

## GIA 5004: POWER AND POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES

Fall 2013

Dr Gerard Toal,

Government and International Affairs,  
Virginia Tech, National Capital Region,  
1021 Prince Street, Alexandria VA 22314

Mondays, 4:00 to 6:30 pm.

### **Course Description**

The contemporary US state is in the midst of a significant legitimacy crisis. Popular books like *Twilight of the Elites* and *The Unwinding* eloquently present this crisis. It has multiple fronts. Economically, the United States is characterized by severe economic inequality, a level today that makes a mockery of nostrums like 'land of opportunity' while hollowing out the American 'middle class.' In 2008, the US experienced a massive economic crisis that nearly tipped the country into another Great Depression. At its heart were institutional failures in how finance and real estate are regulated in the US. Politically, the US elected a president in 2008 who promised a 'new kind of politics' in Washington DC, just as the previous president had. Both have failed to create this. The popular standing of the US Congress is at historic lows while the institution seems mired in partisan gridlock. Recent high profile intelligence failures and revelations of massive government spying programs targeting the communications of US citizens and foreigners have once again damaged the moral legitimacy and international standing of the United States. The long litany of dysfunctionality and failure characterizing the US state system today requires careful consideration of the structures – the nature of the US state and its prevailing ideals – and practices -- how power is exercised and public policy is made, or not made, in the United States. Whither the 'great experiment' in popular democracy?

Gathering together a selection of classic and contemporary books, this course examines the topic of power and the making of state policy in the contemporary United States. Given that the topic is vast, the course will focus on three themes that are particularly vital for students in the Government and International Affairs program. These themes proceed from the abstract to the general to a very specific policy. These are:

- Theories of Power: we will review sociological and political theory debates on how power is to be understood and conceptualized in the modern era.
- The National Security State in the United States: we will examine the longstanding debate in the US about the role of the state and executive branch in a world characterized by seemingly endless everywhere threats.
- The Iraq War in context, justification, decision and debate.

This course assumes that students have a good working understanding of the US political system and its history. While we will be covering aspects of the historical evolution of 'the system' we now find ourselves, our concern is with the contemporary condition, the dispersed and sometimes occluded geography of the institutions and modalities of power today.

The course will be organized as a reading seminar. Students will be expected to facilitate discussion of select chapters of the readings we will be working through together. While the readings are a mix of trade and academic books, trade books are used as readable introductions to the topic under consideration while we'll look to the academic books for more advanced conceptualizations of our contemporary condition. Below the required reading for each week I've added a list of supplemental books for those looking for further readings and resources on the material in this course. I will also cite other books as necessary in our discussions, and we can discuss some that might be appropriate to your third assignment.

A word of warning about the material: much of its content may be dispiriting. This is an inevitable side effect of the topic we are investigating. Greater conceptual and empirical knowledge, even if it induces pessimism, is preferable to mystification or ignorance.

One useful resource for the course is the web site set up by William Domhoff, a legendary figure in power structure research, whose classic book in its latest edition we will be reading (unfortunately very expensive). The website is:  
<http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/> On it you will find lots of material that is very relevant to the first part of the course.

## Required Texts

1. C. Wright Mills (2000), *The Power Elite*. Oxford University Press, [1956] 2000 paperback edition with an afterword by Alan Wolfe. 978-0195133547.
2. Dana Priest and William Arkan (2011), *Top Secret America: The Rise of the New American Security State*. Little, Brown and Company/Bay Back Books Reprint. 978-0316182201
3. Rachel Maddow (2013), *Drift: The Unmooring of American Power*. Broadway, reprint edition. 978-0307460998
4. William Domhoff (2013) *Who Rules America?* Seventh Edition. McGraw Hill.
5. Gary Wills (2010) *Bomb Power*. Penguin.
6. Trevor Thrall and Jane Cramer, eds. (2009) *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear*. Routledge.

7. Steven Lukes (2004) *Power: A Radical View*. Second edition. Palgrave Macmillan; 2nd edition. 978-0333420928
8. Aaron Friedberg, (2000) *In the Shadow of the Garrison State*. Princeton University Press. 978-0691048901
9. Andrew Bacevich (2013) *The New American Militarism*. Oxford University Press, updated edition.
10. Jeremy Scahill (2007) *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*. Nation Books.
11. Michael Isikoff, David Corn (2007), *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal and the Selling of the Iraq War*. Broadway Books.

## Grading

Grades in this course will be determined as follows:

- 20% First Written Assignment submitted through the course's Scholar website on Part I. 1500 word limit.
- 20% Second Written Assignment on Part II. 1500 word limit.
- 30% Third Written Assignment on Part III. This will be an open assignment on an aspect of power and policy concerning the Iraq War. 2500 word limit.
- 30% Class participation determined by quality of class facilitation of assigned readings, participation in general discussion, depth of conceptualization and grasp of the assigned materials and general evidence of knowledge of all the assigned reading materials.

## Weekly Course Outline

### PART I: THEORIES OF POWER

Week 1      Introduction: Legitimacy Crisis      26 August

For accounts see:

Chris Hayes (2012) *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy*. Crown Books. Audio version by the author recommended.

George Packer (2013) *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Week 2      The Power Elite      2 September

Read Mills

See also (available in the Resources folder on Scholar):

Robert Dahl (1958) "A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model." *American Political Science Review*.

Week 3      Theorizing Power Relations      9 September

Read Lukes

See also:

Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson (2010) *Winner-Take-All Politics*. Simon and Schuster.

Joseph Stiglitz (2012) *The Price of Inequality*. Norton.

Week 4      Power, Hegemony, Seduction      16 September

Essays available in Resources Folder on Scholar:

Michael Mann, "Society as organized power networks." Ch 1 of *The Sources of Social Power, Volume 1*. Cambridge University Press.

Pierre Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital."

Pierre Bourdieu, "Rethinking the State."

Pierre Bourdieu, "On Symbolic Power."

Pierre Bourdieu, "Political Representation."

Giorgio Agamben, "State of Exception as a Paradigm of Government."

See also:

Mark Liebovitz (2013) *This Town: Two Parties and a Funeral-Plus, Plenty of Valet Parking!-in America's Gilded Capital*. Blue Rider Press.

Week 5 Who Rules? 23 September

Read Domhoff

See also:

Steve Coll (2012), *Private Empire: ExxonMobil and American Power*. Penguin.

Week 6 No Class 30 September

## PART II: THE US STATE AS POWER STRUCTURE

Week 7 The Cold War Founding 7 October

Read Friedberg, Ch 1-4

**Assignment One Due 7 October at 9 am**

Week 8 Garrison State? 14 October

Read Friedberg, Ch 5-9

Week 9 Bomb Power 21 October

Read Wills

See also:

David Unger (2012) *The Emergency State: America's Pursuit of Absolute Security at All Costs*. Penguin.

Week 10 War Powers 28 October

Read Maddow

For a libertarian perspective see:

Chris Preble (2009) *The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free*. Cornell University Press.

### PART III: WHY IRAQ?

Week 11      Militarism

4 November

Read Bacevich

See also

Susan Brewer (2009) *Why America Fights. Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*. Oxford University Press.

Assignment Two Due 4 November 9 am

Week 12      Privatization, K-Street and Lobbying Power      11 November

Read Scahill

See also:

Robert Kaiser (2010) *So Damn Much Money: The Triumph of Lobbying and the Corrosion of American Government*. Vintage.

Lawrence Lessig (2011) *Republic, Lost: How Money Corrupts Congress--and a Plan to Stop It*. Twelve.

Pratap Chatterjee (2009) *Halliburton's Army: How a Well-Connected Texas Oil Company Revolutionized the Way America Makes War*. Nation Books.

Week 13      Threat Inflation

18 November

Read Thrall and Cramer

See also:

Frank Rich (2007) *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth in Bush's America*. Penguin.

Week 14      The Iraq War I      25 November (Thanksgiving Week)

Read Isikoff and Corn, Ch 1-10

Week 15      The Iraq War II      2 December

Read Isikoff and Corn, Ch 11- Afterword

See also:

MSNBC, *Hubris: The Selling of the Iraq War*. [Documentary video link](#)

Charles Ferguson (2007) *No End in Sight: The American Occupation of Iraq*. Documentary video.

George Packer (2006) *The Assassins Gate: America in Iraq*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Week 16      Secret State      9 December

Read Priest and Arkan

See also:

Janine Wedel (2011) *Shadow Elite: How the World's New Power Brokers Undermine Democracy, Government, and the Free Market*. Basic Books.

Third Assignment Due Dec 11