

First-Year Exam in United States History from Reconstruction to the Present

Please choose two of the questions from those listed below, one from Part I and one from Part II. Answer with coherent and well-organized essays, using specific historical examples and historiographical interpretations to make your own argument. You may use informal citations for any text on the syllabus. You will have eight hours to complete the exam. Please email it as an attachment by 5 p.m. on June 23, 2020, to mweber@gc.cuny.edu.

Part I

1. In *The Republic for Which it Stands*, Richard White notes that Northern enthusiasm for a “powerful central government” during the Civil War largely dissipated when the war ended. During the 20th century, of course, such a government became a permanent fixture. Choose three moments of national state-building from the turn of the 20th century to the present, and analyze the reasons for the federal government’s expansion and persistence, how state-builders attempted to legitimate government intervention in the economy and society, and the nature of and the reasons for opposition to the new government powers. Is there a coherent story of American state-building in the 20th century, or ought the establishment of a powerful central government be seen as occurring in fits and starts and in response to external pressures?

2. Richard Hofstadter wrote in his 1955 book that “the age...running from about 1890 to the second world war, can be considered an age of reform.” Does the concept of reform persuasively link the movements of the Populists, the Progressives, and the New Dealers to effect various combinations of social, economic, political, and legal change? What were the drivers of reform in each instance and what policy and institutional changes did reformers seek? Were the ideas and goals of these three reform efforts fundamentally different from those that emerged after World War II? Pick one postwar example to compare to the three earlier cases and discuss whether it supports or undermines Hofstadter’s periodization.

Part II

3. Margot Canaday contends that modern U.S. history shows that American citizenship is as much about exclusion and difference as it is about inclusion and equal rights. As some groups gained citizenship rights and status, others lost ground in order to limit the emancipatory potential of the new definition of citizenship. Choose three examples of the expansion of citizenship from Reconstruction to the present and assess whether this framework holds up. Find one example when Canaday’s framework does not apply. Alternatively, you may reject Canaday’s framework and provide your own interpretation the changing nature of citizenship during this period.

4. “Americans rarely fought about equality, power, and money without invoking one idealized version of family or another,” writes Robert O. Self, explaining why gender and sexuality should not be regarded solely as “cultural” issues. Rather, they have always been central to struggles over social, political and economic change. Choose three struggles for social, political, or economic change from 1890 to the present that illustrate Self’s thesis and at least one that undermines it.