

George Mason University – The Fund For American Studies

Syllabus - Econ. 496 – Politics and Press Internship Seminar - Summer 2023

Weekly Classes: Thursdays, 5-7 pm

Professor: Richard Benedetto

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Course Overview and Objectives:

The goal of this class is to help students develop skills to analyze the interactions of Washington government, politics, and news media effectively and insightfully in time of national crisis. Emphasis will be on how the theories and practices of political science and mass communication journalism are applied today in everyday gathering, preparing, and presenting the news in the various traditional and new forms of media.

This class will examine, analyze and critique how the news media cover the White House and Congress at a critical time. Not only is the United States dealing with the vestiges of the coronavirus pandemic, but the Biden Administration is also beset by economic problems at home, a citizenry that due to a variety of circumstances is in a sour mood and war in Ukraine that threatens to upset the entire world order.

And if that is not enough to keep us busy, we will preview the presidential race coming up next year that is already starting to heat up.

As we proceed through the summer, we also will study some of the current legal and ethical issues facing journalists and public relations practitioners and the people they report on and deal with. Moreover, we will discuss the changing environment of news as it relates to new and social media such as the Internet, Twitter, Tik Tok, Facebook, Instagram and the 24-hour news cycle, and what that all means for the future direction of news reporting.

Weekly sessions will focus on the biggest news issues of the week and cover topics such as accuracy, objectivity, media bias, use of unnamed sources and reporting on various government institutions, primarily the presidency and Congress. We also will examine political polling and its role in news coverage and analysis of government and politics.

By summer's end, each student will be able to approach political news coverage with a more-sophisticated-and-critical eye. Each will also come away with a well-defined picture of how political journalism is practiced in Washington, D.C. and beyond, for better or for worse, and make sophisticated suggestions for improvement.

Required Texts

Mass Media and American Politics, 11th Edition, 2023, Johanna Dunaway, Doris A. Graber, CQ Publications, paperback.

Politicians Are People, Too, Richard Benedetto, University Press of America, 2006, ISBN-13: 978-0-7618-3422-9 paperback.

Selected readings will be distributed or posted on Blackboard, and additional reading assignments will be made. Other readings in the field will be suggested, but not required. Students are expected to arrive in class on time with reading assignments completed and ready to discuss.

Suggested Additional Reading:

- Read daily political and media coverage in newspapers such as The Washington Post, New York Times, USA Today, Politico.
- Specialized newspapers and magazines that cover media and politics such as Columbia Journalism Review, Roll Call, The Hill, The Atlantic, Realclearpolitics.com, National Journal, Congressional Quarterly, New Republic, National Review.
- The White House, the Senate and The House, along with the major political parties also have Websites that provide a lot of information and perspective. The key here is resourcefulness. There is plenty of information out there if you take the time to seek and read it.

About Your Professor

Richard Benedetto is a veteran political reporter with more than 40 years of experience covering local, state and national government and politics. He retired from his post as White House correspondent/columnist for USA Today and political columnist for Gannett News Service. He began teaching at American University in the Fall 2006 semester.

Since then, he has taught journalism and political science courses in the School of Communication and the School of Public Affairs. He also teaches in The Fund for American Studies Capital Semester and Summer IPJ programs at George Mason University. He began teaching for The Fund in 2005.

University Press of America published Benedetto's memoir of his long reporting career, "Politicians Are People, Too," in 2006. Pyramid Press published "Around and About" in 2019 - a collection of human-interest columns written in his early reporting career.

A native of Utica, N.Y., Benedetto began his journalism career with the Buffalo, (N.Y.) Evening News, and held government/politics reporting positions with the Utica (N.Y.) Daily Press and Observer-Dispatch. He also worked in the Albany, N.Y. bureau of Gannett News Service covering state government, politics, and elections.

Benedetto is a founding member of USA Today, joining the newspaper as part of its start-up team in 1982, prior to its debut. He wrote the newspaper's first Page One cover story.

In Washington, he covered the administrations of Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. He also covered every congressional and presidential election campaign since 1984. He is now a contributor to Politico, RealClearPolitics, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, The Hill, Fox News and The Daily Caller

Benedetto holds BA, MA and doctoral degrees from Syracuse University. Among his numerous journalism awards, Benedetto most values his 1998 Media Award presented by the National Italian American Foundation for projecting a positive image of Italian Americans.

Course Information and Outline

- **Weekly News Article Discussion:**

For each class, one student will be responsible for selecting one political or media-related news article printed in a newspaper, journal or posted on the Web. That student will be responsible for leading a 15-minute class discussion about the article he or she selected. Since there are more students than classes, *I will conduct a lottery and select students to be presenters. Presentations will not be graded.*

Articles must come from a newspaper, news network, magazine, journal or news Website. Avoid blogs unless they are relevant to our class discussion. When it is your turn to select the article, you must email its link to me **NO LATER THAN 24 HOURS** before the class meets so that I can forward the article to the rest of the class for reading in advance.

- **Assignments:**

In addition to the assigned readings and article discussions, there will be other assignments and possible quizzes.

- **Midterm Assignment and Final Paper:**

The Midterm will consist of essay questions based on our readings and class discussions up to that point. A final research paper will be due in Week 7. Topics will be assigned in the first class.

- **Grading**

Grades will be determined by student attendance and participation in class discussions, written assignments, evaluation of the final paper and successful completion of your internship.

Grading Standards

All grades are based upon the student's effort and results not only in written assignments, quizzes and projects, but also on class attendance, participation and discussion. One fifth of the grade (20 percent) will be based upon your internship.

*** An 'A' student is one who demonstrates superior work in all aspects of the class and assignments. All work is submitted on time, Class attendance is near perfect and on time. Grades on homework, quizzes, papers and projects are in the superior category and truly stand out. The A student also is a clear leader and creative thinker in class discussions. An 'A' is earned, not given.**

*** A 'B' student falls slightly short of the 'A' standard in one or more aspects of the above criteria, but still demonstrates above-average interest, effort, creativity and skill in meeting the highest standard.**

*** A 'C' student is clearly short of the 'A' and 'B' standards, more than likely due to lack of effort to come to class regularly or on time, written assignments and quizzes that don't match up with those of most of the class and a shortage in class participation. I expect that few students, if any, will fall into this category.**

*** A 'D' or 'F' grade should be self-explanatory and need no further discussion here. I do not expect to give anyone these grades.**

Grading breakdown:

*** Class quizzes, attendance, written assignments, and class participation - 35 percent**

*** Midterm Assignment – 20 percent**

*** Internship Grade – 20 percent**

*** Final Paper – 25 percent**

*** Total - 100 percent**

Grading standards

A 95-100

A- 90-94

B+ 86-89

B 83-85

B- 80-82

C+ 75-79

C 72-74

C- 70-71

D 68-69

F 67 or below

- **George Mason University's Grading Table:**

Letter Grade Points for Undergraduate Courses

A+ 4.00 Satisfactory / Passing

A 4.00 Satisfactory / Passing

A- 3.67 Satisfactory / Passing

B+ 3.33 Satisfactory / Passing

B 3.00 Satisfactory / Passing

B- 2.67 Satisfactory / Passing

C+ 2.33 Satisfactory / Passing

C 2.00 Satisfactory / Passing

C- 1.67 Satisfactory* / Passing

D 1.00 Unsatisfactory / Passing

F 0.00 Unsatisfactory / Failing

- **Attendance**

Since this class meets once a week, students are required to attend all classes unless they have an excused absence. Having to run personal errands or missing class because you are tired are not excused absences. If you are ill, let me know in advance, if possible.

- **Honesty and Integrity**

I do not have to give you a lecture on honesty and integrity. By now, you should all know the acceptable standards. Violations such as plagiarism or cheating will not be tolerated and could result in failure.

- **CLASS SCHEDULE:**

- **Week 1- Thursday June 8**

Introduction: An overview of the news landscape of Washington, D.C. in the Summer of 2023?

Course Overview

Final Paper to be Assigned in First Class

Syllabus Review

Advance readings:

Chapter 1 in Dunaway-Graber text

Chapter 1 – Politicians Are People, Too.

- **What is news?**
- **What is right and what is wrong with the way the media report the news of government and politics**
- **How is the news business changing before our What are the hottest problems currently confronting the news media.**
- **A brief tour of the history of journalism in the American tradition, a tradition unlike any other.**

- **Week 2 – Thursday June 15**

News Media Coverage of the Presidency

How the Biden Administration and the News Media Interact

Assigned readings: To be Assigned.

- **What is the role of media in coverage of the presidency?**
- **How does the Biden White House manage (or manipulate) the media?**
- **How tough are the media on this administration? Are they watchdogs, lapdogs or opposition party?**
- **How does this president treat the media?**
- **How do the media treat this president?**
- **How can their relationship be improved?**

Student-led News Article Discussion:

- **Week 3 – Thursday June 22**

News Media Coverage in Time of War

A look at how the news media is covering the Russia-Ukraine War and other hostilities around the globe, and how the Biden White House is framing them.

- **What are the pluses and minuses of news media coverage?**
- **What are the pluses and minuses of Biden's war leadership?**

Student-led Article Discussion

Midterm Assignment – Due in next class

- **Week 4 – Thursday June 29**

Media Coverage of Congress

Midterm Assignments Due

Why does Congress overall get such low marks from the public, even though voters re-elect their own congresspersons at a 90 percent rate?

How do the news media cover Congress? How can coverage be better?

What role has Congress played in the Russia-Ukraine crisis?

Student-led Article Discussion

Assigned readings: To be assigned.

- **Week 5 – Thursday July 6**

Presidential Elections

The upcoming 2024 presidential election is starting to take some shape. As of now, President Biden has not officially announced his bid for re-election, but says he intends to run. Most analysts expect he will run.

Meanwhile, Republicans are expected to stage a battle for the nomination.

Former president Donald Trump has announced his candidacy but faces a set of legal battles. Former South Carolina governor and U.N. ambassador Niki Haley and Arkansas Sen. Asa Hutchinson are in the race, along with some lesser-known hopefuls. And we are still waiting to see if Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis will run. We will examine how the race is coming along as we hit midsummer.

We will look with a critical eye at how the news media are covering the upcoming presidential campaign and make suggestions for improvement.

- **What are the major 2024 issues emerging?**
- **How are social media handling and commenting on the campaign?**
- **Will Trump's legal problems spoil his campaign?**
- **Will Ron DeSantis run?**
- **Will President Biden run?**

We will look more closely at how election campaigns are financed, managed, run and covered in the New Media Age. We will examine what goes into covering campaigns by the news media and how it is changing, for better or worse.

Assigned Readings: To be Assigned.

Student Article Discussion

- **Week 6 – Thursday July 13**

Public Opinion Polling in Government and Politics and Proliferation of Unnamed Sources

- **Political Polls are everywhere. Some are good and some are bad. How can we tell the difference? Which polls can we trust? How can polls be manipulated? How interpretation of polls can be misleading What went wrong with polls in 2020 presidential election? What are the polls telling us today?**

- **The use of unnamed sources by reporters has proliferated in recent years, often leading to inaccurate and false reporting. We will look at the issue and discuss some recent examples. Should there be guidelines on unnamed sources? Should reporters have the protection of law to keep secret the names of sources?**

Assigned Readings: To be assigned.

Student Article Discussion

- **Week 7 – Thursday July 20**

Course Wrap up.

- **Final Papers Due**

How new and social media have changed our interest in and perceptions of government, politics, and politicians. What did we learn this summer?

Student-led article discussion

- **We will discuss the problems and perils of reporting in the Digital Age with its emphasis on speed and opinion, often blurring what is really happening.**
- **Moreover, speed often sacrifices accuracy and in-depth analysis.**
- **We will examine how much of the information on social media is inaccurate or just plain false.**
- **Are we who use only social media better informed than those who get their news from traditional sources?**
- **What have we learned from this course?**

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