September 11, 2013 Course Outline

Nixon, the Kennedys, and the Battle for America's Soul

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For nearly thirty years the feud between Richard Nixon and the Kennedys dominated the American political and cultural landscape and established the framework for today's "blue vs. red" acrimony. This epic clash conditioned much of our collective thought on such divisive issues as Vietnam, race relations, Watergate, and the very role of government in our society. This course will interpret the roots of this decades-long contest between the most hated—and beloved—figures in modern American history. We will cover the following topics in our exploration of the period beginning in 1946 and ending with John Kennedy's tragic death nearly fifty years ago.

Week One: Image Making & Myth Building. In Week One we will examine our impressions of Richard Nixon and the Kennedys. Our goal will be to understand how we have come to <u>imagine</u> Richard Nixon as a villain, and the Kennedys as heroes—and whether or not our impressions coincide with reality.

Week Two: The Early Years. This lecture will focus our protagonists' youthful years, and their first years in politics. We will stress that for all their familial differences, both men were similarly molded by their wartime experiences and their understanding of the Cold War.

Week Three: The Election of 1960. We will devote one entire class period to this pivotal election. Our thesis will be that—strangely enough—Nixon played this one above board, while Kennedy and LBJ played fast and loose

with the rules. His narrow defeat embittered Nixon, and led to his steely determination never to lose again. One could draw a straight line from November 1960 to Watergate.

Week Four: Nixon, the Kennedys, and Civil Rights. In this talk we will delve into our rivals' positions on the struggle for racial and social justice in America. We will argue that Nixon and John Kennedy were both very much in the mainstream on the matter of civil rights, although Jack's charm made him more popular with black voters (if not with black civil rights leaders.)

Week Five, Six, and Seven: Cold Warriors: Nixon, the Kennedys, and Foreign Policy. These three classes will center on the area both men regarded as their strongest suit—international relations. Nixon and Kennedy both saw America's struggle with world communism as the critical issue of the day, and both positioned themselves as vigilant, determined soldiers of the Cold War. We will discuss their stances on Cuba, Berlin, Laos, and the early Vietnam years.

Week Eight: The Day the Music Died: November 22, 1963. This year—amazingly—marks the 50th anniversary of Kennedy's assassination. Accordingly, we will take a fresh, in-depth look at the current state of assassination studies, and attempt to separate the wilder conspiracy theories from the more sober analyses of this watershed event in our lives.