FRESHMAN SEMINAR PROGRAM
PROPOSAL FORM

Please include this form with the completed proposal. You may either send your proposal electronically as an email attachment to seminars@fas.harvard.edu or as hard copy to:

Freshman Seminars Program, 6 Prescott Street, Cambridge, MA 02138

The Faculty of the Committee on Freshman Seminars meets occasionally during the fall and regularly through the spring. All proposals will be reviewed by the Committee as soon as possible after they have been received.

Instructor’s Name: David Armitage

Title and Harvard Affiliation: Professor of History

Email: __________________________ Phone #: ______________ Fax #: ____________

Mailing Address: ________________________________

Title of the Seminar: Declarations of Independence: the Political Philosophy of the American Revolution

State the semester and year in which you would prefer to hold the seminar: Fall Term

Please attach to this cover sheet:

1) a 350-500 word course description

2) a draft syllabus outlining the structure, readings, and assignments of the course or, alternatively, a list of topics, required readings, and course assignments.

3) a list of projected course expenses (e.g., guest speakers, theater tickets, etc.); please list as well any course-related trips. A field trip proposal form must be submitted for any off-campus outing, once your seminar proposal has been approved

4) a C.V., if you are a lecturer in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences
This seminar will examine a familiar document -- the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 - in some unfamiliar contexts. The Declaration drew upon two centuries of arguments justifying rebellion, secession, and rights. It spoke to concerns and arguments arising out of contemporary British and American political thought. It was also the culmination of a series of similar declarations from colonies and towns and of a series of manifestoes and papers issued by the Continental Congress. Students will examine these other documents, along with the successive versions of the Declaration in manuscript and in print, in order to understand the political philosophy of the American Revolution. They will then examine the earliest replies to the Declaration, the many other American declarations of independence issued on behalf of women, African Americans, workers and other groups during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the various translations, imitations and analogues of the American Declaration produced by later nationalist, secessionist, and anti-colonial movements up to the present. The seminar will provide a focused introduction to the development of modern ideas of rights, nationality and statehood and will encourage students to place the United States in historical perspective and within an international context.

Rationale:

Because students can be assumed to have some background knowledge of the American Revolution, and because all will surely have read the Declaration of Independence, the subject lends itself readily to a freshman seminar. By proceeding from the familiar to the unfamiliar, students will be presented with a specific example of the transition from high school to college-level work. Most of the materials to be used are, like the Declaration of Independence itself, relatively short but productively dense and will thus afford amply opportunity for detailed discussion in the classroom. All are readily available in print and in translation (where necessary) and can be supplemented by primary research materials from Harvard’s collections and from other local institutions such as the Massachusetts Historical Society.

The materials to be covered will include antecedents to the Declaration, such as the Scottish Declaration of Arbroath (1320), the Dutch Act of Abjuration (1581), and the English Levellers’ Agreement of the People (1649); earlier theories of resistance, especially John Locke’s Second Treatise of Government (1689); pamphlets from the Stamp Act Crisis and the early stages of the American Revolution; Thomas Paine’s Common Sense, (1776); the
local declarations of independence; other Congressional State Papers; British replies to the Declaration of Independence; imitations of the Declaration, such as those from Flanders (1789), Liberia (1847), Czechoslovakia (1918), Vietnam (1945) and Southern Rhodesia (1965); translations of the Declaration, into French, German, Italian, and other languages (depending on students' competence); the alternative declarations of independence published in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and other declarations of independence, from Haiti (1804) and the Latin American republics to the Palestinian Declaration of Independence (1988) and other contemporary movements for independence and secession.

Primary readings:


Secondary readings:

Pauline Maier, American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence (New York, 1997).


Structure:

The course will begin with students reading -- or, rather, re-reading -the Declaration of Independence to work out the logical structure of the text, the arguments that inform it and the presumed audiences to which it was addressed. The next three weeks of the course will then look in succession at some of the antecedents to the American Declaration and at theories of
political resistance since the late sixteenth century. The following three weeks will focus on the immediate American contexts of the Declaration: the political theory of the Revolution; the other declarations, manifestoes, addresses and petitions issued by the Continental Congress; and the local declarations issued by towns and states in 1776. The next two weeks will examine the various drafts of the Declaration and the immediate responses to it, especially from Britain. The remaining weeks will examine the later declarations of independence and the movements that produced them. One session will be held in the Houghton Library, where it will be possible to examine early printings of the Declaration in different formats as well as books and manuscripts associated with the drafters of the Declaration.

Requirements:

Students will be expected to submit short (2-page) response papers on four occasions in the first half of the semester; they will each write a 5-page paper comparing the Declaration with either one of its earlier drafts, with another Congressional state-paper, or with one of the local declarations; and they will each produce a final long paper (8-10 pages) examining one of the later declarations in relation to the American Declaration and to its own historical context. Students will make brief presentations on their chosen topics for the long paper during the final weeks of class. No detailed background in American history will be presumed but a willingness to engage in serious detail with unfamiliar primary sources will be. The seminar will proceed by collaborative examination and discussion of these documents.