

POSC 240 ON AMERICA AND ITS WARS

“History is a bath of blood,” observed William James, as he pondered the frequency of war. Clemenceau, the great French politician, was so mystified by the frequency of armed conflict that he famously observed, “I do not know whether war is an interlude during peace or peace is an interlude during war.”

Over the past 2500 years, observers such as Thucydides and Sunzi have pondered both the meaning and frequency of war and speculated as to its causes. Is it the “natural state of man?” asked Aristotle. Or, said Mencius, perhaps war occurs when “kings and princes know not the natural order of things”.

The history of the United States seems to offer some clues to this oldest of political science questions. For the first hundred years of American history, America stayed clear of the “entanglements of Europe and the dynastic conflicts that rocked that continent.” And yet the at home United States seemed constantly at war, engaging in military battles up and down the western hemisphere and using some of the most egregious military means to push back the claims of indigenous peoples in North America.

What accounts for this almost continuous state of armed conflict? The national character of the American people? Deeply embedded drives which make physical conflict the “natural state of mankind”? The need to defend economic interests by physical means? The “structural and anarchic characteristics of the nation-state system” (as Thucydides and Waltz argue) that make self-protection the only real guarantor of physical survival? The folly of individual political figures who act out of the most short-sighted and ill-informed of intellectual frameworks?

This course will seek answers to these questions by looking at America’s wars. Through readings and class discussions of case studies drawn from America’s history of war in the 20th and 21st centuries, we will see if we can gain some perspectives that help explain the all-too-frequent onset of military activity.

Readings

The readings present historical information and analytic perspectives. Students are responsible for all of the assigned readings, even those not discussed in class. Readings should be completed before coming to class on the date indicated in the syllabus.

Text: George Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*

Paper

A final paper of 10-12 pages due by May 2. The topic is up to you, but obviously it must bear some relationship to the course. By April 22, please submit a brief outline (2-3 paragraphs) of your proposed paper. This should include an explanation of your choice of topic and how you intend to treat the subject. In writing your paper, keep in mind that analysis rather than description is expected, along with sound drafting and good organization.

Grading

Participation in class discussion	40%
Final paper	60%

Tues., April 1 Introduction

Readings:

Chris Hedges, *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, pp. 1-17, 43-61.

Jack Levy, “Domestic Politics and War” in *The Origins and Prevention of Major Wars*, pp. 79-99.

Thurs., April 3 Spanish-American War

Readings:

George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, ch. 7 and 8.

Robert Schulzinger, *U.S. Diplomacy Since 1900*, pp. 16-38.

Tues., April 8 World War I

Readings:

Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, ch. 9 and 10.

Williamson, “The Origins of World War I” in *The Origins and Prevention of Major Wars*, pp. 226-248.

Thurs., April 10 The Inter-War Period

Readings:

Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, ch. 11 and 12.

Hughes, “The Origins of World War II in Europe” in *The Origins and Prevention of Major Wars*, pp. 281-321.

Sagan, “The Origins of the Pacific War” in *The Origins and Prevention of Major Wars*, pp. 323-352.

Tues., April 15 World War II

Readings:

Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, ch. 13.

Schulzinger, *U.S. Diplomacy Since 1900*, pp. 127-161.

Thurs., April 17 The Korean War

Readings:

Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, ch. 14.

Thomson, Stanley and Perry, *Sentimental Imperialists*, pp. 235-250.

Tues., April 22

The Vietnam War

Readings:

Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, ch. 16.

Thomson, Stanley and Perry, *Sentimental Imperialists*, pp. 253-267.

Thurs., April 24

9/11 and Iraq

Readings:

Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, ch. 20.

Pillar, *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy*, pp. 13-68.

Tues., April 29

Afghanistan

Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, pp. 15-57.

Friedman, “Don’t Build Up,” *New York Times*, Oct. 28, 2009.

Thurs., May 1

What Awaits?