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Photo by Ruth Ann Offutt

Dr. Gerald McKnight

Unique Man Teaching a Unique Course

by Lynn Scheidhauer

The air is warm and soothing. A gentle breeze eases through the partially open window as students drag in for their 5 p.m. class. Outside dusk falls on the Hood campus. A lone pine tree, jutting between bare, dark branches, adds color to the scene.

It is a peaceful setting on a peaceful campus. One wonders how these six students, slumped in their straight back chairs, could stay alert for the two and a half hour evening class, a class that makes them miss dinner. And then he walks into the room.

Tall and good looking, he gives the impression of a scholar. He is dressed in a casual green velour shirt and trousers. Wire rimmed glasses frame sharp, inquisitive eyes. He explains the presence of the photographer and reporter with a smile, then proceeds with the class as usual.

But this is no ordinary class. Dr. Gerald McKnight's "Politics of Assassination" course is one of the most talked about on campus. Designed by Dr. McKnight and Dr. Virginia Lewis several years ago, the course gives students a chance to take a closer look at the

three major political assassinations of the '60s — John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy.

"I think the course as taught in this school is virtually unique," Dr. McKnight had said earlier. "It's unique not so much as a result of personality, but of geography. Harold Weisberg is in Frederick."

Weisberg is well known for his research in the Kennedy assassination. He acquired government records using the Freedom of Information Act. According to Dr. McKnight, Weisberg probably has the most comprehensive archive on assassinations in the country. And it is access to these documents that makes McKnight's class unique.

"Our class is based on primary materials," the associate professor of history said. "In the class I tell students to take a look at the circumstances in each case, let them see the documents themselves and then draw their own conclusions. I don't tell them how to think.

"Most courses of this kind are being taught from a 'who dun it' point of view. They have no basis in documented facts. I believe in the way the course is taught here be-

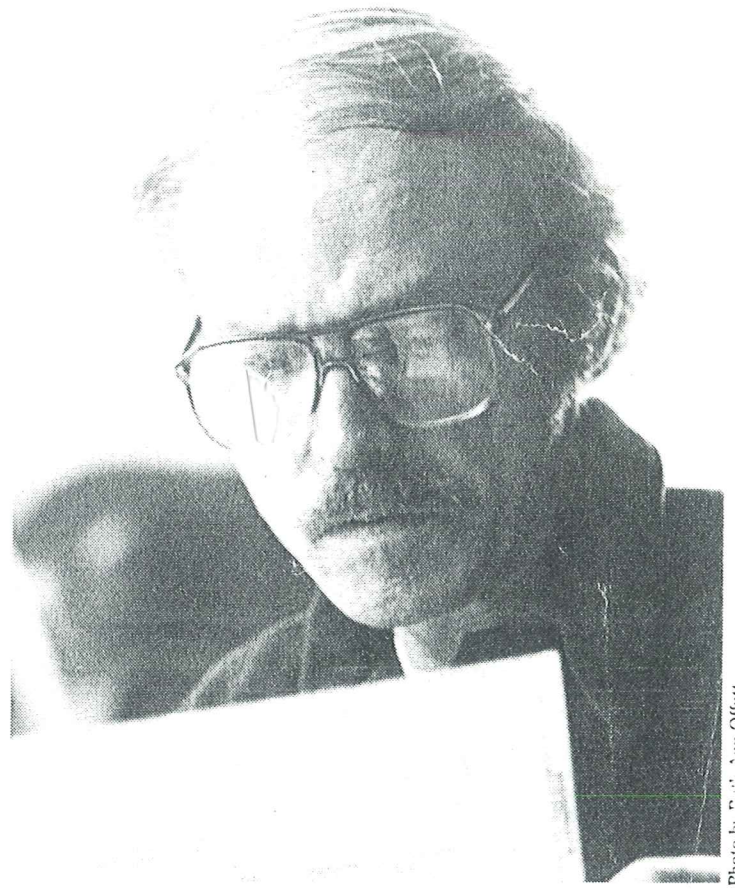


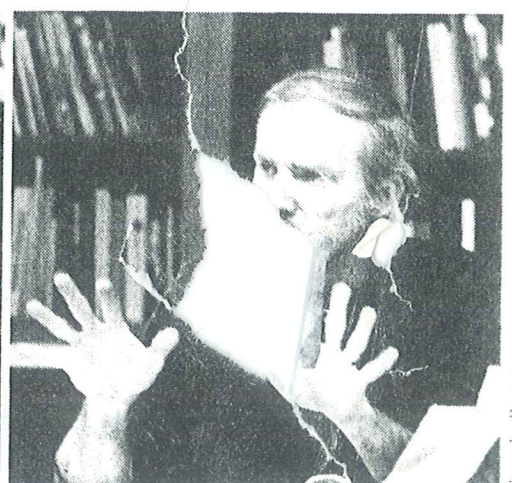
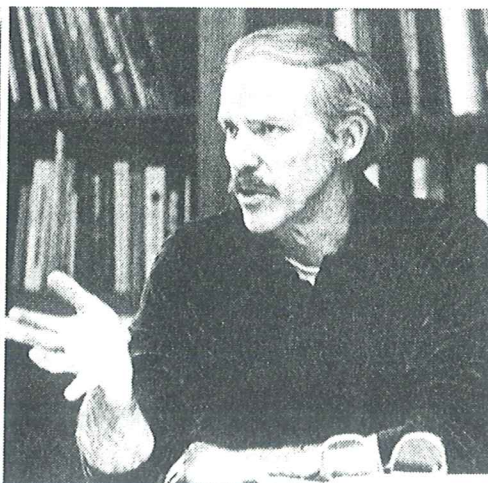
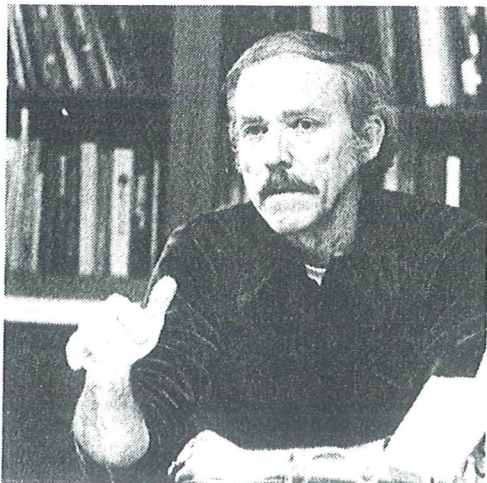
Photo by P. J. Kline/Office

cause we have enough primary materials to make it an academically responsible course. It has a more lasting intellectual value."

Dr. McKnight and Dr. Lewis team taught the course the first year as a special topics course. Dr.

McKnight now teaches the class alone.

Although he plays down the importance of personnel in the course, there's no question that Dr. McKnight has played a major role in maintaining the standards of the course. When students



In investigating Kennedy's death, they used the "Mad Hatter approach."

talk about politics of assassination, they inevitably discuss the professor.

"Being in any of Dr. McKnight's classes is a riveting experience," one former student said. "His style is so much more vibrant than many teachers. I find myself forgetting to take notes.

"When he's trying to make a point, his eyebrows furrow and his fingers stab at you. You can't help feeling every point he puts across.

"And he can always come up with minute details. When he's discussing something that would normally bore you, he adds little details that make it all come alive. He's such a dynamic person."

Dr. McKnight is equally complimentary about his students.

"I get some of the best students at Hood," he said. "They are sophisticated with good analytical ability. And they put a great deal of effort into the course. It's rewarding to see this kind of response."

The enthusiasm generated in Dr. McKnight's class is the result of an unusual topic taught by an unusual man. In discussing President Kennedy's assassination, Dr. McKnight uses documentation to show that the FBI, CIA and Lyndon Johnson desired a quick resolution to the slaying for various reasons.

One of the documents is a memo from a committee staff man to a top staff lawyer on the Warren Commission. The memo was dated April 27, 1964, four months into the Warren Commission investigation. It states "Our intention is not to establish the point with complete accuracy but merely to substantiate the hypothesis which underlies the conclusion that Oswald was the sole assassin."

"In investigating Kennedy's death, they used the 'Mad Hatter approach,'" Dr. McKnight said. "They started out with an assumption and tried to prove it.

"I do not mean to imply that anyone in the government killed Kennedy. What they did was help to perpetuate a cover-up. They wanted a quick, politically acceptable solution to the crime."

Examining circumstances revolving around the three assassinations is only part of the class.

"I intend the class to be much broader," Dr. McKnight said. "I try to give students a sense of failure in the '60s, institutional failure not only in the assassinations themselves. These events and cover-ups set in motion the distrust people have in the government today.

"In the '60s we lost three

major leaders through assassination. We try to touch on 'what does all this mean?'"

Although Dr. McKnight tries to "keep a little balance" between his work life and private life, he spends much of his spare time in researching articles about the assassinations or history in general. He writes book reviews for the *Mid America Journal of American History* and recently finished an article on the Mexican revolution in 1913-1915.

His dedication to his work is obvious in and out of the classroom.

"Dr. McKnight is very approachable," a student said. "He makes you feel at ease. When I took his course, he invited us all over to his house for a big spaghetti feed. What a terrific way to teach a class!"

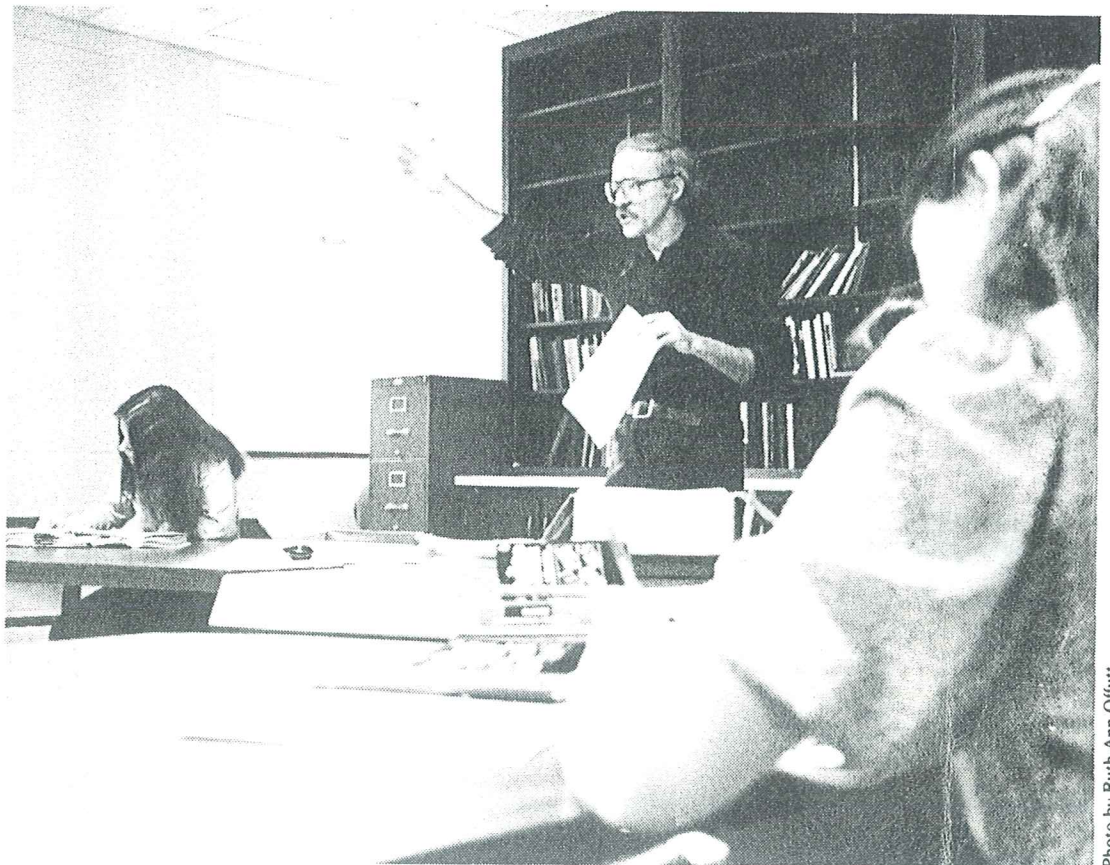


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