

Presidential Leadership at Historic Crossroads

Professor Barbara A. Perry

Spring 2026

Course Description

Starting with its inception in the eighteenth century, the American presidency has faced numerous inflection points that have reshaped the office. From its constitutional roots to Washington's precedents, Jacksonian democracy, Lincoln's Civil War power assertions, Theodore Roosevelt's and Woodrow Wilson's creation of the "rhetorical presidency," Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Great Depression and World War II presidency, the Cold War's impact, Nixon and Watergate, the Global War on Terror, and Donald Trump's unprecedented tenure, the chief executive's influence has waxed and waned depending on circumstances and presidential leadership. Using classic and new scholarship, as well as primary sources, this course will examine the challenges and responses of presidents when they have faced and sometimes constructed historic crossroads. Assigned scholarly literature will allow students to trace the development of presidential studies from a traditional emphasis on constitutional authority to the modern focus on political roles, which has produced a tension between the Founders' concept of the executive branch and the contemporary "personal presidency."

Course Readings

Students are responsible for purchasing any readings below that are not available online. All other readings in the syllabus will be provided. Readings not linked in the syllabus will be uploaded to the learning management system.

1. Greenstein, Fred I. *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Barack Obama*. Princeton University Press, 2009. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
2. Nelson, Michael, and Barbara A. Perry, eds. *The Presidency: Facing Constitutional Crossroads*. University of Virginia Press, 2021. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
3. "U.S. Presidents," University of Virginia's Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/president>.

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. Understanding the concept of the crossroads metaphor as applied to the presidency
2. Comprehending the meaning of leadership and how presidents have exercised it
3. Examining why the Founders created a presidential system
4. Analyzing George Washington's precedents in shaping the office
5. Determining how expansion of the electorate, from Jacksonian democracy through the twentieth century, changed the presidency
6. Assessing the Civil War's impact on presidential power
7. Studying the rise of the "rhetorical presidency" in the early twentieth century and how it promoted the "personal presidency"
8. Capturing how the presidency changed in response to the twentieth century's economic crises and the rise of fascism/communism
9. Understanding how the constitutional structure corralled Watergate's excesses and deciding whether it remains strong enough to preserve the American democratic republic
10. Contemplating presidents' relationships with modern media
11. Measuring the impact of the Global War on Terror and gridlock at home
12. Tracing how presidency scholarship has both reflected and captured the evolution of the office from its founding roots to its extra-constitutional contours

Class Schedule

Week One: February 5: The Crossroads Metaphor

Readings

- Barbara Perry, Jim Lehrer, and William Antholis, "The Presidency at a Crossroads: Understanding the Contemporary Executive," recorded discussion, February 5, 2018, accessed on YouTube (16:35-). ([A link to this video can be found in the Week One module.](#))
- Michael Nelson, "Presidential Crossroads" and "Crossroads of the (c)onstitutional Presidency," in Nelson and Perry, *The Presidency*, 1-6, 28-48. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board One
 - First post due: Sunday, February 8
 - Second post due: Wednesday, February 11

Week Two: February 12: Presidential Leadership**Readings**

- Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference*, Chapter 1. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Richard Neustadt, "Presidential Power," recorded lecture, March 20, 1996, accessed on the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia (7:48–). ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Two module.](#))
- George C. Edwards III, "The Potential of Presidential Leadership," 2016 Presidential Transition Project Paper, 2016, accessed on TexasA&M.edu. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Two module.](#))
- Doris Kearns Goodwin, "Lessons in Leadership: Presidential Character and the Making of a Leader," recorded discussion, March 11, 2019, accessed on YouTube (24:00–). ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Two module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Two
 - First post due: Sunday, February 15
 - Second post due: Wednesday, February 18
- Short Paper One due: Wednesday, February 18
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.

Week Three: February 19: The Founding of the Presidency and Beyond**Readings**

- US Constitution, 1787, Preamble and Articles I–III, accessed on the US Senate website. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Three module.](#))
- Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist Papers, Nos. 69 and 70," *New York Packet*, 1788, accessed on the Library of Congress website. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Three module.](#))
- Saikrishna Prakash, "The Living Constitution: Always at a Crossroads," in Nelson and Perry, 7–27. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Bill Clinton, "President Bill Clinton's Keynote Address at UVA's 2019 Presidential Ideas Festival," speech, May 23, 2019, accessed on the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia website. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Three module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Three
 - First post due: Sunday, February 22
 - Second post due: Wednesday, February 25
 - Final Project/Paper Question due: Wednesday, February 25
 - In roughly 1–2 pages, outline the question your final project or paper will attempt to answer. This should include a description of the paper or project 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.
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Week Four: February 26: George Washington and the Lessons of Leadership

Readings

- Lindsay M. Chervinsky, "George Washington" (all essays), accessed on the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia website. ([A link to these readings can be found in the Week Four module.](#))
- Ron Chernow, "George Washington: The Reluctant President," *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2011. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Four module.](#))
- Richard Norton Smith, "The Surprising George Washington," *Prologue* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1994), accessed on the National Archives website. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Four module.](#))
- Elvin T. Lim, "Five Trends in Presidential Rhetoric: An Analysis of Rhetoric from George Washington to Bill Clinton," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (June 2002): 328–348, accessed on the Wiley Online Library website. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Four module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Four
 - First post due: Sunday, March 1
 - Second post due: Wednesday, March 4
 - Short Paper Two due: Wednesday, March 4
 - 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 Five: March 5: Jacksonian Democracy: The First Step toward Universal Suffrage

Readings

- Daniel Feller, "Andrew Jackson," all essays, accessed on the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia website. ([A link to these readings can be found in the Week Five module.](#))
- Harry Watson, "Andrew Jackson, America's Original Anti-Establishment Candidate," *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2016. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Five module.](#))
- Carnegie Corporation of New York, "Voting Rights: A Short History," Carnegie Corporation, November 18, 2019. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Five module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Five
 - First post due: Sunday, March 8
 - Second post due: Wednesday, March 11
 - Revised Question and Proposed Bibliography due: Wednesday, March 11
 - Revise your initial proposal to incorporate your section professor's feedback AND
 - 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.
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Week Six: March 12: Lincoln and Presidential War Powers

Readings

- Michael Burlingame, "Abraham Lincoln" (all essays), accessed on the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia website. ([A link to these readings can be found in the Week Six module.](#))
- Abraham Lincoln, letter to Albert G. Hodges, April 4, 1864, accessed on the Library of Congress website. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Six module.](#))
- "Ex Parte Milligan, 71 U.S. 2 (1866)," accessed on Oyez. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Six module.](#))
- Russell Riley, "American Regicide: Postwar Presidents and the Bitter Politics of Returning to Normalcy," in Nelson and Perry, 118–136. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Six
 - First post due: Sunday, March 15

- Second post due: Wednesday, March 18
 - Short Paper Three due: Wednesday, March 18
 - 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: March 19: Theodore Roosevelt/Woodrow Wilson and the Rise of the Personal/Rhetorical Presidency

Readings

- Sydney Milkis, "Theodore Roosevelt" (all essays) accessed on the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia website. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Seven module.](#))
- Saladin Ambar, "Woodrow Wilson" (all essays) accessed on the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia website. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Seven module.](#))
- Theodore Roosevelt, "The New Nationalism," speech, August 31, 1910, accessed on Theodore Roosevelt.org. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Seven module.](#))
- Woodrow Wilson, "First Inaugural Address," March 4, 1913, accessed on the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia website. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Seven module.](#))
- Perry and Georgakis Abbott, "The Personal Presidency at a Constitutional Crossroads," in Nelson and Perry, 137–153. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Seven
 - First post due: Sunday, March 22
 - Second post due: Wednesday, March 25
 - Short Paper Four due: Wednesday, March 25
 - 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: March 26: Franklin Roosevelt and the Modern Presidency

Readings

- Greenstein, Chapter 2.
- Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "First Inaugural Address," speech, March 4, 1933, accessed on The Avalon Project. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Eight module.](#))

- Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Address to Congress Requesting a Declaration of War," speech, December 8, 1941, accessed on the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia website. ([A link to this speech can be found in the Week Eight module.](#))
- Allida M. Black, "Championing a Champion: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Marian Anderson 'Freedom Concert,'" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 719–736. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Eight module.](#))

Assignments

- Project/Paper Preview due: Wednesday, April 1
 - 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: April 2: The Cold War Presidency: Truman to Bush 41

Readings

- Greenstein, Chapters 3–6, 8. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- John F. Kennedy, "American University Commencement (June 10, 1963)," speech, accessed on the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia website. ([A link to this speech can be found in the Week Nine module.](#))
- Lyndon B. Johnson, "University of Michigan Speech, [on the Great Society], 5-22-64," speech, May 22, 1964, accessed on YouTube. ([A link to this speech can be found in the Week Nine module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Eight
 - First post due: Sunday, April 5
 - Second post due: Wednesday, April 8
 - Short Paper Five due: Wednesday, April 8
 - 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: April 9: Nixon and Watergate

Readings

- Greenstein, Chapter 7. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

- "*United States v. Nixon*, 418 U.S. 683 (1974)," accessed on Oyez. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Ten module.](#))
- Sam Ervin, "Senate Watergate Hearing," clip, Senator Sam Ervin (D-NC) questions Nixon aide Bob Haldeman, accessed on the C-Span website. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Ten module.](#))
- Alan J. Pakula, dir., *All the President's Men*, clip, "Deep Throat" (Hal Holbrook) speaks to Bob Woodward (Robert Redford), Warner Bros. Pictures, 1976, accessed on YouTube. ([A link to this video can be found in the Week Ten module.](#))
- Richard Nixon, "Farewell to Staff," speech, August 9, 1974, accessed on the C-Span website. ([A link to this speech can be found in the Week Ten module.](#))

Assignments

- Rough Draft due: Wednesday, April 15
 - 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: April 16: The Media and Presidential Leadership: Carter v. Reagan

Readings

- Greenstein, Chapters 9–10. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Jimmy Carter, "Address on Crisis of Confidence," speech, July 15, 1979, accessed on C-Span website. ([A link to this speech can be found in the Week Eleven module.](#))
- Ronald Reagan, "First Inaugural Address," speech, January 20, 1981, accessed on the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia website. ([A link can be found in the Week Eleven module.](#))
- Russell L. Riley, "The White House as a Black Box: Oral History and the Problem of Evidence in Presidential Studies," *Political Studies* 57, no. 1 (March 2009): 187–206, accessed on the Wiley Online Library. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Eleven module.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board Nine
 - First post due: Sunday, April 19
 - Second post due: Wednesday, April 22
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Week Twelve: April 23: The Global War on Terror: Bush 43, Obama, and Trump

Readings

- Greenstein, Chapters 13–14. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Jackie Calmes, "Donald Trump" (all essays), accessed on the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia website. ([A link to these readings can be found in the Week Twelve module.](#))
- Richard J. Ellis, "On Being Unpresidential: The Trumpian Moment in Historical Perspective," in Nelson and Perry, 49–71. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Jennifer L. Lawless and Sean M. Theriault, "The People, the President, and the Congress at a Crossroads: Can We Turn Back from Gridlock?" in Nelson and Perry, 72–85. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Lilliana Mason, Julie Wronski, and John V. Kane, "Activating Animus: The Uniquely Social Roots of Trump Support," *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 4 (2021): 1508–1516, accessed on Cambridge Core. ([A link to this reading can be found in the Week Twelve module.](#))

Assignments

- Final Project/Paper due: Wednesday, April 29
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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. Prompts should reflect the themes discussed in course readings. 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 nine 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 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.