Leadership is most often needed to push organizations and causes toward steady improvement and incremental change. But, there are moments when leadership is needed to produce big leaps forward, dramatically changing what came before. This course will explore the personal traits, organizational circumstances, social conditions, accidents of fate and timing that can lead to monumental change.

We will explore this question in the context of four great books. The first three deal with huge changes in America from the 1930’s through the 1950’s and we will close with a book about the current health care reform debate. I predict that many of you will keep these books sitting on your bookshelves for years to come.

In January, we will spend 3 class periods on David McCullough’s biography “Truman.” Truman was a pivotal figure in history and ranks among the most remarkable of American presidents. He was the last President to only have a high school degree. His political career was a combination of perseverance and accident. He played a key role in desegregation of American life, the formation of the United Nations, the establishment of the basic foreign policy that became the 40+ year “Cold War,” the decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan to end World War II, the creation of the nation of Israel, the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe, the Korean War and the decision to fire General Douglas MacArthur to demonstrate civilian rule of the American military, among many other lasting and occasionally controversial national achievements. He was the first Democratic President to propose a bill to achieve universal health care for American citizens (Teddy Roosevelt was the first Republican President to do so!).

Please buy or check out the Truman biography (you can find it online or at any bookstore) and start reading now.

The discussion on January 11 will focus on Truman’s life through the death of FDR and his ascendency to the Presidency in 1945. This is Parts I and II of the biography—about 345 pages of reading. You can read the first 140 pages—the story of Truman’s ancestors, boyhood and early political life—very quickly, but pay special attention to the chapter about his service in WWI, which was a formative experience for much that came later. Also, pay special attention to the unusual story in Chapter 8 of how Truman was chosen to replace Henry Wallace as FDR’s vice-presidential running mate in 1944.

On January 18, we will focus on Parts III and IV of the biography, which cover Truman’s momentous first term through the 1948 re-election campaign, one of the 2 or 3 most compelling Presidential campaigns in American history. Truman became President after barely 80 days as Vice-President and immediately faced two of the most momentous decisions ever to face any President—whether to use the atomic bomb against Japan to
end World War II and how to negotiate with Joseph Stalin over the future of Europe. In the 1948 election, we will briefly encounter California Governor Earl Warren, who will play a key role later in the course.

On January 25, we will focus on Parts V and VI of the biography, Truman’s second term as President, the Korean War, the finish to his Presidency and his post-President life.

In February, we will spend all four class periods on Richard Kluger’s superb book “Simple Justice.” Kluger’s book is really three interrelated stories. The first third of the book tells the story of how the American constitution and laws were used from the beginning of the nation to enshrine racial segregation at odds with the Jeffersonian declaration that all are created equal. The middle portion of the book tells the story of American lawyers who began in the 1920’s to mount an assault on racial segregation as a violation of the American constitution. These lawyers, primarily educated at Howard Law School, filed cases for two decades all over the United States as part of a closely coordinated strategy principally organized by Thurgood Marshall at the NAACP, with great assistance from two Richmond lawyers, Oliver Hill and Spottswood Robinson. The University of Richmond plays a role in this portion of the book as a key case involving schools in Prince Edward County works its way to the United States Supreme Court. The final section of the book looks at how the United States Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, grappled with 5 cases (including the Virginia case) over the course of nearly 3 years before conclusively declaring that racial segregation in public education was unconstitutional in 1954. This book explores organizational dynamics—within the NAACP and within the United States Supreme Court—that led to the most momentous ruling in the history of American law.

In March, we will move into the world of science, war and military strategy by reading Richard Rhodes’ colossal work “The Making of the Atomic Bomb.” (Rhodes was an assistant who helped Richard Kluger do the massive research for “Simple Justice.”) The book examines how the development of 20th century physics and evolving thoughts about warfare combined to lead to use of atomic weapons in 1945 in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There are many strands to this complex book—the international character of scientific discovery, competition among nations to harness technology to obtain military superiority, the ethical argument over use of weapons of mass destruction that began during World War I and continued into President Truman’s office as he made his fateful decision and the organizational challenges of running the Manhattan Project, the single largest government project ever undertaken by the American government.

Finally, in April, we will jump to the current day and read “The Healing of America” by Washington Post reporter T.R. Reid. Reid has been posted to a number of international desks with the Post and writes to compare the U.S. health care system to those of other nations, especially Canada, Britain, France, Germany and Japan. He points out that the systems of those nations are all different and notes the flaws of each. But, he also points out that they all achieve three basic goals—full coverage of all citizens with better health outcomes and lower costs than the American system. We will discuss Reid’s work during 3 April class meetings and discuss the final outcome of the ongoing debate about
health care in this country, including whether the result represents the momentous breakthrough that Teddy Roosevelt and Harry Truman hoped for.

The class will be focused heavily on discussion—be prepared to weigh in assertively as we figure out the characteristics that lead to the big and meaningful changes. Grades will be based 1/3 on class participation (including each student taking one turn as discussion leader during the semester), 1/3 on short papers that will be written about each of the first 3 books and 1/3 on a final exam. I hope to bring a few speakers to class who have first hand experience in the topics we are discussing.

I will probably also throw a few offbeat readings your way just to show how the “breakthrough” concept transcends all disciplines. Here’s a fun one—google “Dick Fosbury” and you will find reference to an article in the 9/14/09 Sports Illustrated called “The Revolutionary.” It is about how an awkward high school athlete in the mid-1960’s revolutionized the sport of high jumping by developing a new technique that virtually all high jumpers now use. It is a quick and funny read. Bring your own favorite readings on the topic to share with the class if you can.

If you need to reach me before January 11, send me an email at kaine@governor.virginia.gov or call my office at 225-3502. I will provide you with a new phone and email contacts on the first day of class as well as the contact information for my administrative assistant Sherrie Harrington. I am looking forward to a great semester with you.

Tim Kaine
12/24/09