

Twelve Battles That Shaped American History

Professor Craig Symonds

Fall 2025

Course Description

This course will examine twelve military engagements—on both land and sea—that had a major impact on the course of American history. Chronologically, it will cover the entire history of the United States, from the Battle of Saratoga during the American Revolution to Desert Storm in 1991. The goal is to illuminate not only what happened in each case and describe and explain the outcome, but also to understand why that particular engagement had a disproportionate impact on American history. We will examine what happened, try to explain why it happened, delineate the roles of the principal decision makers from presidents to petty officers, and discover the main reason why the battle unfolded the way it did. The purpose of the course is to look not only at the biggest battles, but at those battles that moved history, and it is not merely to describe military engagements but also to explain them in political and cultural terms as well as in military terms.

Course Readings

1. All readings will be provided.

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 political and strategic significance of major battles in American military history.
2. Students will evaluate the decisions of military leaders and analyze how these decisions shaped the course of each battle.
3. Students will be able to connect major battles in American history to broader changes in America's role in the world.

Class Schedule

Week One: September 18: The Battle of Saratoga

Readings

- Kevin Weddle, *The Compleat Victory* (Oxford University Press, 2021), Chapters 3, 9, 11, 17, 18, and 23. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Assignments

- Discussion Board One
 - First post due: Sunday, September 21
 - Second post due: Wednesday, September 24
-

Week Two: September 25: The Battle of Lake Erie

Readings

- Craig Symonds, *Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles That Shaped American History* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 81–138. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Gerard T. Altoff, "Oliver Hazard Perry and the Battle of Lake Erie," *Michigan Historical Review* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1988): 25–57. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Recommended Reading

- W. J. Welsh and D. C. Skaggs, eds., *War on the Great Lakes: Essays Commemorating the 175th Anniversary of the Battle of Lake Erie* (Kent State University Press, 1991).

Assignments

- Discussion Board Two
 - First post due: Sunday, September 28
 - Second post due: Wednesday, October 1
 - Short Paper One due: Wednesday, October 1
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
-

Week Three: October 2: The Campaign for Mexico City

Readings

- K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846–1848* (Macmillan, 1974), Chapters 13–16.

Recommended Reading

- Robert W. Merry, *A Country of Vast Design: James K. Polk, the Mexican War, and the Conquest of the American Continent* (Simon & Schuster, 2009).

Assignments

- Discussion Board Three
 - First post due: Sunday, October 5
 - Second post due: Wednesday, October 8
 - Final Project/Paper Question due: Wednesday, October 8
 - 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.
-

Week Four: October 9: The Battle of Antietam

Readings

- James McPherson, *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam* (Oxford University Press, 2002). ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Recommended Reading

- Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam* (Ticknor & Fields, 1983).

Assignments

- Discussion Board Four
 - First post due: Sunday, October 12
 - Second post due: Wednesday, October 15
- Short Paper Two due: Wednesday, October 15
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.

Week Five: October 16: Gettysburg and Vicksburg

Readings

- Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *Three Days at Gettysburg: Essays on Confederate and Union Leadership* (Kent State University Press, 1999).
 - Read essays by Gary Gallagher, A. Wilson Greene, and Robert K. Krick.
- Michael B. Ballard, *Vicksburg: The Campaign That Opened the Mississippi* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 191–206, 221–250, and 396–407. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Recommended Reading

- Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (Scribner's, 1984).
- Michael Shaara, *The Killer Angels* (Ballantine Books, 2001).
- Donald L. Miller, *Vicksburg: Grant's Campaign That Broke the Confederacy* (Simon & Schuster, 2019).

Assignments

- Discussion Board Five
 - First post due: Sunday, October 19
 - Second post due: Wednesday, October 22
- Revised Question and Proposed Bibliography due: Wednesday, October 22
 - 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.

Week Six: October 23: The Battle of Manila Bay

Readings

- Symonds, *Decision at Sea*, 141–154. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))
- Robert Seager II, "Alfred Thayer Mahan: Navalist and Historian" in *Quarterdeck and Bridge: Two Centuries of American Naval Leaders*, ed. James C. Bradford (Naval Institute Press, 1997), 219–250. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Recommended Reading

- For the diplomatic background to the war, consult David Trask's *The War with Spain* (1981), especially the first four chapters. Trask also covers the battle itself in a tight twelve pages (95–107).
- For the bloody and messy guerilla war that followed the Battle of Manila Bay, see Brian McAllister Linn, *The Philippine War* (2000).

Assignments

- Discussion Board Six
 - First post due: Sunday, October 26
 - Second post due: Wednesday, October 29
 - Short Paper Three due: Wednesday, October 29
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
-

Week Seven: October 30: The Battle of Midway

Readings

- Symonds, *Decision at Sea*, 199–262. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Recommended Reading

- Jon Parshall and Anthony Tully, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway* (Potomac Books, 2007).
- Craig Symonds, *The Battle of Midway* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Assignments

- Discussion Board Seven
 - First post due: Sunday, November 2
 - Second post due: Wednesday, November 5
 - Short Paper Four due: Wednesday, November 5
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
-

Week Eight: November 6: The Battle for Omaha Beach

Readings

- Joseph Balkoski, *Omaha Beach: D-Day, June 6, 1944* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 110–236. ([This reading can be accessed through Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Recommended Reading

- John McManus, *The Dead and Those About to Die: D-Day: The Big Red One at Omaha Beach* (Penguin, 2015).
- Cornelius Ryan, *The Longest Day: The Classic Epic of D-Day, June 6, 1944* (Simon & Schuster, 1994).

Assignments

- Project/Paper Preview due: Wednesday, November 12
 - 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
-

Week Nine: November 13: The Battle of the Bulge

Readings

- Antony Beevor, *Ardennes 1944: The Battle of the Bulge* (Viking, 2015).

Recommended Reading

- Charles B. MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets: The Untold Story of the Battle of the Bulge* (William Morrow & Co., 1985).
- John S. D. Eisenhower, *The Bitter Woods: The Battle of the Bulge* (Grand Central Publishing, 1995).

Assignments

- Discussion Board Eight
 - First post due: Sunday, November 16
 - Second post due: Wednesday, November 16
 - Short Paper Five due: Wednesday, November 19
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
-

Week Ten: November 20: The Landing at Inchon

Readings

- Michael Langley, *Inchon Landing: MacArthur's Last Triumph* (Times Books, 1979).

Recommended Reading

- Robert Heinl, *Victory at High Tide: The Inchon-Seoul Campaign* (Lippincott, 1968).

Assignments

- Rough Draft due: Wednesday, November 26
 - 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.
-

Week Eleven: November 27: The Tet Offensive

Readings

- James Arnold, *Tet Offensive 1968: Turning Point in Vietnam* (Osprey Publishing, 2008), all.

Recommended Reading

- Geoffrey Wawro, *The Vietnam War: A Military History* (Basic Books, 2024).

Assignments

- Discussion Board Nine
 - First post due: Sunday, November 30
 - Second post due: Wednesday, December 3
-

Week Twelve: December 4: Desert Storm

Readings

- No readings.

Assignments

- Final Project/Paper due: Wednesday, December 10
-

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 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 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.