Seminar in American Government: Ethics and Politics in the Age of Trump
Fall 2021
Tuesday 6 to 9 pm.
Dr. Segers

This course is designed to provoke thoughtful reflection upon some of the difficult choices and ethical dilemmas which may arise in American politics, governance, and policymaking. Such ethical dilemmas arise in both global and domestic politics. Recent events in U.S. politics have focused our attention on truth and deception in politics, and on memory, truth and past history (for example, continuing controversies over monuments and memorials). Recent events in global affairs require our attention to public health in pandemic times while we also confront challenges of violence and warfare in different parts of the world.

This semester, we will examine an extraordinary confluence of events in American politics. In 2020, the United States has faced not one but two presidential impeachments along with major problems from a coronavirus against the backdrop of a hotly contested presidential election. What are the ethical dilemmas confronting us in the age of Trump, and beyond? We will analyze the 2016 and 2020 elections and the presidency of Donald Trump to see what norms he challenged. Did he merely flaunt accepted conventions? Or did he cross some fundamental moral boundaries essential in a democratic society?

To consider these problems, a variety of source materials will be used: these include classical treatises in political thought; case studies; essays in philosophy, history, and the humanistic social sciences; and monographs and journal articles. In addition to these problems in American government, we will also consider issues of character and integrity in the lives of exemplary public servants.

REQUIRED READINGS: Available at Barnes & Noble Bookstore in Hahnes Building.


N. Machiavelli, THE PRINCE. This classic is a 90 page paperback. The bookstore undoubtedly has used copies and the paperback book will also be in most university libraries and many public libraries.

In addition to these books, there will be short readings, accessible either through a link or stored on Blackboard under “Course Documents.”

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:
Midterm Exam and Final Exams
Short Essay: (5 to 7 pp) relatively early in the semester.
Book Review of a presidential biography of Donald Trump, Joseph Biden, Barack Obama, Kamala Harris, Michael Pence.
Oral presentation of Book Review to the class.
This assignments has two parts:

1. See the movie, “Schindler’s List,” as soon as you can. Screening this movie is not only critical for the essay part of the assignment (below), but will also provide a common reference for discussion later in the course.

2. As you are viewing the film and afterwards, consider the following question: Was Oskar Schindler an ethical person? Write a brief essay (no more than 6 pages) in response to that query, using what evidence you can from the movie and/or whatever other sources are at your disposal (please cite sources used when appropriate).

This essay is due on Tuesday, February 9th. Be prepared to share your thoughts on this question during our class meeting on Feb. 9th.

Note: For those interested in consulting the book, copies of SCHINDLER’S LIST, by Thomas Keneally, are available in bookstores. (This is not required; seeing the Steven Spielberg film is required.)
Feb. 9

**Truth and Politics: Deception, Lying, and Secrecy**

“Disinformation for Qaddafi,” pp. 72-77 (to be distributed).

“Five Examples of Lying in Office,” to be posted online.

Washington Post, article on Trump & Deception (to be posted).

Recommended: Sissela Bok, LYING: Moral Choice in Public & Private Life.

Are there any limits to lying in politics?

Feb. 16

**How Did Trump Happen?**

**How chart Trump’s political ascendancy?** What did he bring to the political process (campaigning for high public office)? Who backed him, and why?

How did he cultivate their support? What role did the Republican Party play in his rise to the GOP nomination? We will look at the data from the 2016 and 2020 elections to learn more about who supported him. Readings from the Washington Post, the New Yorker, and the New York Times will be posted.

Feb. 23

**How Did Trump Govern?** What was his conception of the powers of the Executive Branch of government? Trump ignored or challenged many norms that are part of the political process—e.g., revealing his tax returns, establishing blind trusts for his own wealth to avoid conflicts of interest.

What did Trump accomplish during his term as president? What promises did he fail to keep or goals that he did not realize?


March 2

**Trump and the Aftermath of the 2020 Elections**

What is Trump’s relation to truth and to the bearers of truth? By the end of his Term, he was thoroughly into denial—vote denial, virus denial, climate denial. He constantly belittled the mainstream media, with charges of “fake news.”

His term ended with Capitol riots and a second impeachment.

**Readings:** Jill Lepore, “You’re Fired: The Origins of Impeachment.” The New Yorker, October 2019. Also, Gerald Pomper, ON ORDINARY HEROES AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY, chapter 3 on Peter Rodino: Hero of Congress (for his work as Judiciary Chair during the impeachment hearings on Richard Nixon.)
Become an expert on your selected biography, and present to the seminar class. Then write a book review providing major highlights of Donald Trump’s life, including his presidential campaigns and his reasons for wanting to be president, the accomplishments and failures of his presidency, and his legacy to American democracy and to the institution of Chief Executive of the United States. How would you characterize his style of presidential leadership? In your analysis, you may include anything you consider significant about his work and participation in American public life. Finally, you should evaluate the writing and scholarship of the author of the book you are reviewing. (In the case of a figure other than former president Trump, you may address similar questions, but be sure to discuss the subject of your book in the light of his or her relation or relevance to former president Trump).

John Kruse, M.D., Ph.D., *Recognizing Adult ADHD: What Donald Trump Can Teach Us About ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER.*

CHARLES W. DUNN, *THE SCARLET THREAD OF SCANDAL: MORALITY AND THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY.*
JEFF FLAKE, *CONSCIENCE OF A CONSERVATIVE: A REJECTION OF DESTRUCTIVE POLITICS AND A RETURN TO PRINCIPLES.*
LANE CROTHERS, *RAGE ON THE RIGHT: THE AMERICAN MILITIA MOVEMENT FROM RUBY RIDGE TO THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY, 2ND ED.* (ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS).

BOOK REVIEWS ARE DUE TUESDAY, APRIL 20, 2021. GRADES ON ANY LATE PAPERS WILL BE LOWERED IN FAIRNESS TO THOSE STUDENTS WHO HAVE MET THE DEADLINE. BOOK REPORTS TO THE CLASS WILL BEGIN ON FEBRUARY 16TH.
Seminar in American Government: Ethics & Politics in the Age of Trump     Spring 2021

Schedule: Student Reports on Biographies of Trump and Related Political Leaders

Become an expert on your selected biography, and present to the seminar class. Then write a book review providing major highlights of Donald Trump’s life, including his presidential campaigns and his reasons for wanting to be president, the accomplishments and failures of his presidency, and his legacy to American democracy and to the institution of Chief Executive of the United States. How would you characterize his style of presidential leadership? In your analysis, you may include anything you consider significant about his work and participation in American public life. Finally, you should evaluate the writing and scholarship of the author of the book you are reviewing. (In the case of a figure other than former president Trump, you may address similar questions, but be sure to discuss the subject of your book in the light of his or her relation or relevance to former president Trump).

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<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>PRESENTATION OF BOOK TO CLASS</th>
<th>STUDENT PRESENTER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 9</td>
<td>Barack Obama, THE PROMISED LAND</td>
<td>Joshua Nordeste</td>
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<td>Feb. 16</td>
<td>Mary Trump, TOO MUCH...AND NEVER ENOUGH</td>
<td>Heather Lee</td>
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<td>Mar. 2</td>
<td>Wright, “The Plague Year,” THE NEW YORKER Jan. 4-11, 2021</td>
<td>Natalie Otero Lopez</td>
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<td>Robert Mueller, THE MUELLER REPORT</td>
<td>Kanika Mirchandani</td>
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<td>Mar. 9</td>
<td>J. Cesar et al, DEFYING THE ODDS: THE 2016 ELECTION</td>
<td>Yousuf Ahmad</td>
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<td>Bob Woodward, FEAR: TRUMP IN THE WHITE HOUSE</td>
<td>Tania Arik &amp; Samira Attal</td>
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<td>Mary Trump, TOO MUCH...AND NEVER ENOUGH</td>
<td>Reine Duevi</td>
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<td>Mar. 30</td>
<td>Michelle Obama, BECOMING</td>
<td>Jamila Smith &amp; Irmola Syla</td>
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<td>Apr. 6</td>
<td>David Cay Johnston, THE MAKING OF DONALD TRUMP</td>
<td>Yusuf Hussein</td>
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<td>Jerrold M. Post, “The Charismatic Leader-Follower Relationship &amp; Trump’s Base</td>
<td>Cristian Avila</td>
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<td>Apr. 13</td>
<td>Michael D’Antonio, THE TRUTH ABOUT TRUMP</td>
<td>Jessica Cook</td>
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<td>Lane Crothers, RAGE ON THE RIGHT (2nd edition)</td>
<td>Nicole Williams</td>
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<td>Apr. 20</td>
<td>Joseph E. Uscinski, CONSPIRACY THEORIES: A PRIMER</td>
<td>Jose Caisabianda</td>
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<td>Peter Baker, OBAMA: THE CALL OF HISTORY</td>
<td>Thelma Peprah</td>
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<td>Apr. 27</td>
<td>Kamala Harris, THE TRUTHS WE HOLD</td>
<td>Tori Varlow</td>
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<td>Jason Stanley, HOW FASCISM WORKS</td>
<td>Adem Amzi</td>
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