GOVT 344: Republic or Empire?
Ideas and Practice in American Foreign Policy

Summer 2020, Mondays & Thursdays, 6-8:30pm, Room TBD

The Fund For American Studies
The Institute on Economics & International Affairs
George Mason University

Course Description:

Is the United States a republic or an empire? Even before George Washington warned in his Farewell Address against unnecessary entanglements, Thomas Paine argued that “the birthday of a new world is at hand” and that Americans possessed a special mission to liberate other peoples. The debate continues today in arguments over American involvement in the Middle East, the proper posture toward international alliances, and whether humanitarian concerns may justify war. This course will explore the development and trajectory of American foreign policy from the perspective of the history of ideas, connecting issues of human nature and the moral life to practical questions of international affairs, constitutionalism, and the paradoxes of American exceptionalism. Readings will be drawn from history, philosophy, and case studies in American and international politics.

Course Goals:

- Acquaint students with a broad overview of American foreign policy history and some of the principles on which that foreign policy has been worked out over time.
- Explore competing voices within that foreign policy tradition, with an emphasis on the long-running debate over intervention vs. restraint, attending to its subtleties and ironies.
- Connect these questions to broader philosophical concerns about the nature of politics, power, and human nature in a way that complements the undergraduate curriculum as a whole.

Required Texts:


Additional texts will be distributed digitally
Course Policies

Attendance and Participation: Students are expected to attend class regularly, and are permitted one unexcused absence. Additional absences should be for legitimate reasons and adequately explained and documented. Each unexcused absence after that will result in a 1/3rd letter grade penalty per absence.

Class discussion is highly encouraged, and thoughtful participation will be noted.

Examinations and Assignments (100 points): Assignments for this course involve completing:

- A foreign policy “autobiography” (20 points)
- One seminar reflection papers (20 points)
- One simulation policy brief (20 points)
- A final essay (40 points)

The foreign policy “autobiography” should be between 2 and 3 pages in length (double-spaced) and is due in class on June 15. This short assignment is designed to get you thinking about the factors that have shaped your own thinking on American foreign policy, as well as the broader historical situation we find ourselves in. There is no “wrong” answer, other than to violate the basic rules of paper-writing.

The reflection papers should between 3 and 4 pages in length (double-spaced). They can be turned in for any class, and should analyze and explore the readings for that particular class. Although these papers do not involve research, they will need to follow some of the same standards as a traditional paper—specifically, they should be written at a collegiate level, feature clear writing, and convey thoughtful analysis that goes beyond mere summary. Details on the particulars of these assignments will be discussed in class, especially regarding the simulation policy brief and the final essay.

Course Policies:

- No computers, tablets, or cell phones may be used in the classroom without specific prior permission.
- Late work: Assignments may be submitted late only with prior authorization and will normally incur a significant penalty.
- Academic Dishonesty: This class will have a "Zero Tolerance Policy." Cheating on quizzes or exams may result in a failing grade for the assignment or the course, or disciplinary action from TFAS and/or GMU. Plagiarism, or the unattributed borrowing of another person’s ideas in written work, will constitute cheating and will be dealt with as such.
➢ Professorial Prerogative: The instructor reserves the right to make changes in the syllabus. Major changes will be made only after announcement in at least one class meeting.
Course Schedule:

Week 1: Present Discontents: The Last Twenty Years

June 8 (3pm-5:30pm). Course Overview & Introduction


*From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776*, by George C. Herring. Pages 938-951 (Bush and his administration’s transformation from 2000 to 2003).


Machiavelli, Discourses on Livy, I.4, I.6, I.9, I.58, II.3, III.1, III.3.

Montesquieu, The Spirit of the Laws, Books X and IX

Week 2: The Founding(s)

June 15  [Foreign policy “autobiography” due.]


“Common Sense,” by Thomas Paine. In Bacevich, 11-15

“Federalist No. 11”, by Publius [Alexander Hamilton]. In Bacevich, 21-24


What the Anti-Federalists Were For, by Herbert J. Storing. Chapter 3: “The Small Republic.”

June 18  NO CLASS

Week 3: Westward Expansion


William Penn [Jeremiah Everts], "Present Crisis in the Condition of the American Indians" (1830) In Bacevich, 41-42.

John Ross, "Letter to Congress" (1836) In Bacevich, 42-43.


*From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776*, by George C. Herring. Pages 93-114 (“Purified, as by Fire”)


*From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776*, by George C. Herring. Pages 427-435 (“A New Age”)

**Week 4: World War and the Advent of a Grand Strategy of Primacy**

June 29    “What is Grand Strategy? Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield,” by Rebecca Lissner


“Chatauqua Speech,” by Franklin D. Roosevelt. In Bacevich, 208-211.

“Giddy Minds and Foreign Quarrels,” by Charles Beard. In Bacevich 214-215

Walter Lippmann, U. S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic (1943) in Bacevich, 242-245.

July 2


United States Objectives and Programs for National Security (“NSC 68”)


From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776, by George C. Herring. Pages 635-650.

**Week 5: Retiring Superpower?**

July 6


July 9


**Week 6: The Liberal International Order and American Power**

July 13


*How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*, by Daniel Immerwahr. Chapters 18, 21 and 22

July 16


“China Is Not an Enemy” (Open Letter), by M. Taylor Fravel et al
Week 7: Rethinking American Foreign Policy


July 23  In-Class Simulation

Week 8:

July 27  Class-Decided Topic

July 30  [Final Essay Due]