

## **American Political Thought**

George Mason University

Spring 2019

Tuesdays 6:00-8:30PM

Professor R. Boyd

Office Hours: Tuesdays before class and by appt

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### **Course Description:**

American politics is characterized by a number of fundamental paradoxes that run more or less continuously from its Puritan settlement in the seventeenth century to the present day. For example, how is it that America is ostensibly a secular nation predicated on a strict separation between church and state, and yet its political culture was at the time of the Founding, and remains even today, deeply suffused by religious faith and imagery? How can Americans be committed to seemingly contradictory values such as liberty and equality, scientific progress and the preservation of tradition, or economic competition and philanthropic charity? Why do Americans cherish privacy and the cultivation of radical individuality, on the one hand, even as they extol engaged citizenship, community service, and voluntary association, on the other?

This course seeks both to explain and illuminate tensions in contemporary political culture by returning to their sources in the American political tradition. We will discuss selections from several different epochs including Puritan New England, the American Revolution, the Founding Era, critiques of democratic culture in the nineteenth century, debates over slavery and race in the years leading up to the Civil War, and the legacy of these conflicts in contemporary America.

**Required Texts**, available for purchase in inexpensive paperback editions at the George Mason Bookstore

Madison, Hamilton and Jay, *The Federalist* (Penguin)

Abraham Lincoln, *Selected Speeches and Writings* (Library of America)

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Harper)

# **Additional Short Documents and Excerpts**, uploaded and accessible via Blackboard

### **Section 1. Course Introduction and the Puritan Roots of the American Tradition (1/22 and 1/29)**

#“Mayflower Compact” (1620)

#John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630)

#John Winthrop, “The Little Speech on Liberty” (1639)

#Roger Williams, “The Bloody Tenent of Persecution” (1644)

#Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741)

#Benjamin Franklin, “The Art of Virtue” (1784)

### **Section 2. Rhetoric and Reason in the American Revolution (2/5 and 2/12)**

#Samuel Adams, “The Rights of the Colonists” (1772)

#Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776)

#Jefferson, “Declaration of Independence”

### **Section 3. Crafting the American Constitution (2/19, 2/26, \*3/5) [\*IN-CLASS MIDTERM 3/5\*]**

*The Federalist*, numbers 1, 2, 6, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 27, 28, 31, 35, 37, 47, 48, 49, 51, 55, 58, 70, 71, 72, 78, 84.

# “Letter from Samuel Adams to Richard Henry Lee,” December 3, 1787

# “Letters from a Federal Farmer” (Melancton Smith?)

### **Section 4. American Culture and the Critique of Democracy (3/12—to be rescheduled for Spring Break, 3/19 and 3/26)**

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, “Author’s Introduction,” Vol. I, Pt. 1. Chs. 2-5; Pt. 2, Ch. 2, 4, 6-9; Volume II, Pt. 1, Chs. 5-14; Pt. 2, Chs. 1-15; Pt. 3, Chs. 1-2, 8, 12, 14, 18-19.

### **Section 5. Slavery and the Crisis of the Union (4/2 and 4/9)**

Abraham Lincoln, “Young Men’s Lyceum,” pp. 13-21; “Fragments on Government and Slavery,” p. 91; “Speech on the Dred Scott Decision,” pp. 117-128; “House Divided Speech,” pp. 131-139; “Lecture on Discoveries,” pp. 200-208; “Address at Cooper Institute,” pp. 240-251; “Address at Gettysburg,” p. 405; “Second Inaugural,” pp. 449-450.

### **Section 6. Liberalism, Conservatism, and Radicalism in American Politics (4/16 and 4/23)**

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “The Four Freedoms” (1941)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963)

Barry Goldwater, “The Conscience of a Conservative” (1960)

Milton Friedman, “Social Responsibility of Business” (1970)

Barack Obama, “Speech on Race” (2008)

William Julius Wilson, “Declining Significance of Race” (2011)

Thomas Sowell, “Race, Culture, and Equality” (1998)

## **TAKE-HOME FINAL EXAM TO BE SUBMITTED THROUGH BLACKBOARD**

### **Course Requirements:**

There are three course requirements for American Political Thought:

- 1) Midterm Exam—33%.
- 2) Take-Home Final Exam—33%.
- 3) Prepared attendance and class participation, where appropriate—33%.

Students should note that the class format is what I describe as “interactive lecture.” Without regular attendance and active engagement in the lectures and accompanying discussion, it will be very difficult for students to do well in this course. Students should come to class having done the readings for each session and prepared to answer questions about the material if called on. As a further incentive, those students who have made a regular and substantial contribution to the class discussion may expect to receive the benefit of the doubt in the many cases when they find themselves on the border between two letter grades.

Dr. Richard Boyd teaches American Political Thought for TFAS U.S. Programs in Washington, D.C. Boyd is associate professor of government at Georgetown University. His research interests include the intellectual history of liberalism, civil society and pluralism, economic and sociological theory, the theory and practice of immigration and citizenship policies in the United States, and the ethical dimensions of the recent financial crisis. He is author of “Uncivil Society: The Perils of Pluralism and the Making of Modern Liberalism” (Lexington/ Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) and editor – with Ewa Atanassow – of “Tocqueville and the Frontiers of Democracy” (Cambridge, 2013). He has published more than thirty journal articles and book chapters on such thinkers as Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, Adam Smith, James Madison, Edmund Burke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, J. S. Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, Stendhal, Mrs. Frances Trollope, Joseph Mazzini, Michael Oakeshott, F. A. Hayek and Frank H. Knight.

He is currently working on two book-length projects. “Liberalism, Capacities, and Citizenship” is a study of the morality of borders, especially the ways in which liberalism – past and present – deals with the question of who deserves to be a member of the political community. The second project – with Richard Avramenko of UW-Madison – is titled “Subprime Virtues: The Moral Dimensions of US Housing and Mortgage Policy” and explores the moral consequences of housing policy in the United States in the wake of the financial crisis.

Before coming to Georgetown in 2007, Boyd taught at the University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, University of Wisconsin-Madison and Deep Springs College. He is currently the faculty director of the Program in Social and Political Thought.