

George Mason University – The Fund For American Studies

Econ. 496 – Politics and Press Seminar - Summer 2021

Professor: Richard Benedetto benedett@american.edu

Thursdays: 5:00 – 7:00pm

Location: Van Metre Hall Room 118, George Mason University Arlington Campus

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Course Overview and Objectives:

The goal of this class is to give students the skills to effectively and insightfully analyze the confluence of Washington government, politics and news media 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 media.

This course will be conducted during the continuing Coronavirus Pandemic, which has raised serious questions about the appropriate roles medical science, the federal government and the news media should be playing in this difficult time. This class will examine, analyze and critique those questions and those roles as we go through the semester.

Moreover, this class will meet in the early months of the new Biden Administration where much has happened in a relatively short time. The past four years of the Trump Administration were tumultuous, but the new government under Biden has sprinted off to an ambitious start with many new programs and controversial issues on the table. We will examine those issues and controversies and analyze and critique how the news media are covering them. Are the media watchdogs or lapdogs for Biden?

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, Facebook, Instagram and the 24-hour news cycle, and what that 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 discuss 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 not only with a more-sophisticated-and-critical eye, but also come away with the well-defined picture of how political journalism is practiced in Washington, D.C. and beyond, for better or for worse, and make suggestions for improvement.

About Your Professor

Richard Benedetto is 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 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 April 2006. Pyramid Press published in 2019 published "Around and About," a collection of his 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, and Fox News.

Benedetto holds B.A., M.A. 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.

Required Texts

Mass Media and American Politics, Tenth Edition, 2018, Doris A. Graber, Johanna Dunaway, CQ Publications, paperback, ISBN 9781506340234

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. Guest speakers might visit from time to time.

Suggested Additional Reading:

Read daily political and media coverage in newspapers such as The Washington Post, New York Times, USA Today, Politico in print or online, preferably in print.

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 it and read it.

Weekly News Article Discussion:

For every class, one student will be responsible for selected for the class 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 it or 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, I will give short writing assignments. There will be a midterm exam in Week 4 based on our class discussions and readings up to that point, mostly essay questions, and a final paper.

Midterm Exam or 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 participation - 40 percent**

* **Midterm Assignment – 25 percent**

* **Final Paper – 35 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 that 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.

CLASS SCHEDULE:

Week 1- Thursday June 10

Introduction: What is the News landscape of Washington in the Summer of 2021? Course Overview

Final Paper to be Assigned in Class

Syllabus Review

Advance readings:

Chapters 1-2 – Politicians Are People, Too.

Chapters 1 and 11 in Graber text

- 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 eyes?
- 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 17

Covering the Coronavirus in a Sharply Divided Partisan Atmosphere

Assigned readings: To be Assigned

Student Article Discussion -

- How are the media covering the virus? Informative or Alarmist?
- What is the media tone of the coverage?
- How are the media covering Congress and the virus; Biden and the virus?
- What do the public want media to tell them about the virus?

Week 3 – Thursday June 24

Covering the Presidency

How the Biden Administration and the News Media Interact

Student Article Discussion:

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? Watchdogs, lapdogs or Opposition Party?
- How does this president treat the media?
- How can relationship be improved?

Week 4 – Media Coverage of Congress – Thursday July 1

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

Student Article Discussion

Midterm Assignment – Due in next class

Assigned readings: To be Assigned

Week 5 – Media and Congressional Elections – Thursday July 8

News Coverage of the 2022 Congressional Elections, So Far, and what are the stakes in the voting? What role will former president Trump play in the voting, and how will it affect the 2024 presidential race?

We will look with a critical eye at how the news media are covering the 2022 congressional campaign and make suggestions for improvement.

- What are the major 2022 issues emerging?
- How are social media handling and commenting on the campaign?
- How are the races playing at the local level?
- What will be the big issues in the 2022 race ?
- Is Trump going to be a factor?

We 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 15

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?
- 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 use of 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 22

How New and Social Media have changed our interest in and perceptions of government, politics and politicians. Semester Wrap-up. What did we learn this summer?

Final Papers Due

- 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 is sometimes often sacrificing accuracy and in-depth analysis.
- Are we better informed than those who only got their news from traditional sources?
- What role have social media played in news coverage and news consumption of Washington politics and government.
- What have we learned from this course?

Student Article Discussion