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)


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)
William Julius Wilson, “Declining Significance of Race” (2011)
Thomas Sowell, “Race, Culture, and Equality” (1998)

TAKING 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.

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.