Wind,” from *Mr. Tambourine Man: Seven Poems of Bob Dylan* (2003)  
**Third short essay due**

WEEK 13: The War on Terror and Globalization

Dec 16 Bush: 2002 State of the Union Address  
Gaddis: “The Lessons of September 11”

Dec 19 Film: *Babel* (2006)