

FINAL PAPER ASSIGNMENT: American Freedom in the Twentieth Century

During the twentieth century, the concept of freedom was a keyword of American culture, a word that everyone agreed was important even if they didn't agree what it meant. The concept emerged as what cultural historians call a "contested terrain" of meaning that people fought over as a way of figuring out the meaning of America itself. We will encounter many examples some examples in class, but there are many others:

Norman Rockwell put the concept into his "Four Freedoms" posters during World War II after hearing Franklin D. Roosevelt use it in his Third Inaugural Address (<http://www.nara.gov/exhall/powers/freedoms.html>). During the Cold War, the concept of freedom was central to American life at home and abroad, in documents like the National Security Council's NSC-68 (<http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-68.htm>), which articulated American aims in the conflict with the Soviet Union. Freedom was also a theme in the songs of the Civil Rights Movement and in Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," and it was also in the writings of beat poets like Allen Ginsberg (http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_1/ginsberg/onlinepoems.htm). During the tumultuous 1960s, it could be found nearly everywhere, from the Port Huron Statement of the radical 1960s group Students for a Democratic Society (http://lists.village.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/SDS_Port_Huron.html), to the manifesto of the conservative pro-Vietnam-War youth movement Young Americans for Freedom (<http://www.yaf.com/sharon.shtml>).

In **eight to ten pages**, explore the meaning of freedom in American politics and culture during the twentieth century through a close analysis of a document or small set of documents. Your essay should explore the meaning of freedom to the individual(s) or group(s) that you are examining, and use that to develop a broader interpretive argument about American culture in this period. Be sure to elaborate on the broader significance of your document for America's ongoing debate about freedom and national identity that has been the central theme of this class.

This is a research paper that requires you to base your argument on material not currently on the syllabus. The examples I give above only scratch the surface – there is almost no limit to the range of topics that could be explored. Be sure, however, that your paper is based on an interpretation of original material produced during these years in which freedom is a central organizing concept. A poem about freedom works just fine. Your rambling thoughts about how driving a '57 Chevy makes you feel free is not. (If you have your heart set on writing about a topic on an earlier time period in American history, let me know, and we can work something out. The twentieth century, as you will soon find, is easier to research, but there is plenty of material on other topics.)

This is not the kind of paper that you can write in one night, and so the requirements for the paper are set up to prevent you from trying to do that. On class #22, we will have a discussion in class on issues of writing and conceptualization to get you to start thinking about your topic if you haven't already done so. If you come up with ideas for the topic **after class #23**, you may want to email me about them or come to office hours. This is also the time to do background research about your topic. Leave time for dead-ends in your research.

On class #24, you should hand in a brief description of your paper that describes the primary source material that you will use, and the questions that you think it will answer. You don't have to have a thesis statement, an opening paragraph, or an outline, but you might find it useful to draft something like that. You should definitely have some sense by now of what your paper will ultimately be about, and whether

the source material you've found can help you address those questions. This is required, and counts for 5% of your final grade. Bring what you write with you to class that day, and we will spend some time doing brainstorming. You will turn them in that day and I will respond to them by email.

The final paper is due in class on class #26. I encourage you to work with a peer editor on a draft during the last couple of days. Bring your paper with you and be prepared to talk about it. We will also discuss King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," so be sure to set aside time to read that as well.

What Are Some Kinds of Primary Sources?

The following are taken in part from a series of essays on "Recovering the Past" in Gary B. Nash, et al., *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society* (1994). They are meant to suggest the wide range of things that historians examine.

Think about: newspapers, magazines, congressional records, census data, architecture, autobiographies, sermons and speeches, military records, paintings, novels, poems, foreigners' travel narratives, personal diaries, scrapbooks, and letterbooks, maps, public monuments, labor or radical pamphlets, ethnic newspapers (especially if you read other languages), photographs, political cartoons, government wartime propaganda, advertising, social scientific surveys, court decisions, fashion, and film.

Tracking Down Materials

There are a number of collections of primary sources in American history from which you could put together a list of sources. The *Annals of America* series and the *Major Problems in ...* series are particularly good. MIT has a remarkably good collection of magazines and newspapers of the twentieth century, some on microfilm and others in the RetroSpective Collection. Use reference works like *Poole's Index* (for 19th-century magazines) or the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* (after 1900 or so). If you are focusing on a specific person, it would be worth your time to look him/her up in something like the *Dictionary of American Biography*, *Who's Who*, or *Notable American Women*. The *Blackwell Companion to American Thought* is useful for intellectual and cultural trends. Those working in literary sources should consult the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* for the authors they are considering. The *Grove Dictionary of Art* has excellent entries on hundreds of American artists from the period. Other works like Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, or Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History* can give a multicultural perspective. A good starting place for any research is *The Reader's Companion to American History*, edited by Eric Foner and John Garraty.

Reference Librarians. These folks are very helpful, particularly with such issues as identifying on-line sources, working with microfilm and microfiche, or navigating the various article indexes. You can always work with the reference librarian at the desk (during hours when it is staffed), but it may be a better idea to set up an appointment in advance.

Extensions. You have plenty of time to plan for the paper in advance; extensions should not be necessary except in case of emergency. I have set the paper deadline at the end of the term in order to give you time during the exam period to focus on your other classes. Please remember that computer-related crises are not valid reasons for an extension; leave yourself a cushion of time in case something breaks or will not print. Please be careful to cite the sources of information and ideas that you use in your paper, both primary and secondary. You may use any of the standard methods of citation (footnotes, endnotes, parenthetical references, etc.), as long as you are complete and consistent.