

American Political Thought

George Mason University

Summer 2020

M and Th 6:00-8:30PM

Professor R. Boyd

Office Hours: Thursdays 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, controversies over slavery and race in the years leading up to the Civil War, and the legacy of these debates about liberalism 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

Week 1. Course Introduction and the Puritan Roots of the American Tradition (6/8 and 6/11)

#“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)

Week 2. Rhetoric and Reason in the American Revolution (6/15 and 6/22)

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

#Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776)

#Jefferson, “Declaration of Independence”

Weeks 3 and 4. Crafting the American Constitution (6/25, 6/29, *7/2*) [IN-CLASS MIDTERM 7/2]

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?)

Week 5. American Culture and the Critique of Democracy (7/6, 7/9, and 7/13)

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.

Week 6. Slavery and the Crisis of the Union (7/16 and 7/20)

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.

Week 7. Liberalism, Conservatism, and Radicalism in American Politics (7/23 and 7/27)

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 DUE 8/1 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.