American Political Thought
George Mason University, Government 420
Summer 2022
Mondays and Thursdays 5:00-6:30PM; Wednesday asynchronous assignment

Professor R. Boyd
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Course Description:
American politics is characterized by 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? How can historical dilemmas of race and exclusion be reconciled with the universal commitments of liberalism?

This course seeks to 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 or by Amazon, etc.

Madison, Hamilton and Jay, The Federalist (Penguin)
Abraham Lincoln, Selected Speeches and Writings (Library of America)
Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, ed. J. P. Mayer, translated by George Lawrence. (Harper Perennial Modern Classics)

# Additional Short Documents and Excerpts, uploaded and accessible via Blackboard/Canvas

Week 1. Course Introduction and the Puritan Roots of the American Tradition (6/6 and 6/9)

#“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)
[Asynchronous PowerPoint lecture on Puritan Political Thought uploaded for 6/8]

Week 2. Rhetoric and Reason in the American Revolution (6/13 and 6/16)

#Samuel Adams, “The Rights of the Colonists” (1772)
# Thomas Paine, Common Sense (1776)
# Jefferson, “Declaration of Independence”

[PowerPoint lecture on the American Revolution uploaded for 6/15]


*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?)

[Writing assignment #1 uploaded 6/22]

**Week 5. American Culture and the Critique of Democracy (6/30 and 7/7)**


[PowerPoint lecture on Tocqueville uploaded 6/29]

[Writing assignment #2 uploaded 7/6]

**Weeks 6 and 7. Slavery and the Crisis of the Union (7/11, 7/14, and 7/18)**


Frederick Douglass, “Is it Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper?”


Douglass, “What the Black Man Wants”

[PowerPoint Lecture on Antebellum America and Slavery uploaded 7/13]

**Week 8. Liberalism, Conservatism, and Radicalism in American Politics (7/21 and 7/25)**

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)

[PowerPoint Lecture on Modern Liberalism and Civil Rights uploaded 7/20]

**TAKE-HOME FINAL EXAM DUE 7/30 TO BE SUBMITTED THROUGH BLACKBOARD**

**Course Requirements:**

There are three formal course requirements for American Political Thought:

1) 2 short at-home writing assignments—25%.

2) Take-Home Final Exam—50%.

3) Prepared attendance and class participation, where appropriate—25%.
Students should note that 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. Attendance and Participation is also a graded component of the course, and you may take the following guidelines as an approximation of how A&P will be assessed:

- Absent in three or more sessions without medical documentation: 0-15/25 points
- Present in most sessions but no significant contributions: 20-21 points
- Regularly present; occasional/ unproductive contributor: 22 points
- Regular, active, productive participant: 23-24 points
- Class leader: 25 points

**Grading Scale:**

A=100-93
A-=92.99-90
B+=89.99-87
B=86.99-83
B-=82.99-80
C+=79.99-77
C=76.99-73
C-=72.99-70

Grade cut-off’s are absolute, and I don’t usually “round up” final grades except under exceptional circumstances.