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**Department Mission Statement**  
The role and mission of the faculty and students of the Department of Communication Studies are to examine human symbolic activity as it shapes and is shaped by relationships, institutions, and societies. This work concerns the creation, analysis, and critique of messages. The department's research, teaching, and service devote particular attention to understanding the ways in which communication erodes and sustains collaboration within and among local, national, and global communities.  

**Course Mission Statement**  
If you were to browse the literature most often associated with “political communication” courses, you would find a series of works and topics dealing with the instrumental influence of particular messages on public attitudes, voting decisions, officials’ behavior, and public policy. In many ways, such courses resemble the study of social psychology. They review literature generated by social-science methods—survey research and experimentation.  

This course asks the participants to think critically about American political discourse. It is an exploration of national meaning. I have organized our study around four themes:  

1. We will engage in an exploration of the political myths (reoccurring cultural stories) that guide the invention of political discourse. We will focus especially on the influence of religion and place on American mythology.  
2. We will examine the relationship between discourse and ideological worldview. We will pay particular attention to the manner in which metaphors differently organize the discourses of liberals and conservatives.  
3. We will investigate the deployment of racial discourse in post-civil-rights America. We will use the text and circumstances surrounding Barack Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” as a window on the contemporary politics of race.
4. We will investigate the persistent ironic tensions in American political discourse. We will employ as a guide the always fascinating and often frustrating insights of Kenneth Burke.

**Texts**


**Supplemental Readings**

During the course of the semester, I will supply supplementary readings that will enrich your understanding of the course texts. Our discussions may lead us in directions that call for additional reading materials. These will appear as pdf files either on Blackboard or on Electronic Course Reserves.

**Course Requirements and Participant Responsibilities**

1. **Close reading:** The quality of this class depends on the participants’ careful reading of the material. Each Monday evening, each participant must show up having read the assigned material closely.

2. **Reports:** During the course of the semester, participants will be assigned reporting tasks. These tasks will involve giving short reports (5-10 minutes) on assigned or supplemental readings. The purpose of these reports is to provide an initial overview of the material and to set the agenda of the questions we need to answer.

3. **Critical essays and presentations:** At the conclusion of each major course section, participants will be asked to write a short (4-8 pp.) critical think piece over some issue that has been suggested by the readings and/or our discussion. These are not research papers but the fleshing out of an argument. You will present these to the other members of the seminar and we will engage in close questioning of your argument.

4. **Final essay:** In a medium-length essay (12-20 pp), participants will take one of their critical essays (or another topic) and expand it into a scholarly essay appropriate for presentation at an academic conference.

**Course Policies**
Evaluation of student work: A written evaluation will accompany the grades you receive on your essays. If you disagree with my evaluation of your work, feel free to come and speak with me. Please do this within a week of the time you receive your evaluation. I am not defensive about my grading and you should feel no apprehension about discussing the evaluation of your work. On occasion I have been persuaded to change a grade.

Grading Scale: You may check your grade by going to Blackboard, clicking “Tools,” and then clicking “Check Grade.”

Completion of assignments: All major assignments must be completed in order to pass the course. If a student fails to turn in an essay or make a presentation, then the student will receive an F for the final course grade regardless of the quality of other work.

Late work and excused absences: Extensions will be granted only where the student is able to document special circumstances and provide the instructor with prior notification. All other work will be penalized one letter grade for every 24 hours past the due date.

Academic misconduct: Violations of academic integrity are very serious matters and will result in automatic failure of the class, and referral to the proper university officials. The work a student submits in a class is expected to be the student’s own work and must be completed for that particular class and assignment. Academic dishonesty includes: handing in another’s work or part of another’s work as your own, turning in one of your old papers for a current class, turning in the same or similar past or current paper for two different classes, presenting a group project as your work solely, purchasing or otherwise obtaining research or papers written by another and turning that work in as your own. Using unauthorized notes or other study aids or otherwise obtaining another’s answers for an examination represents a breach of academic integrity. Sanctions are applied whether the violation was intentional or not. You must keep all your original data for projects (i.e. articles, questionnaires, interview audio tapes) and be prepared to present them to the professor when asked.

Plagiarism means intentionally or knowingly representing the words of ideas of another as one’s own. Plagiarism includes quoting or paraphrasing from other sources without acknowledging/citing the source of your information or presenting quoted material as your own words. You must be very clear about attribution of sources and you must know how to cite sources in a paper. Students who are unfamiliar with how to cite sources should purchase a style manual such as the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association. Claiming lack of knowledge about standards for writing is not an acceptable excuse for committing plagiarism. Come to a faculty member for help if you are at all unsure about any of these issues or seek help at the UNL Writing Assistance Center (472-8803, Andrews Hall 129). No one wants to see you have these kinds of problems with your work, so please start assignments early and seek help when you need it.
Schedule

Week 1

Requirements, organization, and mission

Introductions

“Everything I need to know about politics I learned in kindergarten” – a short note on political socialization

Dialectical tensions in American political discourse – a brief critical encounter with Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. Thinking about the “Address to the Nation on Testimony before the Independent Counsel’s Grand Jury, August 17, 1998.”

Week 2

What is political myth and why do critics of public discourse care about it?

Hughes, *Introduction*

What is the relationship among religion, the nation’s founding, and political myth?

Hughes, *Myth of the Chosen Nation*
Hughes, *Myth of Nature’s Nation*
Hughes, *Myth of the Christian Nation*

Week 3

Labor Day holiday

Week 4

Hughes, *Myth of the Millennial Nation*

Hughes, *Mythic Dimensions of American Capitalism*

Hughes, *Myth of the Innocent Nation*

Week 5

Presentations of Critical Essay 1
Week 6

*Place, Myth, and American Politics*


Week 7

Lakoff, Part One: Introduction, 3-37– David Tuck
Lakoff, Part Two: Moral Conceptual Systems, 41-64 – Tessa Breneman
Lakoff, Strict father morality, 65-107 – Mary Anne Bruce
Lakoff, Nurturant parent morality, 108-140 – Gary Domet
Lakoff, Part Three: From family-based morality to politics, 143-176 – Darrel Farmer

Week 8

Lakoff, Part Four: The hard issues, 179-280 – Blake Gilmore & Christine Hunt
Lakoff, Part Five: Summing Up, pp. 283-331 – Sarah Jones

Week 9

Fall Semester Break.

Week 10

Presentations of Critical Essay 2
Weeks 11-14: Schedule

We are going to engage in an exploration of the political discourse of race in America through the close reading and discussion of six rhetorical documents: (a) Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” (b) Barack Obama’s keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, (c) Reverend Al Sharpton’s speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, (d) Jeremiah Wright’s September 2001 sermon, “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall,” and (e) Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign address, “A More Perfect Union.”

In the course of examining these rhetorical documents, we will engage scholarly reactions written from different critical perspectives and employing different critical methods.

** All the articles will be available shortly on Blackboard under “Readings.”

Week 11

1. Exploring Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”
   - Primary Text
   - Critical Reactions

2. Exploring the Speeches of Barack Obama and Al Sharpton at the 2004 Democratic National Convention
   - Primary Texts
• **Critical Reactions**


**Week 12**

1. **Exploring Jeremiah Wright’s “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall.”**

   • **Primary Text**

   Wright, J. (2001, September 16). The day of Jerusalem’s fall.

   • **Critical Reactions**

   Lee, R., & Morin, A. (Unpublished). Barack Obama’s response to the “angry black man” race card: A critical analysis of “A more perfect union” as a tragic moral compromise. – Ron Lee

2. **Exploring Barack Obama’s “A More Perfect Union.”**

   • **Primary Text**


   • **Critical Reactions**


Lee, R., & Morin, A. (Unpublished). Barack Obama’s response to the “angry black man” race card: A critical analysis of “A more perfect union” as a tragic moral compromise. – Ron Lee

**Week 13**

National Communication Association Convention, San Francisco – No Class.

**Week 14**

Presentations of Critical Essay 3

**Week 15**

Final paper presentation