The central goal of this course is to examine the relationship between democracy and empire in the American case, focusing especially on the years since 9/11.

We ask broad theoretical questions: what does it mean to call a state or nation an “empire?” What does the adjective “imperial” connote? Do arguments about “capitalism” suffice to explain the causes and meaning of empire? -is it also related to the ways that “democratic” and “American” have been defined? How are the universalistic claims of “liberal democracy” and “America” related to practices of exclusion, racial domination, and military power? What are the conditions of American world power, and do those conditions undermine democratic values and practices?

We ask broad historical questions: What is the historic relationship between liberalism (as a political creed promising liberty, equality, and pluralist toleration) and a history of racial exclusion and imperial power? How has “world power” been justified, and mass support mobilized since world war two? Has American empire changed since the cold war ended, and how do those changes influence democratic values and practices?

We will relate these broad questions to the post-Vietnam years leading up to the first Iraq war, to 9/11, and to the Obama years since 08.

In part we ask: did the national response to 9/11 repeat or transform historical patterns of conduct and inherited political languages? Is “the war on terror” unprecedented and necessary, or is it more about American racial history and cultural anxieties? How has the war on terror been defended, explained, and criticized? What accounts for bi-partisan support for drone strikes, NSA surveillance, etc? How and why has Obama defended/expanded rather than curtailed the national security state?

In part we ask: How have Americans understood and responded to economic crisis and increasing inequality? How should we interpret widespread language of economic and national “decline”? How should we interpret polarized conflict over “domestic” policy, i.e. state programs, infrastructure and public goods, taxes, (in)equality, immigration, and civil rights? What sub-texts drive these debates? We will study the rhetoric of Obama, and of the “Tea Party” and “Occupy Wall Street” movements, to trace visions of crisis and citizenship.

To conclude we compare the representational strategies in Thomas Pynchon’s Vineland, and in recent Hollywood movies (3 Kings, Syrianna, Michael Clayton, Up In the Air, Descendants) that star George Clooney. In each film he plays a character awakening to his complicity in imperial power, corporate corruption, and economic crisis. He had dissociated from the meaning of his acts and practices, but can he now redeem that history and failure?

**Required texts:**
Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, The Movie*
David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*
David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism*
Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*

**recommended texts for projects:**
Wendy Brown, *Walled States*
Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics*
Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire*
Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*
Theda Skocpol et.al, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of the Republican Party*
Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*
Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland*

**Course Requirements:**
* because we meet once a week, attendance is mandatory
* one-page typed response papers each week
* one 5-page critical essay
* one 10-15 page research paper involving course texts/themes
* no cell phones or laptop use in class

**Grading:** 25% participation/response papers; 25% 1st paper; 50% research paper

**Plagiarism:** the use of the words or work of others without attribution is punishable by an F in the course. PLEASE, if you have ANY questions about what would count as plagiarism, ask for clarification. Always better to cite than not cite, no question!

**Learning goals:**
1) to learn the central terms of analysis for understanding American politics in its international and internal dimensions
2) to learn the meaning of “culture” and “politics” as concepts and as dimensions of life
3) to learn “close reading” of theoretical texts and arts of interpretation
4) to develop writing skills in the critical essay genre
5) to learn how to develop, elaborate, and research a theoretical question

**central theoretical questions:**

1) how should we understand the causes and the meaning of imperial power? (Do “capitalism” and “material interest” suffice to explain the cause and meaning of imperial politics? What is the role of racial discourse, gender and sexuality, and unconscious motivations, in imperial domination & violence?)

2) How do imperial practices “abroad” relate to anti-democratic practices “at home?” (What Americans euphemistically call “world power” has meant a military-industrial complex, imperial presidency, and a consumer culture of growth – what is their political meaning? How are the practices we link to “empire” (over “others”) also enacted domestically and locally (over others at home or enfranchised citizens)? Who is subject(ed) to empire? Should prisons, ghettos, reservations, and borderlands be seen as sites of an imperial (not democratic) regime? Are there sites of exception to liberal or democratic norms? Did enfranchised citizens benefit from empire? Still, or not now?)

3) How should we explain the collapse of New Deal/welfare state liberalism? (Is “neo-liberalism” an adequate explanation? Why has it been so successful? What is the relationship between “neo-liberal,” evangelical, and “new right”? How are we to understand the shift of many working class people into the republican party?)

4) How do narratives and vernacular idioms shape American politics? (What hegemonic narratives & idioms authorize empire -in the name of freedom or democracy? How do critics of empire argue? What idioms or genres might help Americans address profound economic crisis and its cultural meaning?)
5) What is the role of literary/visual art in political criticism? Can literary/visual art be a way to theorize politics?

6) How are we to understand claims about national decline—about the end of the American dream or erosion of American economic and international power? Is the claim valid? Is it a trope, expressing a sense of loss or crisis—whose?

7) How do people narrate/represent their sense of crisis? How should we interpret their claims and stories? What genre of narrative is needed now?

1/28 #1 Introduction: goals, concepts, timeline

2/4

#2: Frameworks of Analysis

Richard Slotkin, Gunslinger Nation (intro/conclusion -xerox)
John F. Kennedy, two speeches (xerox)
Michael Rogin, “The History of Political Repression” in Reagan
Jonathan Lear, “The Shrink Is In” (xerox)

write:
* How do Rogin or Slotkin “explain” the causes and meaning of imperial power?
* How does liberal capitalism in the US relate to racial/national identity?
* How do frontier myth, violence & savage war relate to democratic ideals?
* Do myth/narrative, or unconscious motivation (involving fantasy, anxiety, racial/gendered symbolism) merely rationalize “material interest”?
* What are “internal” or “domestic” consequences of imperial/global power?
* Are liberalism and empire incompatible? correlated? Both?
* What is “exceptional” and what is enduring (or recurring) in US history?
* Do Rogin or Slotkin retell American history in the genre of tragedy?

POST-60'S POLITICS: THE ASCENDENCY OF THE NEW RIGHT

2/11 Defensive Nationalism I: Overcoming the Vietnam syndrome

#3

read: Ronald Reagan, “City on a Hill” (xerox)
William Adams, “Remembering Vietnam” (xerox)
Michael Rogin, Reagan, preface excerpted (xerox)
Linda Boose, “Techno-muscularity and ‘the boy eternal’” (xerox)
David Harvey, The New Imperialism, chap 2 (26-86)
Andrew Bacevich, The Limits of Power, intro/c.2 (1-66)

recommended reading:
Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” (xerox)
Andrew Bacevich, The Limits of Power chap 2 (”The Political Crisis”) Chalmers Johnson, Sorrows of Empire (1-13/15-65/255-312)


write:
* Assess the relationship between anti-communism and empire.
* Compare how Harvey/Boose/Bacevich depict the causes/meaning of empire.
* Assess “paranoid style”/”hubris”/”material interest” as theories of politics
* Compare views of (the meaning of) the Vietnam War.
* Assess the effort to deny or redeem defeat as a motive in politics.

2/18 Defensive Nationalism II: Undoing New Deal Liberalism

#4

read: David Harvey, A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism (5-54/64-86)
Cowie/Salvatore, “The Long Exception: Rethinking...the New Deal” (xerox)
Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (on “individualism”)
Wendy Brown, “Neo-liberalism & the End of Liberal Democracy” (xerox)
Steve Fraser, “The Limousine Liberal’s Family Tree” (xerox)
William Connolly, “The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine” (xerox)

**recommended reading:** Michael Rogin, “Political Demonology” in *Reagan*

**write:**
* What is neo-liberalism and how does the concept explain historical change?
* What follows from different narratives about the New Deal consensus?
* Compare accounts of Reagan supporters as “populist” or “neo-liberal.”
* Assess the implications of the anti-statism that Reagan articulated.
* What is “exceptional” and what is enduring (or recurring) in US history?
* Assess the significance of “individualism” in American (political) life.
* What glue holds together the republican party – ideology? Affect?
The Carceral Empire Within: the post-civil rights racial regime

#5
read: Loic Wacquant, “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration” (xerox)
Michael Rogin, “Two Declarations of Independence” (xerox)
George Lipsitz, “Possessive Investment in Whiteness” (xerox)
Glenn Loury, “Why Are So Many Americans in Prison?” (Xerox)
James Baldwin, “Letter to My Nephew” (xerox)
Hannah Arendt, “On Collective Responsibility” (xerox)
Kimberlee Crenshaw, “Real Justice/Reel Time” (xerox)
Obama-Sharpton, speeches at 2004 Democratic Party National Convention

recommended reading:
Frank Wilderson, “Prison Slave as Hegemony’s Scandal” (xerox)
Jared Sexton, “Racial Profiling and Societies of Control” (xerox)
Obama, Philadelphia speech on race (xerox)

recommended viewing:

write:
* How has the American racial regime changed since/because of the CRM?
* Why does racial(ized) inequality persist despite formal equality?
* How is a culture of individualism related to structures of inequality?
* How does “narrative” matter in what people (can) see, say, do?
* Compare the content & form of the speeches by Obama and Sharpton.
* Relate the carceral “inside” and the imperial “outside.”

first paper due Monday March 3, 10am

THE NATIONAL SECURITY STATE AND PERMANENT WAR

#6
read: journalism about 9/11 (xerox)
Michael Ignatieff, “The Burden”(xerox)
David Harvey, The New Imperialism (1-25/213-32)
Andrew Bacevich, The Limits of Power, chap 2 (“The Political Crisis”)
Mahmoud Mamdani, “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim” (xerox)
Jasbir Puar, “Homo-nationalism” (xerox)
Jane Mayer, “Whatever It Takes” (on TV show 24 and torture -xerox)

recommended reading:
Andrew Bacevich, The Limits of Power (chap 3, “The Military Crisis”)
Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” (Xerox)
Jasbir Puar, “Abu Graib: Arguing Against Exceptionalism” (xerox)
Aymy Kaplan, “Violent Belonging”

recommended viewing:
Erroll Morris documentaries on MacNamara and on Rumsfeld;
"The Hurt Locker” and "Zero Dark Thirty"

write:
* What is unprecedented &/or recurring in the U.S. response to 9/11 attacks?
* Compare two accounts of what motivated the US response to 9/11.
* Is American response to 9/11 a case of “counter-subversive demonology”?
* How is the national ‘we’ re-defined via sex/gender politics?
* How are inside and outside re-defined after 9/11?
* Are elites rational? deranged? Are masses duped, invested, skeptical?
* Is Ignatieff right to make “exceptions” to “save” “liberalism,” or is that how liberalism repeatedly justifies imperial politics?
* How should we understand/explain the use of torture?
* why does Mamdami oppose “culture talk?” What is a “political” alternative?

THINK ABOUT RESEARCH TOPIC - MEET WITH GEORGE NEXT WEEK
3/11  Defensive Nationalism IV: Obama at War
#7
read: Obama, speech against Iraq War, West Point & Nobel Prize Address (xerox)
Obama, on drones & NSA surveillance (xerox)
Andrew Bacevich, Limits of Power 170-82
Michael Rogin, “Make My Day: Spectacle...in Imperial Politics”(xerox)
Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, and Politics” (xerox)
Talal Asad, On Suicide Bombing, chap one (xerox)

recommended reading:
Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation”
George Shulman, “Disavowal & Acknowledgment as an idiom for politics”
Andrew Bacevich, The Limits of Power, chap 3 (“the Political Crisis”)

write:
* Is there a valid distinction between legitimate (state) violence and illegitimate (“terrorist”) violence?
* How would Butler address Obama on just war? How would Obama respond?
* Assess the claim to a valid national interest that is not “imperial.”
* Compare how Obama & Butler address the national subject.
* Is B’s “ethical” critique really a rejection of politics as such?
* Assess Rogin’s idea of “covert politics” as “spectacle”

week of March 10-15: meet with George to finalize research project
3/17 SPRING BREAK

3/25  Anti-Imperial Idioms
#8
read:
Bill Kaufman, Ain’t My America, Introduction (xerox)
Robert Westbrook, “Isolationism re-considered” (xerox)
C. Wright Mills, “Structure of Power”
Paul Potter, SDS anti-war speech 1965
Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, anti-war statement
Eugene McCarthy, speeches
Martin Luther King, “A Time to Break Silence” (xerox)
Michael Rogin, “The Ugly Revolution” (xerox)
Allan Ginsberg, “Wichita Vortex Sutra” (xerox)

recommended reading:
Hannah Arendt, “On Lying in Politics” (xerox)
J. William Fullbright, “The Arrogance of Power” (xerox)

write:
* How do critics explain war/empire?
* On what grounds/for what reasons should we (who?) reject it?
* By what acts/practices do critics see opposition to empire enacted?
* Is it possible to be a “world power” and remain a “democratic” society?
* Does anti-imperial politics have conditions/presuppositions-i.e. isolation?
  Pacifism? Austerity not consumer culture? De-centralization?
* Should people of color in the US identify globally not nationally, on a political (not racial) basis, as subjects of neo-colonial domination?
* Does language matter in explaining (what causes) war, or in opposing it?
* What sort of problem is “Vietnam”?
* Are elites rational? deranged? Is the public ignorant, invested, amnesiac?
* Compare claims of a “republic” in jeopardy, or of a “system” is in crisis.
* Explore genre differences: political speech, a sermon, a poem.
* Who do critics “address” -specific groups? A national subject? Each person?
"HOMELAND" - POLITICAL ECONOMY AND CULTURE IN CRISIS

4/1  The 08 Crash
#9
read: Doug Henwood, “Reflections on the Current Crisis” (xerox)
Paul Krugman, “How did Economists Get It So Wrong?” (Xerox)
Machiavelli, The Discourses, excerpts on corruption & renewal
William Connolly, “The Ecology of Late Capitalism” (xerox)
Obama, 2nd Inaugural address and speech on inequality
recommended reading:
  Brenner, “What is Good for Goldman Sachs is Good for America”
write:
* What is “neo-liberalism”? How does the concept explain the crash?
* In what larger contexts should we situate the crash and its meaning?
* What should be the political/policy response to crash and recession?
* What does the crash mean for American culture and national identity?

4/8  From the Reagan Revolution to the Tea Party Movement:
#10  the question of right-wing populism and neo-liberalism
read:
Lisa Duggan, “Downsizing Democracy” (xerox)
Charles Postel, “The Tea Party in Historical Perspective” (xerox)
Mark Lilla, “The Tea Party Jacobins” (xerox)
recommended reading:
  Theda Skocpol,”The Tea Party & the Remaking of Republican Conservatism”
write:
* Is the “tea party” movement best theorized as “neo-liberal” or “populist”?
* Does TPM continue “culture wars” since the 70s?
* Characterize/analyze the motives of tea party activists.
* Assess the value/causes/consequences of “anti-statism” as an ideology.
* What is the relationship between “race” and TPM?

4/15  Left Populism -the idea of democratic insurgency
#11
read:
Lawrence Goodwyn, The Populist Moment, Introduction (xerox)
Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy” (xerox)
Joseph Lowndes, “open-source populism” (xerox)
readings from N+1 plus journalism, blogs, speeches about ows
Obama, speech on inequality
Recommended:
  Bayard Rustin, “From Protest to Politics”
  Staughton Lynd, “Coalition Politics or Non-Violent Revolution?”
  Hannah Arendt, “On Civil Disobedience” and “What is Freedom”
  Michael Rogin, “In Defense of the New Left”
  David McIvor, “The Politics of Speed”
write:
* What elements forge a social movement?
* Explore the relation of the ‘instrumental’ and ‘expressive’ in politics: what is the purpose of action-in-concert?
* Assess Wolin: is “democracy” episodic only, not a regime or way of life?
* Should OWS have pursued instrumental goals (and used electoral & legislative politics) or remain focused on prefigurative practice of democratic life?
* What was the status of the nation & national identification in OWS?
* OWS anti-statism (“direct” vs “representative” democracy): liability or asset?
* Is the ideal of equality dead? Is the ideal of democratic participation dead?

4/22  Borderlands & Diasporas: Natives, Migrants, Detainees, Sojourners
#12  States of exception & cultures of resilience/resistance
read:
   Jeremiah, “Lamentations” (xerox)
   Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands (excerpts)
   Christina Beltran, The Trouble With Unity (excerpts/xerox)
   Saidiya Hartman, “Fugitive Justice” (xerox)
recommended reading: Richard Iton, In Search of the Black Fantastic (excerpts/xerox)
write:

4/29  Film/Narrative I: imperial politics and the crisis of the liberal subject
#13
view: “3 Kings” (1999) and “Syrianna” (2003)
read: Eve Sedgwick, “Melanie Klein & the Difference Affect Makes”
suggested viewing: “The Hurt Locker”

5/6  Film/Narrative II: the liberal subject at “home”
#14
view: “Michael Clayton” (2007) and “Up In the Air” (2009)
read:
   Lauren Berlant, “Thinking about Feeling Historical” (xerox)
   Sheldon Wolin, “Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation” (xerox)
recommended viewing: “Blue Jasmine”