

The Kennedy Era

Professor Barbara Perry

Summer 2025

Course Description

At the dawn of the 1960s, polls showed that three-quarters of Americans trusted the national government to do the right thing; by 1974, that percentage had plummeted to one-quarter. This course explores the crucial turning point in American history when the hope engendered by the Kennedy presidency, as it promised "to get the country moving again" after the "quiescent" decade of the 1950s, was dashed by assassinations, racial tensions, Vietnam, and Watergate.

More than fifty years after its tragic end, the presidency of John F. Kennedy continues to be the focus of scholars, educators, biographers, journalists, politicians, advertisers, students, and citizens of the nation and the world. Why does a mere thousand-day presidency continue to attract such universal attention? Was it "one brief shining moment," as the Camelot legend proclaimed?

This course examines JFK's biography, career, rhetoric, and policies, and uses political symbols and the media to contextualize the Cold War, the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam, the Peace Corps, civil rights, the space race, and the arts, to gain both knowledge of and perspective on the thirty-fifth president and his family's legacy as carried on by Robert and Edward Kennedy. Followed by Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy, the fraught era concluded with the unprecedented resignation of a US president, which continues to resonate today.

Course Readings

1. Dallek, Robert. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2004.
2. Giglio, James N. *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 2nd ed. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
3. Perry, Barbara A. *Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of the New Frontier*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2018. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Course Requirements

- Watch all course lectures
- Complete all course readings

- Submit five short papers (500 words each)
- Contribute to nine discussion boards
- Participate in at least three Q&As
- Complete a 15-page (~3,750 words) research paper or project of appropriate rigor
- Complete a course evaluation (A survey link will be sent to your Gettysburg email during week eleven of the semester.)

Learning Objectives

1. Students will understand the boundaries of the Kennedy era, from the 1950s through the early 1970s and beyond, via Edward Kennedy's lengthy Senate career.
2. Students will comprehend the meaning of "political symbols" and their use as a lens to focus on the Kennedy presidency, starting with JFK's inaugural address.
3. Students will place the Kennedy and Fitzgerald families in the context of immigration history.
4. Students will examine Kennedy's use of modern media to relay the messages of his campaign and administration.
5. Students will analyze how the Cold War shaped Kennedy's foreign and domestic policies.
6. Students will assess the Camelot legend's origins, longevity, and accuracy in capturing the Kennedy presidency.
7. Students will study the role of Jacqueline Kennedy as First Lady.
8. Students will investigate the problematic relationship between Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.
9. Students will place the tumultuous year of 1968 in the broader context of US politics.
10. Students will understand how Nixon won the presidency and how Watergate led to his demise.

Class Schedule

Week One: May 29: The Kennedy Era

Readings

- Perry, *Jacqueline Kennedy*, Chapter 1.
- PBS, *The Fifties: The Road to the Sixties*. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week One module.](#))
- UVA Miller Center Essays on Dwight D. Eisenhower. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week One module.](#))
- Richard Nixon, Checkers Speech, September 23, 1952. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week one module.](#))
- Dwight Eisenhower, Farewell Address, January 17, 1961. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week One module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board One
 - First post due: Sunday, June 1
 - Second post due: Wednesday, June 4
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Week Two: June 5: Framing the Kennedy Presidency

Readings

- Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 3–133.
- John F. Kennedy, "The President's News Conference of January 25, 1961." ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Two module.](#))
- "JFK Crowd Work." ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Two module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Two
 - First post due: Sunday, June 8
 - Second post due: Wednesday, June 11
 - Short Paper One due: Wednesday, June 11
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor, or to one of your own design.
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Week Three: June 12: The Fitzgerald-Kennedy Dynasty: Old and New Eras

Readings

- Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 3–296. (Skim for main points.)
- UVA Miller Center, "John F. Kennedy on Politics and Public Service," Fall 1960. ([A link to this recording can be found in the Week Three module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Three
 - First post due: Sunday, June 15
 - Second post due: Wednesday, June 18
- Final Project/Paper Question due: June 18
 - In roughly 1–2 pages, outline the question your final project or paper will attempt to answer. This should include a description of the project or paper you are proposing, some background information and historical context on your topic, a brief description of your research plan, and a justification for why your particular project or paper is worth pursuing.

Week Four: June 19: JFK and Religion: "The Catholic Issue"

Readings

- John F. Kennedy, "Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association," September 12, 1960. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Four module.](#))
- Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, "Sarah Palin Is Wrong about John F. Kennedy, Religion, and Politics," *The Washington Post*, December 3, 2010. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Four module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Four
 - First post due: Sunday, June 22
 - Second post due: Wednesday, June 25
- Short Paper Two due: Wednesday, June 25
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.

Week Five: June 26: Exploring the "New Frontier": JFK's Historic Inaugural Address

Readings

- John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Five module.](#))
- Thurston Clarke, "Ask How," *The New York Times*, January 15, 2005. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Five module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Five
 - First post due: Sunday, June 29
 - Second post due: Wednesday, July 2
- Revised Question and Proposed Bibliography due: Wednesday, July 2
 1. Revise your initial proposal to incorporate your section professor's feedback AND
 2. Create an annotated bibliography containing at least five sources. Each of these sources should be followed by a short paragraph describing the source and what it will contribute to your final project/paper.

Week Six: July 3: JFK's First Year: From Rhetoric to Reality on the "New Frontier"

Readings

- Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 47–98.
- Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 299–441. (Skim for main points.)
- John F. Kennedy speech on the Bay of Pigs Invasion, April 17, 1961. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Six module.](#))
- JFK Library, "Peace Corps." ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Six module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Six
 - First post due: Sunday, July 6
 - Second post due: Wednesday, July 9
 - Short Paper Three due: Wednesday, July 9
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
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Week Seven: July 10: The Cold War at Home: Cuban Missiles, Space Race, Civil Rights

Readings

- Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 150–155 and 173–236.
- Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 535–574 and 639–651.
- "John F. Kennedy Consults Dwight Eisenhower during the Cuban Missile Crisis," October 28, 1962. ([A link to this recording can be found in the Week Seven module.](#))
- John F. Kennedy, "The Goal of Sending a Man to the Moon," May 25, 1961. ([A link to this recording can be found in the Week Seven module.](#))
- John F. Kennedy, "Address on the Space Effort," September 12, 1962. ([A link to this recording can be found in the Week Seven module.](#))
- "Fly Me to the Moon" Presidential Recording, November 21, 1962. ([A link to this recording can be found in the Week Seven module.](#))
- John F. Kennedy, "Address on Civil Rights," June 11, 1963. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Seven module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Seven
 - First post due: Sunday, July 13
 - Second post due: Wednesday, July 16
 - Short Paper Four due: Wednesday, July 16
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
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Week Eight: July 17: Assessing JFK's Presidency

Readings

- Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 441–469 and 630–711.
- Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 99–172, 237–270, and 297–310.
- John F. Kennedy, "Acceptance of the Democratic Party Nomination," July 15, 1960. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Eight module.](#))
- John F. Kennedy, "Ich bin ein Berliner," June 26, 1963. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Eight module.](#))
- John F. Kennedy, "American University Commencement," June 10, 1963. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Eight module.](#))
- John F. Kennedy, Dictation on the Assassination of Diem, November 4, 1963. ([A link to this recording can be found in the Week Eight module.](#))
- JFK Library, "The Last Two Days: November 1963: 21–22." ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Eight module.](#))
- John F. Kennedy, "Undelivered Remarks for Dallas Citizens Council," November 22, 1963. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Eight module.](#))

Assignments

- Project/Paper Preview due: Wednesday, July 23
 - Project: Submissions of the project preview will differ from project to project according to type. Determine an appropriate portion of your final project to turn in with your section professor.
 - Paper: Turn in a rough draft of the first five pages of your final paper.
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Week Nine: July 24: First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy: Clotheshorse or Cold Warrior?

Readings

- Perry, *Jacqueline Kennedy*, Chapters 3–6.
- JFK Library, "Life of Jacqueline B. Kennedy." ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Nine module.](#))
- John F. Kennedy, "Remarks at Amherst College," October 26, 1963. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Nine module.](#))
- John F. Kennedy Library, "Jacqueline Kennedy Entertains." ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Nine module.](#))
- "Jacqueline Kennedy: White House Tour," February 14, 1962. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Nine module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Eight
 - First post due: Sunday, July 27

- Second post due: Wednesday, July 30
 - Short Paper Five due: Wednesday, July 30
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
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Week Ten: July 31: RFK and LBJ: Triumph and Tragedy

Readings

- "JFK and RFK Convention Speeches" RFK at 18:00–end. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Ten module.](#))
- Will Higgins, "How RFK Saved Indianapolis," *The Indy Star*, April 2, 2015. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Ten module.](#))
- UVA Miller Center, "Lyndon B. Johnson," essays. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Ten module.](#))
- Lyndon B. Johnson, "Great Society," speech, May 22, 1964. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Ten module.](#))
- Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks on Decision Not to Seek Reelection," March 31, 1968. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Ten module.](#))

Assignments

- Rough Draft due: Wednesday, August 6
 - Project: Submissions of the project rough draft will differ from project to project according to type. Determine an appropriate portion of your final project to turn in with your section professor.
 - Paper: Turn in a rough draft of the first ten pages (at minimum) of your final paper.
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Week Eleven: August 7: POTUS v. SCOTUS: Nixon and the Supreme Court

Readings

- *United States v. Nixon*, 418 U.S. 683 (1974). ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Eleven module.](#))
- "Articles of Impeachment Against Nixon," July 27, 1974. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Eleven module.](#))
- UVA Miller Center, "Richard Nixon" essays. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Eleven module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Nine
 - First post due: Sunday, August 10

- Second post due: Wednesday, August 13
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Week Twelve: August 14: The Kennedy Era's Coda: Edward Kennedy Bears the Torch

Readings

- Edward M. Kennedy Oral History Project, Commemorative Book, 2015. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Twelve module.](#))
- Edward M. Kennedy, "Address to the People of Massachusetts on Chappaquiddick," July 25, 1969. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Twelve module.](#))
- Edward M. Kennedy, Democratic National Convention Address, August 12, 1980. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Twelve module.](#))
- "Ted Kennedy Endorses Barack Obama," January 28, 2008. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Twelve module.](#))

Assignments

- Final Project/Paper due: August 20
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Course and Program Policies

It is the responsibility of students to know, understand, and abide by course and program policies.

For a full overview of program policies, review the Gettysburg College–Gilder Lehrman Institute Student Handbook.

Course correspondence

Correspondence with faculty and administrators should be formal. Include a subject line, addressee, and closing. Put the name and number of your course in the subject line.

Plagiarism and AI

This program uses Turnitin to check for instances of plagiarism and AI. Plagiarism and papers composed fully or in part by AI will not be tolerated. This includes self-plagiarism. A student caught plagiarizing or composing papers with AI for the first time may receive a zero on the assignment. A student caught plagiarizing or composing with AI for a second time may be permanently removed from the program.

Your section professor will set the policies for use of AI for research or purposes other than composing your papers.

Late work

Assignments should be submitted no later than 11:59 p.m. Pacific Time on the due date unless otherwise specified by your section professor. If you think you will be unable to submit an assignment on time, it is your responsibility to contact your section professor to ask for an extension before the assignment's due date. Late assignments will be docked 5% if less than a week late, 10% if one week late, and an additional 10% for each subsequent week.

Grading scale

Letter Grade	Number Grade	Grade Points
A	95%–100%	4
A-	90%–94%	3.67
B+	87%–89%	3.33
B	84%–86%	3
B-	80%–83%	2.67
C+	77%–79%	2.33
C	74%–76%	2
C-	70%–73%	1.67
D+	67%–69%	1.33
D	64%–66%	1
D-	60%–63%	.67
F	0%–59%	0

Assignment Descriptions

Short Papers (25% of grade – 5% per short paper)

Students will complete five short papers. Each should be approximately 500 words long. The purpose of these papers is not to merely summarize weekly readings but to demonstrate that you have read them analytically and contextually. Students have the option of responding to a prompt created by their section professor or to one of their own design. Student-created prompts should reflect the themes discussed in course readings and be

included at the beginning of the paper. If you need help getting started, you can complete one of the options listed below.

Complete a thesis identification - Select one of your assigned readings and focus on identifying the thesis as well as the evidence the authors use to support that thesis.

Complete a primary source evaluation - Evaluate a primary source from the Gilder Lehrman Collection or elsewhere. Primary sources must be relevant to that week's readings. Keep the following questions in mind:

- Who is the author of this document?
- Who was their intended audience?
- How might both author and audience impact the content of the document?
- For what reason was this document created?

Complete a book review - Focus on one of the secondary sources assigned in this course and critique it. Keep the following questions in mind:

- What is the author's argument?
- Does the author adequately support their argument?
- Are you convinced of their argument? If not, why not?
- How does this source fit into the larger discussion of its topic?

Discussion Board Posts (18% of grade – 2% per discussion board)

Students will interact in 9 discussion boards in this course. Discussion boards are led by section professors, who will provide specific instructions for participation in their section. You are required to make at least one post to each discussion board and respond to **at least two other students**.

Question-and-Answer Sessions (15% of grade – 5% per reaction)

Throughout the semester the lead professor of each course will conduct five Q&As. Students **MUST** attend at least three of these sessions for each course they are taking. **In order to receive credit for attending each Q&A, you must attend the session live and complete a 1–2-paragraph Q&A Reaction within 24 hours of participation.** Note: If you cannot attend three of the five Q&As, you may receive credit by viewing archived Q&As and completing a 500-word review of topics covered for each missed Q&A. **Makeup assignments must be completed within two weeks of the missed Q&A.**

Final Project/Paper (42% of grade)

For the final assignment of each course, you will choose to complete either a research project or 15-page research paper. Research projects are a public-education tool designed for the general population, teachers, and/or students of varying ages. Sample projects include (but are not limited to) vodcasts and podcasts, documentary editing and transcription, websites, annotated readers, walking tours, or museum exhibits. Lesson plans

will not be accepted. A 5-page paper narrative must accompany the project. Your section professor must approve research projects.

The research paper can be a traditional position paper that uses original research to prove a thesis statement or a historiography paper that critically examines how American historians have interpreted the same event differently and why shifts in historical debates may have occurred.

Both final assignment options require you to ask an open-ended historical question (something that does not have an easy yes or no answer) that you do not yet know the answer to. You will then use the research process (pulling from a variety of resources, mostly primary source documents) to explore that question and create a thesis-driven answer. Regardless of whether you choose to pursue a project or paper, finals are scaffolded throughout the semester. This method breaks up a large grade into smaller constituent grades and allows time to incorporate instructor feedback into assignments.

Scaffolded Assignments

- Final Project/Paper Proposal (2%)

In roughly 1–2 pages, you should outline the main question, topic, or purpose of your final project or paper. This should include a description of the project or paper you are proposing, some background information and historical context on your topic (answer the questions who, what, where, and when), a brief description of your research plan (this does not need to be super specific, but should outline how many weeks you plan to research, if you need to schedule research trips or if your sources are published or available digitally, and when you plan to begin writing) and a justification for why your particular project or paper is worth pursuing (what is the significance of this topic? What does it add to our historical knowledge? Are you filling a gap that other historians have overlooked such as considering race, ethnicity, or gender?)

- Revised Proposal and Annotated Bibliography (3.5%)

This assignment will give you the opportunity to incorporate the feedback you received on the first draft of your proposal. In addition to incorporating your section professor's comments, you will also submit a proposed bibliography listing five sources you plan on utilizing in your research for your final product. Each of these sources should be followed by a brief summary (3–5 sentences) of the source and what it will contribute to your research process.

- Project or Paper Preview (5%)

This will give you the opportunity to show the progress you have made on your final project or paper and get some early-stage feedback from your section professor. For a final project, determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your

final submission to turn in. For a final paper, this should be roughly the first five pages of what will ultimately be your final submission.

- Rough Draft (10.5%):

For a final project, determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your final submission to turn in. For a final paper, this should be, at minimum, the first ten pages of what will ultimately be your final submission.

- Final Product (21%):

Final Project: Much like the final paper option, a final project is meant to prove that you have mastered the content covered by this course. We encourage you to be creative in your approach to this project, though it should be equivalent in rigor and workload to a final paper.

Final Paper: Final papers should be at least fifteen pages in length. These can take the form of research papers or historiography papers.