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

Fall 2020, Seminar: Tuesdays, 4:30–7:00pm
(with some additional early semester meetings due to the quarantine and one asynchronous element; see below)

The Fund for American Studies
Capital Semester Program
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:


(Note: This course also occasionally uses supplementary readings, which are available on Blackboard. If you have trouble downloading, printing, accessing them, etc., please let me know as soon as possible.)
Course Policies

Attendance: 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 (i.e. from B+ to B, etc.). The class will meet via Zoom through September 4th and on GMU’s Arlington Campus (Van Metre Hall 118) after that.

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

- A foreign policy “autobiography” (15 points)
- Three reading analysis papers (3 x 10 points each = 30 points)
- Open book quizzes (15 points)
- Final exam (20 points)
- Participation (20 points)

The foreign policy “autobiography” should be 500-800 words in length (double-spaced) and is due via email by class time on September 8. 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 in which we find ourselves. There is no “wrong” answer, other than to violate the basic rules of paper-writing and academic integrity.

The reading analysis papers should between 800-1200 words in length (double-spaced, 1-inch margins, Times New Roman size 12). You will sign up for three slots by Sept. 1 at the link below; papers should analyze and explore the readings due for that particular class. No more than 3 students may sign up for a reading analysis of the same class period; the third slot may only be taken if all other class periods have two slots filled. These papers do not involve research, but they must follow 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. Signup is via the Google Sheet at this link: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1eNw1BIRO1uHJGIqOuV10HfALBuV9wfVHUYE_QRmZoEU/edit?usp=sharing

For most class meetings, you will take an open-book quiz of the material covered. The questions will go out in advance via email and answers are due back via email by 11:59 p.m. the night before that class.

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

Course Policies:

- 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.” Academic dishonesty of any kind may result in a failing grade for the assignment or the course, or disciplinary action from TFAS and/or GMU.
- 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:

Session 1: Present Discontents: The Last Twenty Years (Aug. 25 – 90 minutes via Zoom)

Course Overview, Syllabus, & Introductions
“Study Finds Relationship Between High Military Casualties and Votes for Trump Over Clinton,” by Zaid Jilani. The Intercept.

Session 2: Republicanism and Empire Before America (Aug. 26 – 90 minutes via Zoom)

Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.1, 2.34-2.54, 5.84-5.113, 6.8-6.24.
Aristotle, Politics, Book III, chapter 11: http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.3.three.html

Session 3: American Republicanism Developing (Sept. 1 – 90 minutes via Zoom)

[ Deadline to sign up for Reading Analysis dates:  
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1eNw1BIR01uHJGlqOuV10HfALBuV9wfVHUYE_QRmZoEU/edit?usp=sharing ]
“Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death,” by Patrick Henry. In Bacevich, 10.

Session 4: American Republicanism and Nationhood (Sept. 2 – 90 minutes via Zoom)

[Foreign policy “autobiography” due]
McDougall, “Preface”, “Introduction,” and Chapter 1: “Liberty, or Exceptionalism (so called)”


*Federalist* nos. 11, 15, 16, 17, 39.


**Session 5: Movie: *The Quiet American* (1958) (120 minutes – asynchronous, but due before class 9/8)**

Watch: *The Quiet American* (1958):
[https://digitalcampus.swankmp.net/gmu277629/watch/D0B587C5B61A8D3D?referrer=direct](https://digitalcampus.swankmp.net/gmu277629/watch/D0B587C5B61A8D3D?referrer=direct)

(Use need your GMU NetID credentials for access. N.B.: Mac users will need to use Chrome, Firefox, or some other non-Safari browser.)


**Session 6: Imagination and World Affairs (Sept. 8)**

“A Covenant with all Mankind: Ronald Reagan’s Idyllic Vision of America in the World,” by Justin D. Garrison. [PDF]

Greene, *The Quiet American* (entire book)

**Session 7: Looking Homeward (Sept. 15)**

McDougall, Chapter 2: “Unilateralism, Or Isolationism (so called)”


McDougall, Chapter 3: “The American System, or Monroe Doctrine (so called)”


Speeches of Henry Clay and others on the Independence of the South American Republics and the Monroe Doctrine (1818/1822) [PDF]

**Session 8: Expansionism as Imperialism? (Sept. 22)**

McDougall, Chapter 4: “Expansionism, or Manifest Destiny (so called)”


[Jeremiah Everts], “Present Crisis in the Condition of the American Indians.” In Bacevich, 41-42.


Session 9: From McKinley to Wilson: A Turning Point (Sept. 29)

McDougall, Chapter 5: “Progressive Imperialism”
“Preparedness, the Road to Universal Slaughter,” by Emma Goldman. In Bacevich, 138-142.

Session 10: One Last Retreat? The Interwar Years (Oct. 6)

“Kellogg-Briand Pact.” In Bacevich, 196-197.

October 13 – GMU Administrative Monday – No Class

Session 11: World War and the Advent of a Grand Strategy of Primacy (Oct. 20)

McDougall, Chapter 6: “Wilsonianism, or Liberal Internationalism (so called)”
“Chautauqua Speech,” by Franklin D. Roosevelt. In Bacevich, 208-211.

**Session 12: The Cold War and Character (Oct. 27)**

McDougall, Chapter 7: “Containment”


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

**Session 13: “A Normal Nation for Normal Times?” (Nov. 3)**

McDougall, Chapter 8: “Global Meliorism”

McDougall, “Conclusion: A Delightsome Spot”


“The Future of the Liberal World Order: Internationalism After America” by G. John Ikenberry.: [PDF]


**Session 14: The Liberal International Order and American Power (Nov. 10)**


“Liberals, Neocons, Realcons,” by Michael C. Desch. [PDF]

“Robert Kagan: Machiavellian in Liberal Disguise,” by David C. Hendrickson. [PDF]

Patrick Porter, “Why America’s Grand Strategy Has Not Changed” [PDF]

“What is Grand Strategy? Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield,” by Rebecca Lissner [PDF]

*How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything*, by Rosa Brooks. Chapters 7 and 8. [PDF]
Session 15: Rethinking American Foreign Policy (Nov. 17)


Final Exam Review

Final Exam – Nov. 24

Details to follow.