

## POSC 258: POLITICS AND AMBITION

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Spring 2015  
Office hours: T 3-5 (Weitz Café),  
F 10-12, and by appt.

Our problem, in appropriately stylized prose:

“. . . That our government should have been maintained in its original form from its establishment until now, is not much to be wondered at. It had many props to support it through that period, which now are decayed, and crumbled away. Through that period, it was felt by all, to be an undecided experiment; now, it is understood to be a successful one. Then, all that sought celebrity and fame, and distinction, expected to find them in the success of that experiment. Their all was staked upon it;-- their destiny was inseparably linked with it. Their ambition aspired to display before an admiring world, a practical demonstration of the truth of a proposition, which had hitherto been considered, at best no better, than problematical; namely, the capability of a people to govern themselves. If they succeeded, they were to be immortalized; their names were to be transferred to counties and cities, and rivers and mountains; and to be revered and sung, and toasted through all time. If they failed, they were to be called knaves and fools, and fanatics for a fleeting hour; then to sink and be forgotten. They succeeded. The experiment is successful; and thousands have won their deathless names in making it so. But the game is caught; and I believe it is true, that with the catching, end the pleasures of the chase. This field of glory is harvested, and the crop is already appropriated. But new reapers will arise, and they, too, will seek a field. It is to deny, what the history of the world tells us is true, to suppose that men of ambition and talents will not continue to spring up amongst us. And, when they do, they will as naturally seek the gratification of their ruling passion, as others have so done before them. The question then, is, can that gratification be found in supporting and maintaining an edifice that has been erected by others? Most certainly it cannot. Many great and good men sufficiently qualified for any task they should undertake, may ever be found, whose ambition would aspire to nothing beyond a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial or a presidential chair; *but such belong not to the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle,*[.] What! Think you these places would satisfy an Alexander, a Caesar, or a Napoleon? Never! Towering genius disdains a beaten path. It seeks regions hitherto unexplored. It sees *no distinction* in adding story to story, upon the monuments of fame, erected to the memory of others. It denies that it is glory enough to serve under any chief. It scorns to tread in the footsteps of *any* predecessor, however illustrious. It thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen.

“Is it unreasonable then to expect, that some man possessed of the loftiest genius, coupled with ambition sufficient to push it to its utmost stretch, will at some time, spring up among us? And when such a one does, it will require the people to be united with each other, attached to the government and laws, and generally intelligent to successfully frustrate his designs.

“Distinction will be his paramount object; and although he would as willingly, perhaps more so, acquire it by doing good as harm; yet, that opportunity being past, and nothing left to be done in the way of building up, he would set boldly to the task of pulling down.”

– Abraham Lincoln, 1838

## I. Purpose and Scope

Lincoln's life demonstrates the power of political ambition to achieve good in the world. His words, though, remind us of the deeply ambiguous nature of political ambition and its enormous capacity for harm. His words also instruct us as to the difference between great ambition and more modest varieties—and to the need to understand great ambition, since it will always be enormously consequential. Each of these themes will figure prominently in this course. When and how is personal ambition a threat to peace and the public good, and when and how is it a prod to nobility and heroism? When and how does it exemplify the opposition between self and society, and when and how does it represent their intersection and mutual support? And can it do both at the same time? How should society deal with the intrinsically dangerous phenomenon of great ambition—should we educate it? try to moderate it? channel it or check it through institutions? diminish or even eliminate it? Finally (looking beyond Lincoln's speech), what are the inner nature and sources of political ambition: what do the ambitious really want, and do they experience fulfillment when they achieve their ambitions? These are some of the major questions around which our investigation will be structured.

## II. Course Requirements

The most important course requirement is that you read all assigned texts **closely** and **before class**. The readings will be of varying length and difficulty, but they will always demand—and success in the course will demand—careful attention and review. You should come to class prepared to discuss what you've understood and prepared to ask about what you haven't understood. Course grades will be determined by papers (90% total) and class participation (10%). As part of your class participation you may be required to make an oral presentation and lead discussion in one class session. You are also expected to contribute regularly to class discussion throughout the term.

There are four options for the paper assignments:

- Option 1: A 20-22 page seminar paper (90%) due on Monday, June 8.
- Option 2: A 5-7 page interpretive paper (30%) to be presented in class and a 15 page seminar paper (60%) due on Monday, June 8. The shorter paper would serve as the basis for some part of the day's discussion.
- Option 3: Two 10 page papers (45% each), one due on Monday, May 4 (mid-term break), the other due on Monday, June 8.
- Option 4: Three 6-8 page papers (30% each). The first paper must be submitted by Friday, May 1; the second by Wednesday, June 3 (the last day of classes); the third by Monday, March 16.

Please let me know your preferred option by Monday, April 6.

All papers should be submitted electronically <[lcooper@carleton.edu](mailto:lcooper@carleton.edu)> as Word documents. Please be sure to make your last name the first part of the file name.

### **III. Academic Honesty**

Strict standards of academic integrity will be upheld in this class. Your signature on a test or assignment means that you have neither given nor received unauthorized aid. Students who are found to have violated this standard can expect severe sanctions.

### **IV. Assigned Texts**

The following books are available for purchase at the bookstore:

Plutarch, *Greek Lives*  
Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*  
Shakespeare, *Macbeth*  
Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*  
Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus*  
David Johnson, *Socrates and Alcibiades: Four Texts*  
Plato, *Symposium*

Other required readings will be on eReserve at the Library (password: POSC).

### **V. Class Schedule**

Note that this is an *approximate* schedule. We are likely to depart from it as class discussions, etc. so require. Adjustments will be announced in class, typically at the end of the class period. Please note: there are two Thursdays on which we won't meet owing to my conference travel: April 2 and April 16. I have scheduled a make-up class on Sunday, April 12. If necessary, we'll schedule an additional make-up class later in the term.

#### **A. Introduction**

March 31: Plutarch, "Alexander" (*Greek Lives*, pp. 312-81)

#### **B. The Problem of Ambition: A Philosophic Survey**

April 2: no class; make-up class scheduled for Sunday, April 12—see below

April 7: Fukuyama, chapters 13-19; and Kojeve, "In Place of an Introduction" (eReserve)  
\*\*Recommended for *seriously* ambitious students: selection from Hegel (on eReserve)\*\*

April 9: Fukuyama, chapters 27-31; also read selection from Nietzsche (eReserve)

### **C. Ambition and Democracy**

April 12: **\*\*Sunday make-up class\*\***: Classical democracy: Pericles' funeral oration, as recounted by Thucydides (eReserve); **\*\*Recommended: Plutarch, "Pericles" (*Greek Lives*, pp. 144-79)\*\***

April 14: Modern democracy, 1: Liberal democratic statesmanship: read selections from the American Founders and Lincoln (eReserve)

April 16: no class

April 21: Modern democracy, 2: read selections from Franklin and Tocqueville (eReserve)

### **D. Ambition and Lawlessness**

April 23: Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

April 28: Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

### **E. Ambition and Empire**

April 30: Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus*, Book I

May 5: Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus*, Books II and III

May 7: Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus*, Books IV and V

May 12: Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus*, Books VI and VII

May 14: Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus*, Book VIII

May 19: Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus*, conclusion (no additional reading)

### **F. The Soul of Ambition**

**\*\*Recommended preliminary reading: Plutarch, "Alcibiades" (*Greek Lives*, pp. 222-59)\*\***

May 21: Plato, *Alcibiades I* in Johnson, trans, *Socrates and Alcibiades* (NOTE: because the Greek text sometimes translates awkwardly into English, an alternate translation is available on eReserve)

May 26: Plato, *Alcibiades I*

May 28: Plato, *Symposium*, 172a-178a and 198a-212c

June 2: Plato, *Symposium*, 212c-223d