

HISTORY 902: RESEARCH SEMINAR IN AMERICAN HISTORY: THE CIVIL RIGHTS  
MOVEMENT

FALL 1992. Professor Plummer

**Objective.** The purpose of this course is to train students in methods of and approaches to research in U. S. history, using the civil rights movement as a laboratory.

**Scope.** The course takes an expansive view of the civil rights movement. It sees the movement as having exerted a profound influence on American life. It is open to efforts to explain and analyze the rich and diverse aspects of civil rights history. Students are free to study any dimension of the movement: its emergence, its relationship to broader societal change, the impact of such momentous events as World War II, the role of gender, legal-historical origins of civil rights litigation, the relation to subsequent social movements, ad infinitum.

**Course procedure.** The semester will be divided into three parts of approximately five sessions (weeks) each. The first part is devoted to reviewing the general history of the civil rights movement, exploring local resources for its study, and examining the historiography. Students will come to each weekly session during Part I prepared to discuss a set of readings in relation to questions that the instructor and the class as a whole formulate for that meeting. One student will chair the session. Everyone will be responsible for the general readings, and each week, one or more persons will report on and organize discussion around these. More specialized material may be assigned, depending on class interest. In addition to this student-directed activity, the instructor will help guide discussion each week to encompass certain key concepts and events to lend thematic coherence. After thoughtful consideration of available resources and interest, students will choose a specific topic to research by the end of Part I. Some sample topics have been enclosed with this syllabus. (See Sample Topics). No one is limited to any of these. Students are free to undertake any civil rights-related project after consultation.

Part II is reserved for work on the projects. Meetings during these weeks will focus on practical issues and methodological problems that students face on a day-to-day basis as the work proceeds. Students will share resources and insights. By the end of Part II, students will have written and submitted the first of two papers. The first will be a bibliographic and historiographic essay that demonstrates a good grasp of the literature and the sources for the project.

Part III is the time in the semester when students present their work to the class, review and evaluate their findings, and prepare the second paper. The second paper is the culmination of the research effort. (See enclosed guidelines for writing the papers). It is submitted for the instructor's evaluation only after the topic has been thoroughly presented to and discussed by peers. Due dates for these papers will be set by the class collectively. Firm dates for the beginning and end of Parts I-III and specific weekly reading assignments will also be agreed on.

**Evaluation.** All students are evaluated on the basis of the quality of their class preparation and discussion, and their written assignments. They will be presented by the professor with a written evaluative summary of their oral presentations and written work at the end of Part II and again at the end of Part III. Students are expected to be pro-active in initiating and sustaining class discussions and in pursuing their research.

**General Texts.** Terry Crowley, Clio's Craft (Toronto: Copp, Clark, Putnam, 1988)

Ronald Grele, ed. Envelopes of Sound (New York: Praeger, 1991)

Vincent Harding, Hope and History (New York: Orbis, 1990)

**Optional:**

Rhoda Blumberg, Civil Rights: The 1960s Freedom Struggle, rev. ed. Boston: Twayne, 1991)

## Papers

The following comments are notes about the criteria that will be used to evaluate the papers that you will write. These comments are not a "how-to" manual to writing papers, but simply indicate the factors that influence my judgment in making distinctions among essays.

The historiographic/bibliographic essay. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate your command over the literature related to your topic and your knowledge of the perspectives that other scholars have taken. Writing the paper will broaden your awareness of the field, and give you some insights about where your contribution is situated.

Bibliographies and historiographies do not necessarily have to be exhaustive. They should, however, be an effort to identify and understand the major trends in the literature. You might proceed by asking yourself: What has been written on this subject? By whom? When? From what perspective? How does scholar X's analysis compare to Scholar Y's? What ideas and trends have most influenced writing on this subject? What, if any, are the deficiencies of the literature? What has it most emphasized?

There is no set length for the paper because the availability and abundance of materials varies from topic to topic. The paper should be typed, double-spaced. I am specifying margins and type point sizes only because computers now allow people to do so many sneaky things with type. Margins should be no wider than 1.5 inches on any side. Type should be conventional-sized—12 point or less. Standard conventions of citation apply. If you want to directly quote a source in your text, use quotation marks and indicate the source of the quotation in a footnote. Any ideas not your own should be identified as borrowed. You may use any citation system you wish as long as you are consistent. It is to your advantage to proof-read papers for typing, grammar, and spelling errors. These directions apply to the research paper also.

The research paper. This paper provides an opportunity for you to hone your skills as a historian and do original research in civil rights history.

The first concern is topic choice. Have you chosen a topic that is too broad for a seminar paper? Alternatively, have you chosen one that is too narrow for the sources of information currently available to you? Are local resources adequate for your purpose? If not, will you, through the use of interlibrary loan, personal travel, or other strategies, be able to complete the work by the end of the semester?

The task of making a lucid argument or persuasively presenting a viewpoint depends greatly on how evidence is marshalled and presented. The writer makes a case by accessing the pertinent literature and demonstrating understanding of material that supports her/his claims. This includes acknowledging and coming to terms with contradictory data that doesn't fit.

Papers should also possess internal logic, that is, plausible arguments should flow consistently from one point to another in coherent paragraphs. The introduction and conclusion are important in this regard. The introduction should indeed address the issues raised in the body of the paper, and the conclusion should succinctly resolve them.

This hand-out is very general in nature and may leave some questions unanswered about specific research and writing problems. See me for more detailed information or clarification about individual projects.

## 902 Sample Project 1:

Pressure to restore the civil rights won during Reconstruction mounted after 1945 as membership in veterans organizations and the NAACP increased in small towns and rural areas in the South. Afro-Americans had entered World War II with the expectation that racial reform would reward their participation. Black veterans enthusiastically supported the "Double-V" campaign—victory over fascism abroad and racism at home.

The Mississippi state legislature, evidently in the throes of patriotic fervor, passed an April 1946 law exempting all World War II veterans from poll taxes regardless of race. The lawmakers expected literacy tests and the Democratic Party white primary to deter prospective Afro-American voters. They did not anticipate, however, the groundswell of interest in voting that the 66,000 returning black GIs demonstrated. Black veterans, emboldened by the Supreme Court's 1944 decision in *Smith v. Allwright* to strike down the white primary in Texas, came to registration sites.<sup>1</sup>

Mississippi's demagogic senator, the virulent and outspoken racist Theodore Bilbo, counseled whites to make intimidating visits to blacks to prevent them from registering. The father of future civil rights leader Medgar Evers was among those receiving such attention. This harassment did not, however, deter Medgar Evers who, accompanied by four other veterans, tried to vote the following day. Gun-toting thugs turned them away from the polls. Fearful that newly enfranchised blacks would re-establish the Republican Party in the South and install reform governments as during the Reconstruction era gave impetus to the drive to disqualify as many black voters as possible.<sup>2</sup>

Trouble in Mississippi prompted a Senate investigation, but Dixiecrats managed to pack the committee. The committee held hearings in Mississippi but subpoenaed no Afro-American witnesses. Black Mississippians, led by activist veterans, nevertheless appeared at the Jackson courthouse where the committee was convening. They informed the national press of harassment, assault, illegal arrests and fraudulent use of voter qualification examinations.<sup>3</sup>

A 1944 survey conducted by the Army indicated that 51% of all black veterans had definite personal postwar plans. Only one-third wanted to return to their previous line of work. While only 6% of white GIs planned to leave their region of origin, 12% of black veterans made that decision. Most who planned to move wanted to go to the Northeast.<sup>4</sup> Continued educational segregation in the Deep South proved another sore point. Afro-American veterans could not take advantage of the educational opportunities the GI bill afforded, because most could attend only black colleges that simply did not have space for them. Of 100,000 Afro-Americans eligible for higher education under the GI bill, 20,000 actually succeeded in enrolling. Fifteen thousand were turned away. Tuition benefits remained underutilized as overcrowded campuses at historically black colleges and universities provided yet more incentive for former soldiers to leave the southern states.<sup>5</sup>

The relatively large number of World War II-era veterans assigned to noncombat or service units meant that many received training in skills with a civilian counterpart. As over half the Afro-American GIs had been unskilled farm laborers, this training was significant, and gave many the confidence to emigrate. Returning veterans now sought employment in the heavy industries whose ability to retain them depended greatly on sustained economic growth and full employment for preferred white workers.

Mainstream black organizations devoted increased attention to veterans affairs. The NAACP had 300 veterans committees among its branches by early 1947. A NAACP rally in Cincinnati, Ohio on June 30, 1946 opened with an aerial demonstration by the black 477th Composite Group from Lockbourne Field in Columbus. The Elks also boasted a veterans department. Yet returning black veterans did not place all their future hopes in the care of established organizations. Interest in civil rights and voter registration, noted above, characterized an early response to the perceived need for change. Veterans also organized associations of their own.

In the South, many black veterans continued to organize themselves locally without reference to, or substantial contact with, national developments. They remained in the vanguard

in challenging Southern racial discrimination. Many refused any longer to accept accommodationism. In Columbia, Tennessee a black veteran threw a white radio repairman through a plate glass window after the mechanic struck his mother. A white mob, followed by state police, subsequently pillaged the black section in late February 1946, destroying homes, beating the inhabitants, and killing two. Veterans composed half of the 70 persons arrested without cause.<sup>6</sup>

Given the evident desire for change in 1945, why is it that veterans groups as such did not play a larger role in the emerging civil rights movement?

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<sup>1</sup>U. S. Senate, Hearings Before the Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures, 1946 (Washington, 1947) 6, 17; Lawson, Black Ballots, 103.

<sup>2</sup>Steven F. Lawson, Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the United States (New York, 1976), 103; Senate, Hearings Before the Special Committee, 17-19.

<sup>3</sup>Lawson, Black Ballots, 107-109.

<sup>4</sup>Selective Service System, Special Monographs No. 10, Special Groups (Washington, D. C.: 1953), 170, 171.

<sup>5</sup>Charles G. Bolte and Louis Harris, "Report on Negro Veterans," Negro Digest 9 (July 1947): 65; Donald R. McCoy and Richard T. Ruetten, Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration (Lawrence, 1973), 60.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Duberman, Paul Robeson (New York, 1990), 305, 306; Howard Johnson, "The Negro Veteran Fights for Freedom," Political Affairs May 1947, p. 438, SCF; Peter M. Bergman, The Chronological History of the Negro in America (New York: Harper and Row, 1969). 511-512.

## 902 Sample Project 2:

During the Vietnam era, the major civil rights groups feared the loss of revenues if pro-war advocates withdrew their support. Internal friction among organizations and leaders over the war issue was another reason for avoiding troubled waters. Anxiety over possible accusations of subversion, and concern that the civil rights focus would be sidetracked also caused apprehension. The sheer immediacy of the civil rights movement in the South during its early years provided a powerful pretext for channeling organizational energies to domestic questions only.<sup>1</sup>

In 1965, however, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party publicly advocated draft resistance. As both victory and defeat, amidst mounting casualties, continued to elude the Johnson administration, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee became the first national body to oppose the war. SNCC veterans James Bevel and Diane Nash became active in the anti-war movement, and such prominent blacks as Julian Bond and Muhammad Ali, among others, became public adversaries of administration policy.<sup>2</sup>

Martin Luther King, Jr. had been a peace advocate long before his famous speech of April 1967 at New York's Riverside Church. King, encouraged to speak out by Coretta Scott King, Stanley Levison, James Lawson and activists from SANE and American Friends Service Committee, condemned U. S. bombing raids in Indochina. He offered his personal services as a mediator with Ho Chi Minh. Senator Thomas Dodd sharply criticized his remarks. Dodd questioned the civil rights veteran's competence to address foreign policy matters and warned that he was alienating Congress.<sup>3</sup>

King's own organization, SCLC, had not taken an anti-war position. Some of its members, Andrew Young among them, openly opposed the peace movement. As a result of war-related reductions in Great Society social welfare programs, however, certain SCLC activists became less convinced Johnson loyalists.<sup>4</sup>

Using Arthur Goldberg as an intermediary, in September 1965 President Johnson pleaded with King to make no further statements on the war that might jeopardize secret negotiations that were supposedly taking place. King nevertheless supported the black Georgia politician Julian Bond when the latter was denied his seat in the state legislature because of his endorsement of SNCC's anti-war statements.<sup>5</sup>

Other civil rights leaders also began making linkages between the need for racial reform and changes in foreign policy by mid-decade. James Farmer, addressing the Congress of Racial Equality's 21st convention in Durham, North Carolina in 1965 declared that the war in Vietnam was draining the funds for the Johnson administration's War on Poverty. The NAACP's Roy Wilkins advocated silence on foreign policy questions. These, he believed, would only "confuse the issue" as civil rights organizations lacked sufficient information to make judgments.<sup>6</sup>

Many people apparently shared Wilkins' perspective. In 1966, according to a Newsweek poll, only 35% of blacks disapproved of the war. The big transition came in 1967 when the Defense Department lowered its qualifications in order to draft more minority personnel so as to avoid drafting white college students. The Army accepted only 29.9% of blacks examined by the Selective Service in 1965. It enrolled 42.5 percent in 1966. The same year the Pentagon launched its widely touted Project One Hundred Thousand as its contribution to the War on Poverty. Men previously unable to qualify for military service were recruited to unskilled job categories in the army but given no remedial education. Of the first quarter million recruits, 41% were nonwhites, but nonwhites constituted less than 2% of all draft board members.<sup>7</sup>

In March 1967 King joined Dr. Benjamin Spock in leading an anti-war demonstration in Chicago. The following month, he made a speech at the Riverside Church in New York City that sharply criticized American domestic and foreign policy. King formally reiterated his inability to square Vietnam with his conscience. He believed that the war was sapping the economic and spiritual vigor of the country, and that the national mission needed redefinition.<sup>8</sup> King's remarks unleashed a firestorm of repudiation from the white press, the NAACP, and the Urban League. Soon after the Riverside address, SCLC found its fund raising efforts in jeopardy.<sup>9</sup>

The executive departments, the military, and local governments used several methods to counter dissidents' growing militancy. The U. S. Army in 1965 initiated a program of spying on civilians. The program, an effort to head off any civil unrest that might require military action, expanded during the summer of 1967 to collect intelligence on both right and left-wing civilian organizations. Black organizations under surveillance included the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Revolutionary Action Movement.<sup>10</sup>

As Adam Fairclough has suggested, King did not try to merge the anti-war and civil rights movements because the former cause lacked the black community base which formed King's major constituency. Within the peace movement itself, there was little consensus on how to protest, and King remained leery of New Left's impious style of confrontation. "SCLC's earlier victories," Fairclough claims, had rested on the assurances of "peace, black unity, and Presidential favor." By 1967 these essential ingredients were all lacking. King's movement to the left, motivated by conscience, left him in an exposed position. There was a constituency for his views, but no one, including himself, knew how to organize it.<sup>11</sup>

Scholars generally assume a relationship between the civil rights movement and succeeding social movements, such as the anti-war movement and the women's movement. It is assumed that through networking, the borrowing and adaptation of rhetoric and techniques, and mutual solidarity, a tutelary relationship existed between the black struggle and others. Can we refine the nature of these relationships by studying them more thoroughly?

<sup>1</sup>Robert S. Browne, "The Freedom Movement and the War in Vietnam," 472-3.

<sup>2</sup>William Loren Katz, "The Afro-American's Response to Imperialism," Freedomways 11:3 (1971): 284, 285; Adam Fairclough, "---," Phylon 44, p. 28, 28n.35, 36; New York Post, January 13, 1967, SCF.

<sup>3</sup>Adam Fairclough, "---," Phylon 44, p. 24, 24n.20, 25.

<sup>4</sup>Adam Fairclough, "---," Phylon 44, p. 24, 24n.20, 25.

<sup>5</sup>Fairclough, 26, 28, 28n.35, 36.

<sup>6</sup>Time, July 16, 1965, p. 20;

<sup>7</sup>New York Times, October 16, 1966, I, 9:2-5; Paul T. Murray, "Blacks and the Draft: A History of Institutional Racism," Journal of Black Studies 2 (Sept. 1971): 72, 73.

<sup>8</sup>David L. Lewis, King: A Critical Biography (Baltimore, 1970): 359-364; Browne, "The Freedom Movement," 473.

<sup>9</sup>Fairclough, 30, 31.

<sup>10</sup>Christopher Pyle, "CONUS Intelligence: The Army Watches Civilian Politics," Washington Monthly 1 (January 1970): 5, 6; Washington Post May 16, 1972, B, 15:5.

<sup>11</sup>Fairclough, 34-38.

## 902 Sample Project 3:

The welfare state attempted to solve the problem of poor relief by sharing costs with state governments in such programs as Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Welfare entitlements thus became a citizenship right and a civil rights issue. Yet efforts to limit poor black women's welfare entitlements stemmed not only from resistance to civil rights demands per se, but also to the desire to ensure the privileges of the white middle class while denying similar privileges, and the right of unimpeded reproduction, to minority peoples.

When the civil rights movement began in the early 1960s, nearly half the states had criteria for the disbursement of welfare payments that were based on legitimacy, i. e., in wedlock birth. In the southern states where most of the black population still lived, these regulations served primarily to disqualify black women AFDC candidates.

This problem originally came to public attention as a poverty issue rather than as a civil rights concern. When U. S. society discovered poverty anew during the early years of the Kennedy administration, Michael Harrington's The Other America acquainted the middle class reading public with the harsh deprivation of life in the backwoods of Appalachia and the cotton plantations of the Black Belt. The media highlighted southern states' inadequate welfare allotments and the discriminatory way that they handled relief. Changing these conditions would be part of a national program directed by federal authorities, and connected in the public mind with other New Frontier ventures.

When the welfare rights issue surfaced in northern cities, it emerged as a political movement among poor families. The scholarship on it, most notably by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, reflects the character of the welfare rights movement as a social process. Can we develop a history of the struggle over welfare entitlements that examines its relationship to the demand for other rights that were being withheld during the Jim Crow era? Would this history address how southern states' welfare policies were contested, and involve examining historical actors who differ from the standard protagonists of civil rights historiography?

## 902 Sample Project 4:

Lisabeth Cohen has observed that in 19th century American society perceived entitlements as rights over production.<sup>1</sup> White farmers wanted land, and in the North, "free soil:" that is, land unencumbered by the economic strictures and social constraints of slave holding. Genuine citizenship meant the right to produce. After slavery, Afro-Americans wanted 40 acres and a mule, also a claim on the right to own and to produce. The Harlem riot of 1935 and the "don't-buy-where-you-can't-work" campaigns characteristic of the black urban experience of the 1930s, also concerned production. They were struggles over jobs, the right to produce, not the right to consume.<sup>2</sup>

The late twentieth century, Cohen observes, has witnessed a reorientation of entitlements to increasingly privilege consumption rights. Women have played a major role in this as heads of household and thus as the arbiters and leaders of household consumption. In this sense, the Montgomery bus boycott involved black working women refusing to purchase the services of a bus company which treated them, the consumers, with disrespect.<sup>3</sup> It is an interesting aside that civil rights leader Ella Baker worked in New York as a consumer advocate before joining SCLC.

The desegregation of public facilities forced through by the civil rights movement has politicized Afro-Americans as consumers. To a large degree, citizenship and dignity are conflated with the right to consume the fruits of U. S. capitalism. Consumer consciousness is ironically reflected in the looting of commodities as a common activity in inner city revolts to the extent that it is associated with widespread dissatisfaction with retail practices. To Cohen, the economism in Malcolm X's prescriptions for black survival reaffirmed the importance of consumerism and were thus not particularly radical.

Was there a relationship between civil rights insurgency and urban unrest? Have historians adequately understood the activity of women as civil rights protagonists?

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<sup>1</sup>This sample is based on the work of Lisabeth Cohen, "The Racial Politics of Consumption: From Sitting Down at Woolworth's to Looting Ghetto Stores, paper for "Reworking Am. Labor Hist.: Race, Gender, & Class," State Historical Society of Wisconsin, April 11, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> On Harlem, see William Muraskin, "The Harlem Boycott of 1934: Black Nationalism and the Rise of Labor-Union Consciousness," Labor History 15 (Summer 1972): 361-373.

<sup>3</sup>Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It (Knoxville, 1987).



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