

(Re)Introduction to US History

How two Penn professors revamped
the entry-level history class for an age of
instant information access and endless quarrels
over the meaning of America's past.

By Trey Popp

GENERAL FREMONT'S PROCLAMATION.

THE following Proclamation was issued on 31st ult., at
St. Louis:

"HEAD-QUARTERS OF THE WESTERN DEPARTMENT,
"St. Louis, August 31, 1861.

"Circumstances, in my judgment of sufficient urgency, render it necessary that the Commanding General of this Department should assume the administrative powers of the State. Its disorganized condition, the helplessness of the civil authority, the total insecurity of life, and the devastation of property by bands of murderers and marauders who infest nearly every county in the State and avail themselves of the public misfortunes and the vicinity of a hostile force to gratify private and neighborhood vengeance, and who find an enemy wherever they find plunder, finally demand the severest measures to repress the daily increasing crimes and outrages which are driving off the inhabitants and ruining the State. In this condition the public safety and the success of our arms require unity of purpose, without let or hindrance, to the prompt administration of affairs.

"In order, therefore, to suppress disorders, to maintain as far as now practicable the public peace, and to give security and protection to the persons and property of loyal citizens, I do hereby extend, and declare established, martial law throughout the State of Missouri. The lines of the army of occupation in this State are for the present declared to extend from Leavenworth by way of the posts of Jefferson City, Rolla, and Ironton, to Cape Girardeau on the Mississippi River.

"All persons who shall be taken with arms in their hands within these lines shall be tried by court-martial, and, if found guilty, will be shot. The property, real and personal, of all persons in the State of Missouri who shall take up arms against the United States, and who shall be directly proven to have taken active part with their enemies in the field, is declared to be confiscated to the public use; and their slaves, if any they have, are hereby declared free.

Imagine yourself into a mid-semester Sunday afternoon. You're easing into a quiet hour in the Quad. Or as quiet as a Quad hour gets, anyway, as water whines through shower pipes and music floats across the lawn. It's the first warm day of March. Some classmates are out tossing a Frisbee. Or maybe it's the kind of spring that dumps eight inches of snow onto Philadelphia 10 days before the equinox, and your hallmates are frolicking in it before it melts. This is your reverie. You're in charge.

But you have work to do. The weekly prompt for History 011 has come out, and it's time to respond. What is this artifact? And what's the trick this week? Usually the task seems a little more difficult: without resorting to Google, but secure in the knowledge that no grade will penalize an errant reply, write three sentences describing the origin and historical significance of the item at hand. Yet this one is already stuffed with clues: a dated proclamation by one General Fremont, pertaining to an obvious conflict in a specific state. So your job is at once simpler and harder: Why does this document matter? Say so in three or four sentences.

Seriously: Write down three sentences. Read the prompt again if need be. The rest of this article will be waiting for you. Don't fret if Fremont's first name escapes you. What might a historian glean from this news clipping? What significance would it have had to a Missouri farmer who read it in the summer of 1861—or to an enslaved stvedore on a Mississippi River ferry, or to a Washington insider, or to the president himself? Three sentences: Go!



In May, I happened across Walter Licht, the Walter H. Annenberg Professor of History, walking a few blocks west of campus after having delivered the final lecture of his 44-year teaching career at Penn. His retirement was news to me. I asked how it felt to address his last class. Different than he'd always imagined, he replied. "After I finished and took my last question," he said, "I clicked a button and the window on my computer closed."

In a year unclouded by COVID-19, there might have been an hour of well-wishing and bittersweet camaraderie outside the lecture hall.

I was curious about the subject of his final lecture. Licht specializes in the history of labor and industrial capitalism. But as fitting as it might have been to end with one final trip to his scholarly wheelhouse, he told me he'd lectured about the evolution of American conservatism from George Wallace to Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump W'68. His swan song, in other words, had come in an entry-level introduction to US history course. But the last thing Licht needed from me was neighborly commiseration, for sparks of intellectual electricity seemed to shower the sidewalk as he buzzed on about this class. He and Kathleen Brown, the David Boies Professor of History, had completely reimaged this course from top to bottom, along with the educational goals they had for it. The result, he told me, had been the most rewarding teaching experience of his entire career.

When Licht joined Penn's faculty in 1977, the history department vibrated with charismatic professors whose flair at the podium had ushered in a golden era of the introductory survey course. Few, if any, were more beloved than the late Alexander Riasanovsky ["Obituaries," Jan|Feb 2017], a Russian émigré whose family had been driven from their home in Chinese Manchuria by the Japanese invasion when he was nine years

old. With a rich baritone voice whose cadence quickened into a "thunderous roar" at climactic moments—as recalled by Lee Gordon C'68, who named his firstborn son Alex in tribute—Riasanovsky mesmerized generations of history, pre-med, Wharton, and engineering students with his magisterial survey of Russia and the Soviet Union.

Riasanovsky was one of "a bunch of hams," Licht recalled with fond admiration, "who did it extremely well." Another was Richard Beeman, the John Welsh Centennial Professor of History Emeritus, whose 43 years on the faculty included stints as department chair and dean of the College. His introductory survey of American history may have featured the most extensive wardrobe in the annals of undergraduate education. His death in 2016 ["Obituaries," Nov|Dec 2016] triggered an outpouring of memories about the costumes he donned to transform lectures into full-fledged theatrical performances. When Beeman covered Davy Crockett, his colleague Bruce Kuklick C'63 G'65 Gr'68 recalled to the *Daily Pennsylvanian*, "he would dress in buckskin and suck on a corn cob pipe and have his trusty great big brown dog sit down beside him."

This heyday carried into the early 1990s but was flagging by the turn of the millennium. Riasanovsky retired in 1999, Beeman stepped down in 2011, and nobody could fill their shoes with quite the same panache. Other dynamics were also eroding the classic survey course—particularly in the realm of US history. The proliferation of Advanced Placement US History classes in American high schools made a collegiate-level survey seem redundant to many incoming Penn students. Popularity shifted to more narrowly defined courses, like Drew Faust G'71 Gr'75's class in Southern history ["Alumni Profiles," May|Jun 2007] and Tom Sugrue's class on the 1960s ["The Vital Thread of Tom Sugrue," May|Jun 2009]. Interest leaked away from the classic introduction to US history, imperiling

a traditional gateway for history majors—whose number was also sliding.

An intellectual challenge also confronted the traditional American history survey course. Contemporary historical scholarship had introduced "so many contested perspectives that challenged the overarching narrative" long presented by conventional textbooks, as Brown puts it, that "it became harder to sustain a course with a linear beginning, middle, and end." Works like Wendy Warren's 2017 *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America*, for instance, have complicated the traditional treatment of plantation slavery as an essentially Southern phenomenon, by revealing the influential economic role played by New England shipping firms and financial houses in directing its development. And that is just one example among legions. Several decades' worth of scholarship excavating the experiences of overlooked groups, and interrogating familiar stories through unconventional lenses, have enriched the American story with a wealth of complexities.

The educational landscape was changing, as well. "In an age where any student who graduates from Penn will be able to Google a question of historical fact any time they want," asks Brown, "wouldn't the primary task be to teach them how to *think* historically ... rather than absorbing information?"

"Information itself is kind of passé at this point as a way to spend your time in a college classroom," she says, "when the more difficult thing to teach—and the more valuable skill to take with you after you graduate—might be asking the right kind of questions about how the past is being reconstructed or used."

Assessing the state of civic discourse in the early 2010s, Brown found herself increasingly frustrated by "how history got used and abused politically to make political points, by all kinds of people—not just by people whose politics I disagreed with, but even the ones I did agree with. And it seemed to me that anyone who had

Cover of a 1914 Disston brochure. Companies like Henry Disston's saw works were one aspect of the economic dynamism that made Philadelphia a magnet for immigrants and a "workshop of the world."

"A Full and Complete Account of the Late Awful Riots in Philadelphia": Burning of St. Michael's Church by anti-Catholic nativists, on Wednesday afternoon, May 8, 1848.

only just absorbed a narrative," she concluded, "wasn't going to be sufficiently skilled to ask the right questions about how the past was being used."

Sensing an opportunity to do something different, Brown and Licht came together and brainstormed ways to create a new kind of entry-level course. It would have minimal resemblance to the AP US history curriculum so many undergraduates already had under their belts. There would be no textbooks—ideally, no books at all. Primary sources would rule: news clippings, political cartoons, a handcrafted saw from Philadelphia's manufacturing heyday, a small-appliance advertisement from the 1950s, Billy Joel's "Allentown" music video. They hoped to foster the kinds of epiphanies that gripped seniors working on history honors theses. "You see them catch fire," Brown says, "Because they're doing research, working with primary sources," and learning in a deep way that big overarching narratives—whether they're organized around the Founding Fathers of 1776 or the importation of slaves to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619—can distort as much as they reveal.

They called it History 011: "Deciphering America," and debuted it for 45 students in 2012.

VanJessica Gladney C'18 found her way to History 011 as a junior looking to fill a curricular requirement. She'd taken AP US History in high school but experienced it as a massive chronology of events to memorize, along with their textbook treatment, in hopes of passing the year-end exam. It convinced her to focus on engineering. She spent her first couple years at Penn in the School of Engineering and Applied Science's interdisciplinary Digital Media Design program, but then shifted her major to English. Mary Frances Berry's "History of American Law" was the only history class she'd taken before enrolling in "Deciphering America."

Licht had a mantra for the course: "We will make the familiar unfamiliar, and the



unfamiliar a little more familiar." Gladney felt like she'd been tossed into the deep end of the pool. It was "mind-blowing," she says, to discover how much information lived in a single artifact—especially when you examined it from multiple perspectives. Brown specializes in the history of gender and race in early America. Licht's bread and butter are labor markets and economic history. "The contrast between their areas of study was one of the most important parts of taking that as an introductory course," Gladney says. "It reminded me that there are different people in different positions," she continues, "that would have seen these issues

differently. Not only are the issues themselves complicated, but the people around those issues are complicated."

Licht, for example, liked to bring in a steel handsaw from the Philadelphia saw works of Henry Disston, an immigrant who crossed the Atlantic in 1833 steeped in the hardware manufacturing traditions of his native Sheffield, England. Made of high-tensile specialty steel that held its sharpness and never warped, Disston's handcrafted saw exemplifies many dynamics that shaped 19th-century Philadelphia: technology transfer from the Old World to the New; immigration as a driver of economic growth; special-

History Mystery I

Who might have said this?

Why? When?

“I think that we have sufficient stock in America now for us to shut the door, Americanize what we have, and save the resources of America for the natural increase of our population. . . I believe that our particular ideas, social, moral, religious, and political, have demonstrated, by virtue of the progress we have made and the character of people that we are, that we have the highest ideals of any member of the human family or any nation. We have demonstrated the fact that the human family, certainly the predominant breed in America, can govern themselves by a direct government of the people. If this Government shall fail, it shall fail by virtue of the terrible law of inherited tendency. Those who come from the nations which from time immemorial have been under the dictation of a master fall more easily by the law of inheritance and the inertia of habit into a condition of political servitude than the descendants of those who cleared the forests, conquered the savage, stood at arms and won their liberty from their mother country, England.”

ized industrial manufacturing as a determinant of urban development; and even the long arc from built-to-last tools to business models oriented around planned obsolescence. “I tell the students of meeting carpenters who work with prized Disston saws that have been passed down through four to five generations,” Licht says. Later in the course he examines the forces that ultimately unraveled firms like Disston’s—namely mass-market Sears saws “produced at one-tenth the cost, totally mechanically, with galvanized steel guaranteed to warp and lose it sharpness,” but which satisfied consumer preferences that were shifting toward cheap, disposable products.

Yet stories like that of Henry Disston—who was part a giant wave of immigration that helped Philadelphia earn its moniker as “workshop of the world”—gain additional layers of complexity when Brown picks up the thread in a lecture touching on the anti-Catholic Kensington Riots of 1844, the rise of nativism, and the use of arson as a form of “ethnic cleansing” targeting Black and immigrant communities.

“Learning about how arson was used as a political tool to remove certain businesses and attack certain ethnic groups,” Gladney says, “really changed the idea that any conflict in US history is a binary conflict.” That dynamic, after all, was nested in other complexities, like the early 19th-century temperance movement—which was at once a middle-class outgrowth of religious revivals emphasizing moral perfectionism, a political cudgel against German and Irish voting blocs, and a women’s movement grappling with truly prodigious alcohol consumption among American males.

The course took its rhythm from paired journal entries: three or four sentences in blind response to a prompt on Sunday, and then a second stab at the same prompt after the week’s lectures and readings. Anders Bright, a doctoral student who led discussion sections as a teaching assistant, felt that even

though the pedagogical emphasis fell squarely on critical thinking, the class’s heavy emphasis on primary sources and artifacts “leaves students with a certain residue that they’re going to remember for a long period of time.”

“We started out with fresh eyes and submitted before we saw any presentations or slides,” says Tulio Tagliaferri, who took History 011 as a freshman during the pandemic, when lectures shifted to an online platform. “Sometimes I felt like I was a news reporter describing an image that we had to look at ... And at end of week, we could compare it to what we had learned, and say, ‘Oh, I was completely wrong!’

“It’s a sort of learning I’d never experienced in school,” he continues. “They

give you the tools and you have to build a house. Most of the time, they teach you how to build a house and you have to reconstruct it on a test.”

Perhaps no passage of American history has provoked more historiographical contention—or more self-righteous contemporary punditry—than the Civil War. The arguments start with where to begin.

“When are you going start the story of the Civil War?” Licht asked at the outset of a lecture this past March (distilled into a slightly abridged form here). “Do you start it in 1619, with the arrival of the first Africans in North America? Do you start it with the writing of the Constitution—which does not include the word *slavery*, but ensconces slavery, particularly with the ‘three-fifths’ resolution allowing Southern states to dominate the halls of Congress? Would you start it with the British textile revolution, which changed and entrenched slavery at a point in the 19th century when it might have seemed like it was withering away, with ‘King Cotton’ and that raw material that would be fed into the machinery of metro industrialism? Do you start it with expansion: the Louisiana purchase, and other purchases and seizures of land that begged the question of what is going to happen in these territories when they become states—will slavery be allowed?”

And within Civil War historiography, no figure inspires more argument than Abraham Lincoln, who wrote and spoke so much that “you can cherry-pick” your way to any verdict you like. Was he a moral paragon who boldly sided with the “better angels of our nature,” as he phrased it in his first presidential inaugural address, to deliver the United States from its original sin of human bondage? Or was he at best a reluctant abolitionist, an opportunistic shapeshifter whose comfort with slavery is right there in the very same speech, wherein he endorsed a Constitutional amendment to guarantee the legality of slavery in any state that wished to keep it?

Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, issued by executive order on Sep. 22, 1862, to go into effect on Jan. 1, 1863.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN
AND HIS

Emancipation Proclamation

Whereas On the Twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, a Proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing among other things the following, to-wit:

That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State, or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward and forever free, and the executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to oppress such persons, or any of them, in any sphere they may make for their actual freedom.

That the executive will, on the first day of January aforesaid, by proclamation, designate the States and parts of States, if any, in which the people thereof respectively shall then be in rebellion against the United States, and the fact that any State, or the people thereof, shall on that day be in good faith represented in the Congress of the United States by members chosen thereto at elections wherein a majority of the qualified voters of such State shall have participated, shall, in the absence of strong counterbalancing testimony, be deemed conclusive evidence that such State and the people thereof are not then in rebellion against the United States.

Now, therefore, I, ABRAHAM LINCOLN, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States in time of actual rebellion against the authority and government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion, do, on this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and in accordance with my purpose so to do, publicly proclaim for the full period of one hundred days from the day the first above mentioned order, and designate as the States and parts of States wherein the people thereof respectively are this day in rebellion against the United States, the following, to-wit: ARKANSAS, TEXAS, LOUISIANA (except the parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemine, Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James, Ascension, Assumption, Terre Bonne, Lafayette, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Orleans, including the City of New Orleans, MISSISSIPPI, ALABAMA, FLORIDA, GEORGIA, SOUTH CAROLINA, NORTH CAROLINA and VIRGINIA (except the forty-eight counties designated as West Virginia, and also the counties of Berkeley, Accomac, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Anne and Norfolk, including the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth), and which excepted parts are, for the present, left precisely as if this Proclamation were not issued.

And by virtue of the power and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States and parts of States are and henceforward shall be free; and that the executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

And I hereby again upon the people so declared to be free, to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defense, and I recommend to them that, in all cases, when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

And I further declare and make known that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.

And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand, and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty-seventh.

By the President: ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

WILLIAM H. EWARD, Secretary of State.

NOTE.—The rest of the slaves were afterwards freed by Legislation and Constitutional Amendments.

“Boy, is there a spectrum of opinion about Lincoln,” Licht concluded after a tour through some of it. “See where you come out on this,” he told the students, “when you do the readings.”

In the meantime, he asked them to consider a counterfactual: What if Lincoln had not won the 1860 election? What if, instead, victory had gone to John Fremont—who had been the Republican Party’s very first presidential candidate in 1856? Or what if Fremont had challenged Lincoln for the nomination in 1864, as was the hope of some abolitionists dismayed with what they saw as Lincoln’s excessively flexible moderation on the issue of slavery’s future.

In a classic instance of “making the familiar unfamiliar,” Licht deployed a series of facts that had first sent Gladney (who served as a teaching assistant in 2021) reeling from her high-school history class’s simplified view of the conflict as two sides facing one another across Mason and Dixon’s iconic line. When Southern states considered secession after the Confederate Constitutional Convention in the spring of 1861, Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Missouri rejected it—and Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware declined to formally consider it at all. The attack on Fort Sumter by South Carolina secessionists spurred many of those states to join the Confederacy; but Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri remained in the Union as slave states. While some New Jerseyans continued to hold enslaved people in bondage, the western portion of Tennessee was sufficiently at odds with eastern secessionists that Andrew Johnson continued to represent Tennesseans in the US Senate until 1862, when Lincoln appointed him military governor of his home state. And the complexities only blossom from there.

So where, in all of this, does John Fremont’s 1861 proclamation fit? One might start by identifying it as an emancipation proclamation: a unilateral order by the general to free slaves confiscated

from rebels in Missouri. But the August 31 decree proved ill-starred. Fearing it would tip Missouri and other border states toward secession, Lincoln revoked it on September 11 and relieved Fremont of his command soon thereafter. Yet although Fremont’s emancipation proclamation came more than a year before the capitalized version American high schoolers learn about, it was neither unique nor even the first. He was not the only general chafing under Lincoln’s narrow focus on restoring Southern states to the Union, even if that meant restoring their slavery regimes in the bargain. General Benjamin Butler had pursued a similar course in Virginia, where his refusal to return fugitive slaves to their owners became standard procedure. In the spring of 1862, General David Hunter pulled a Fremont by means of a similar proclamation covering South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

Lincoln revoked that one, too. But these developments had a cumulative effect on the president. “He is being pushed and pushed,” Licht said, “to have a more militant prosecution of the war, and also to take up the issue of freeing the slaves. The biggest people who are pushing him are his own generals ... and he is also being pushed in Congress.” Figures like Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, of course, were pushing against still other levers.

Wherever a student comes down on Lincoln, in other words, the 16th president had at least one thing in common with every occupant of the White House before and since: no action he took occurred in a vacuum, for the life of a democratic republic is influenced by a large cast of actors.

“The biggest moral to the story is that heroes of the past are much more complex than basic American history writes them to be,” reflects Tagliaferri. “Lincoln is renowned as one the greatest presidents, if not *the* greatest president, in US history. ... In the end, I fell on the side that there’s no bad reason to do

good. At the end of the day, Lincoln did what is mostly regarded as the morally correct thing to do—even though it wasn’t necessarily for the reasons that are painted today.”

“A war to disarm a dictator has become an open-ended occupation of a foreign country. This is not America. This is not who we are.”

—Sen. Barack Obama, October 2, 2007, speech about the US war in Iraq

“I stand with the people gathered across the country tonight defending our values & our Constitution. This is not who we are.”

—Defeated presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, responding to an executive order by President Donald Trump temporarily banning the entry of travelers from seven Muslim-majority countries and suspending refugee admissions.

“This is not America,” a woman said to a small group, her voice shaking. She was crying, hysterical. “They’re shooting at us. They’re supposed to shoot BLM, but they’re shooting the patriots.”

—Participant in the January 6, 2021, march against the US Capitol, as reported by Andrew McCormick in *The Nation*.

One way to gauge the success of History 011: “Deciphering America” is by the traditional measure: butts in the seats. From their initial enrollment of about 45 students in 2012, Brown and Licht grew it to over 140 in 2019—the last in-person iteration before COVID-19 scrambled the basis for meaningful comparison. The course will outlive Licht’s transition to emeritus status; its format is tailor-made to accommodate another professor, who might deploy a different set of prompts and perspectives. (To judge from student feedback, a certain perspectival tension in this team-taught class would be an important quality to preserve.)

Another way to judge the class is by holding it up to the professors’ intellectual goals. Has it bolstered students’

History Mystery II

Who might have said this?

Why? When?

“This Court’s cases and the Nation’s traditions make clear that marriage is a keystone of our social order. ... This idea has been reiterated even as the institution has evolved in substantial ways over time, superseding rules related to parental consent, gender, and race once thought by many to be essential. ... Marriage remains a building block of our national community. ... For that reason, just as a couple vows to support each other, so does society pledge to support the couple, offering symbolic recognition and material benefits to protect and nourish the union. Indeed, while the States are in general free to vary the benefits they confer on all married couples, they have throughout our history made marriage the basis for an expanding list of governmental rights, benefits, and responsibilities. These aspects of marital status include: taxation; inheritance and property rights; rules of intestate succession; spousal privilege in the law of evidence; hospital access; medical decisionmaking authority; adoption rights; the rights and benefits of survivors; birth and death certificates; professional ethics rules; campaign finance restrictions; workers’ compensation benefits; health insurance; and child custody, support, and visitation rules. ... The States have contributed to the fundamental character of the marriage right by placing that institution at the center of so many facets of the legal and social order.

abilities to cast a critical eye on how the past is mobilized to advance contemporary agendas? Has its thematic approach, keyed to the complications of “emblematic moments” rather than the dubious coherence of a single overarching narrative, helped them draw their own lessons from the past in a way that helps them make better sense of the present?

By the time Gladney took the class in the spring of 2017, after Donald Trump’s electoral college victory had sent half of the American news commentariat into paroxysms of incomprehension, she was frustrated by her own inability to make sense of her country.

“This class allowed me to make connections from the past to the present,” she says. “Thinking critically, rather than merely factually, changed the way I understand history.” It also reduced her susceptibility to a species of rhetoric whose kudzu spread through the gardens of American civic discourse had compounded her frustration.

“Whenever something terrible happens, it’s, ‘Oh, this not America. This is not our country,’” she says. “But once you learn about history, you realize that it is! And if we want to change anything, we can’t just think about changing the surface of things now—we have to get to the core of these issues and think about the ways these systems were built, and when they were built, and who was building them.”

Barack Obama’s 2007 intimation that deposing distant leaders or occupying foreign lands somehow lay outside the American experience cannot survive any honest engagement with the history of 20th-century US foreign policy—as the then-senator surely knew. To Hillary Clinton’s suggestion that immigration restrictions were likewise beyond the historical pale, a History 011 student might retort, “What about the Immigration Act of 1924?”

As for the invasion of the US Capitol, setting aside the question of who should rightfully have been shooting whom, “I can obviously see ways in which that was unprec-

edented,” says Brown. “But the culture of political violence runs very deep in this country. It’s about as consistent a theme as you can find. And I don’t think it serves anybody’s purpose to whitewash that.”

If there’s an overarching goal to this class, it’s to instill a healthy skepticism about the very notion that any single

point in time contains the seeds of everything that came thereafter. “Something we try to tell the kids is that nothing gets solidified in any one moment,” says Licht, venting frustration about the current craze for locating America’s original DNA—a dodgy metaphor under any circumstances—in the year 1619, or 1776 to the exclusion of 1619, or 1836 (where Texas Republicans recently proposed starting their state’s clock on “patriotic education”), and so on. “Even in our dealing with the coming of racialized slavery, it’s something that is cemented and then recemented” by a long succession of statutes and legal decisions, Licht elaborates. “And it’s not one generation that are the ‘sinners.’”

History 011 “helped change some of the questions I was asking,” says Gladney. “Instead of saying, ‘How could this happen?’ one could start looking at dynamics like the rise of the New Right and the New Left” in response to widely varying dissatisfactions with the bipartisan liberal consensus of the mid-20th century, “and the way that parties were either emboldened or undermined based on the demographics of their constituencies.” Gladney caught the history bug that entry-level classes aim to spread. “It helped me move from shocked and surprised to energized and ready.” She is now a doctoral student at Penn, where she applies her digital-media chops to the website of the Penn & Slavery Project [“Gazetteer,” Nov/Dec 2018].

Tulio Tagliaferri, who is majoring in political science, credits the class with fostering a slightly different sort of intellectual growth. Its emphasis on critical inquiry from multiple angles made him “more humble” about what he still has left to learn—not just about a past that’s more complex than he had appreciated, but about the moment he is living through and the future he may one day help to shape.

“We as people in the present should be cautious,” he says. After all, future historians will scrutinize us too.