Formal Essays

Barbara Welke

History 1302: United States History 1865 to Present

HISTORIANS AT WORK PAPER

Due: W/Th. 1/30 or 1/31 in discussion sections.

This assignment has two parts intended to introduce you to (1) making a historical argument supported by evidence; and (2) evaluating the strength of one argument versus another where historians differ in their interpretation.

From grade school through high school most students learn history as a set of facts. History is taught as though it exists outside of interpretation, as though its' sequence and meaning are givens. One goal of this course is to begin to unsettle that received wisdom.

On questions large and small historians often disagree as to what exactly happened, why it happened, what it meant at the time and later, how significant it was vis-a-vis other questions, indeed, they often disagree on whether it is worth thinking about at all. Moreover, even long settled understandings are often challenged and toppled by later historians bringing to bear new questions, evidence, or perspective. A historian's interpretation of a given historical question takes the form of an argument supported by evidence.

Part I: Making a Historical Argument

Using either the Ayers, Rabinowitz, or Welke excerpt (your TA may assign a particular excerpt for all students in the section to do), outline the argument, including (1) stating the author's argument; (2) noting its' major points; (3) noting the evidence supporting the argument. You should include here the type of evidence rather than the specifics, e.g. newspaper rather than Montgomery Advertiser, or legal opinion rather than Hall v. Decuir, etc. The finished product for Part I should look something like an outline, beginning with Thesis (argument), key subpoints, and evidence filled in between.

You should put things in your own words rather than simply quoting from the author. There is no set minimum or maximum page limit here. Your outline should be complete whether it takes 1 page or 3 pages.

Part II: Evaluating History

Considering the book as a whole, write a two-page commentary noting which arguments you found most persuasive and why and which arguments you found least persuasive. Is it possible...
that more than one of these authors is right? Having read this book, how would you answer the questions "When did Southern segregation begin?" and why does it matter?

Late Papers will be marked down 1 letter grade for each day they are late.

HISTORY OF A DAY PAPER

In a paper of 6-7 pages you will write the history of one day in a year assigned to you by your T.A. The date, within that year, will be your birthday.

Sources: You will use at least two newspapers as primary sources. The best starting place is the New York Times which is on microfilm in the basement of Wilson Library. Start by looking up your date. That will tell you the news people read about when they got up on your day. It will not, however, tell you what happened that day. For that you have to look at the day after (and perhaps several more after that if you happen onto an unfolding story). If you find yourself in the middle of some event (for example, a scandal of some sort or a foreign negotiation or a battle) you can use the Index of the NYT to find other stories on that topic around the same time. You should also use a more local paper (Minneapolis or St. Paul -- or if you wish a paper from a place of your choosing) or a paper directed at a more particular audience (e.g., The Chicago Defender, The Revolution) to get at least one more perspective on what happened and how people in different places or from different perspectives learned about the event or didn't. Pay attention not only to "big news" -- the stuff on the front page -- but also to editorials, letters to the editor, feature articles, fashions and advertisements. These will give you insight into the history of everyday life at the time, what people did in their free time, what newspaper editors thought women or men were interested in, what problems advice columnists were asked about, what humor was like.

Guidelines for drafts (your T.A. will give you additional instructions as well):

1. CITE YOUR SOURCES. Throughout your paper a reader should be able to tell where you are getting your information. Do this with footnotes using the form suggested in the University of Chicago Manual of Style. It is better to have too many than too few citations. For newspaper articles the following examples will usually work:


"Earthquake Shakes Cleveland," Cleveland Tribune, July 18, 1903, p. 1.

2. ANALYSIS IS AS IMPORTANT AS EVIDENCE. You will be tempted to give lots of information from the papers you read without stopping to ask what it means. You need to be asking yourself questions about what you read. Ask yourself if there were evident biases in the ways news was written and presented. Could you tell much about what cultural or political
attitudes seemed dominant? Why do you think certain issues were prominent and others less so? Don't take what you read at face value. Someone wrote those stories -- highlighting some facts and ignoring others, perhaps even getting it wrong. Some editor decided what went on which page and wrote the headlines. Ad agencies designed ads with specific markets in mind, etc.

3. THINK ABOUT LINKAGES, THEMES. One of the difficult things about this assignment is the range of information in a newspaper. In most cases, you will need to narrow the number of things you discuss in order to avoid jumping from one to another (“and then, . . . and then”). Difficulty with transitions can signal you that you need to think about how these issues are linked. In most cases you can move beyond recognizing coincidence (it all happened on the same day) to think about what it means that these things were simultaneous. It helps to know something about the broader context (from your textbook, lecture, or discussion). Sometimes juxtaposition is very effective (the dramatic and the mundane, the international and the local), but it does not mean much without analysis. Evidence does not speak for itself!

4. VERBS: Be consistent with verb tense. In a history paper, past tense is usually most appropriate. Also avoid passive verbs whenever possible. They obscure the actor(s).

First Draft Due: Week V (in section. Your T.A. will assign the specific date.

Final Draft Due: Week X in section. Your T.A. will assign the specific date.

Late Papers: Late papers will be marked down 1 letter grade for each day they are late.