

FINAL EXAM | HIS 597 | CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS: THE REEL HISTORY OF MODERN AMERICA

Directions: Select three of the following topics to address. Each topic will require one essay, which may be broken down into subsections if necessary. Each essay is worth 50 points.

Length: I would suggest that each of your essays be 750 to 1500 words. You may exceed this word limit if you must, but I do not believe you can provide adequate answers in less than 750 words.

Citations: Please cite all ideas that are not your own. Since this project must be completed in Microsoft Word, please use the Chicago Manual of Style as your model. A quick guide is posted on the manual's website at: http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

Due Date and Procedure: All exams must be emailed to me as a single Microsoft Word file by midnight on August 6. Please do not send more than one email, and please do not submit revised essays.

TOPIC I

In his classic work, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948), Richard Hofstadter argued that “the legendary battles so dear to the Progressives, between Federalist capitalists and Jeffersonian democrats, Whig businessmen and Jacksonian plebeians, amounted to far less than met the eye. Whatever genuine differences and conflicts divided the nation’s political leaders, ‘the business of politics’ had always been to ‘protect this competitive world [that is, capitalism], to foster it on occasion, to patch up its incidental abuses, but not to cripple it with a plan for common collective action.’” Most of Hofstadter’s book “re-interpreted liberal heroes from Thomas Jefferson through Franklin Delano Roosevelt, bringing each luminary crashing down out of the clouds by insisting that nearly all American politicians ‘accepted the economic virtues of capitalist culture as necessary virtues of man.’ Hofstadter’s irony performed a great deal of work, as he depicted his subjects less as paragons than as paradoxes. Jefferson was, in Hofstadter’s formulation, ‘the Aristocrat as Democrat’; Andrew Jackson, the supposed democratic tribune of the common man, turned out to be an advance agent of liberal capitalism in its most cut-throat, laissez-faire form. Theodore Roosevelt was ‘the Conservative as Progressive.’”

Although Hofstadter’s book now appears to be “contrarian to the point of being shallow,” it was certainly a central element in the consensus school that dominated American historiography during the 1950s.

How might we see *12 Angry Men* (1957) as an example of the consensus school? And what does *Inherit the Wind* (1960) have to say about the dangers of consensus politics and culture? Why was cultural, political, and economic consensus important to Americans in the 1950s, and what dangers did it pose to the larger American experiment in self-government?

Note: the quotes listed above come from Sean Wilentz’s review of David S. Brown’s recent book, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography*. For the review, see the *New Republic*, July 10 and 17, 2006, 21-28.

TOPIC II

“Well, boys, I reckon this is it - nuclear combat toe to toe with the Rooskies. Now look, boys, I ain't much of a hand at makin' speeches, but I got a pretty fair idea that something doggone important is goin' on back there. And I got a fair idea the kinda personal emotions that some of you fellas may be thinkin'. Heck, I reckon you wouldn't even be human bein's if you didn't have some pretty strong personal feelin's about nuclear combat. I want you to remember one thing, the folks back home is a-countin' on you and by golly, we ain't about to let 'em down. I tell you something else, if this thing turns out to be half as important as I figure it just might be, I'd say that you're all in line for some important promotions and personal citations when this thing's over with. That goes for ever' last one of you regardless of your race, color or your creed. Now let's get this thing on the hump - we got some flyin' to do.” -- Major T. J. "King" Kong, from *Dr. Strangelove*.

Why did Charles Maland entitle his 1979 essay on *Dr. Strangelove*, “Nightmare Comedy and the Ideology of Liberal Consensus”? What does this phrase mean, and why was the film important?

TOPIC III

“It's ugly. This whole thing is so ugly. Have you any idea what it's like to live with all this? People look at us and only see bigots and racists. Hatred isn't something you're born with. It gets taught. At school, they said segregation what's said in the Bible... Genesis 9, Verse 27. At 7 years of age, you get told it enough times, you believe it. You believe the hatred. You live it... you breathe it. You marry it.” – Mrs. Pell, from *Mississippi Burning*.

Based on your reading, what important historical elements did *Mississippi Burning* (1988) get wrong? Why do you think the film makers presented the narrative the way they did? And, finally, do you think Spike Lee's portrayal of Malcolm X was more historically accurate? Explain.

TOPIC IV

Colonel Lucas: Your mission is to proceed up the Nung River in a Navy patrol boat. Pick up Colonel Kurtz's path at Nu Mung Ba, follow it and learn what you can along the way. When you find the Colonel, infiltrate his team by whatever means available and terminate the Colonel's command.

Willard: Terminate the Colonel?

General Corman: He's out there operating without any decent restraint, totally beyond the pale of any acceptable human conduct. And he is still in the field commanding troops.

Civilian: Terminate with extreme prejudice.

Colonel Lucas: You understand, Captain, that this mission does not exist, nor will it ever exist...

- *Apocalypse Now* (1979)

Apocalypse Now (1979) is simply the best film on the Vietnam War. Defend or refute this statement. Use illustrations from the film (or other films) to support your argument.

TOPIC V

“You know the results of the latest Gallup Poll? Half the country never even heard of the word Watergate. Nobody gives a shit. You guys are probably pretty tired, right? Well, you should be. Go on home, get a nice hot bath. Rest up... 15 minutes. Then get your asses back in gear. We're under a lot of pressure, you know, and you put us there. Nothing's riding on this except the, uh, first amendment to the Constitution, freedom of the press, and maybe the future of the country. Not that any of that matters, but if you guys fuck up again, I'm going to get mad. Goodnight. “ – Ben Bradlee, from *All the President's Men* (1976)

According to Robert Brent Toplin, why is *All the President's Men* the story that people know and remember? What does this phrase mean? And how does the film compare to Oliver Stone's more recent movie, *Nixon*, which covered the same era?

TOPIC VI

Carolyn Burnham: This is a \$4,000 sofa, upholstered in Italian silk. It is not just a couch.

Lester Burnham: [shouts] It's just a couch!

- *American Beauty* (1999)

A. What does the film *American Beauty* reveal about the social, economic, and cultural concerns of the upwardly mobile in middle class American society? How does the film address these concerns?

B. In what way does *American Beauty* document changing moral values and attitudes concerning sexuality in modern America? How does the film's treatment of these issues shed light on the social dilemmas faced by American citizens in the twenty-first century?