

ISS 1110 : The American Idea

Quest 1: Justice and Power

I. General Information

Class Meetings

- Spring 2026
- 100% in person, no GTAs, 35 residential students
- Period 11 - E2 (6:15 PM - 9:10 PM)
- CSE 0429
- Final Exam: 4/27/2026 @ 8:00 PM - 10:00 PM

Instructor

- Professor Christian Ruth
- CSE E504
- Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday 1-3:00 and by appointment
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Course Description

The United States of America has been described as the first nation in the world founded on a creed—a set of beliefs and ideas—rather than the more customary national origins of ethnicity and territory (or “blood and soil”) prevalent in the eighteenth century. It is this unique national nativity that is sometimes regarded as a foundation of the concept of “American exceptionalism.”

This sense of creedalism continues to be a defining feature of the American identity, even if its particular features and meanings remain much debated—as they always have been. Thus the animating question for this course: what are the primary beliefs and ideas that shaped the United States at its birth, throughout its history, and into the twenty-first century?

Ideas are also inseparable from the people who hold them and advance them. Who are some of the most notable and influential Americans who have developed, even in some cases personified, these ideas? How do they relate, if at all, to the American character and identity over time, and now in our contemporary moment?

Using a combination of primary documents, core texts, and secondary readings, this multidisciplinary course will profile a series of ideas and the people who embodied them to trace the development of the United States itself. The primary documents will be drawn from the full spectrum of human expression, including filmed speeches, political tracts and essays, book chapters, articles, sermons, and literary excerpts from novels and poetry. The secondary sources will be drawn from a variety of disciplines, including writings of premier scholars in American history, literature, and political theory.

The course will consist of a combination of lectures, discussions, and student presentations. We will place particular emphasis on civil discourse – as both a foundational principle of healthy democracy and an important value and skill to cultivate in our own lives. Indeed, at its best, civil discourse itself is a part of “the American Idea.”

Quest and General Education Credit

- Quest 1
- Humanities
- Writing Requirement (WR) 2000 words

This course accomplishes the [Quest](#) and [General Education](#) objectives of the subject areas listed above. A minimum grade of C is required for Quest and General Education credit. Courses intended to satisfy Quest and General Education requirements cannot be taken S-U.

Required Readings and Works

1. No textbook required. All readings and works are available in Canvas or will be provided in class. Bibliographic information is included in the weekly reading description.
2. Writing Manual: R. M. Ritter, *The New Oxford Style Manual*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2016). ISBN: 978-0198767251.
3. Materials and Supplies Fees: n/a

II. Graded Work

Description of Graded Work

1. Active Participation and Attendance: 30%
 - i. 20% of the total course grade is based on discussion participation: an exemplar participant shows evidence of having done the assigned reading before each class, consistently offers thoughtful points and questions for discussion, and listens considerably to other discussants. See participation rubric below. (R)
 - ii. 10% of the total course grade is based on attendance. On-time class attendance is required. You may have two unexcused absences without any penalty. Starting with the third unexcused absence, each unexcused absence reduces your attendance grade by 2/3: an A- becomes a B, and so on.
 - iii. Except for absence because of religious holiday observance, documentation is required for excused absences, per [UF attendance policy](#). If a student misses 10 or more classes (excused or not), they will miss material essential for successful completion of the course.
2. Self-Reflection Presentation: 20%
 - a. Each student must sign up to present on a Thursday class meeting. The student will be asked to observe a selection of American popular culture—such as a song, an exhibit, a movie, a tv show – that in some way highlights that week’s idea/theme in American life. Each presentation cannot exceed 6 minutes. See Canvas for details. (R)
3. Campus Event Report, due week 8: 10%
 - a. Students will be asked to attend public lecture on civics sponsored by the Hamilton Center for Classical and Civic Education or the Bob Graham Center for Public Service. Afterwards, they will write a 500-word summary and reflection on the event. See “Experiential Learning Component” in syllabus, below. An instructor will provide written feedback. See Canvas for details. (R)

4. Final paper (2,000 words), due week 15: 40%
 - a. Students will pick three of the figures covered in the syllabus (but not any two who are already paired with each other) and imagine that they were to meet for dinner one evening, in a year and locale of their choosing. The topic for their dinner discussion is “What does it mean to be an American?” The students will write the essay in the form of a transcript of their conversation. For full points, a clear thesis should be laid out early in the dialogue, comparing and contrasting the position of each thinker. Throughout the fictional conversation, an analytic argument should be sustained in the body of the essay. An instructor will provide written feedback on the thesis topic draft and completed paper. See Canvas and Writing Rubric for further details.
 - b. Draft due week 13. Final version due week 15.

Grading Scale

A	94 – 100%		C	74 – 76%
A-	90 – 93%		C-	70 – 73%
B+	87 – 89%		D+	67 – 69%
B	84 – 86%		D	64 – 66%
B-	80 – 83%		D-	60 – 63%
C+	77 – 79%		E	<60

For information on how UF assigns grade points, visit:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academic-regulations/grades-grading-policies/>

Grading

Rubric(s)

Participation Rubric

	Excellent	Good	Average	Insufficient	Unsatisfactory
Knowledgeable: Shows evidence of having done the assigned work					
Thoughtful: Evaluates carefully issues raised in assigned work.					

Considerate: Takes the perspective of others into account and listens attentively.					
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If a student is predisposed to an aversion of public speaking, they must approach an instructor directly, as soon as possible after the commencement of the course.

Writing Rubric

	SATISFACTORY (Y)	UNSATISFACTORY (N)
CONTENT	Papers exhibit at least some evidence of ideas that respond to the topic with complexity, critically evaluating and synthesizing sources, and provide at least an adequate discussion with basic understanding of sources.	Papers either include one or more ideas that are unclear or off-topic, providing inadequate discussion of ideas. Papers may not reference sufficient sources.
ORGANIZATION AND COHERENCE	Paragraphs (including those written in dialogue form) must exhibit at least some identifiable structure for topics, including a clear thesis.	Papers lack clearly identifiable organization, coherent sense of logic in associating ideas, and may also lack transitions and coherence to guide the reader.
ARGUMENT AND SUPPORT	Papers use persuasive and confident presentation of ideas, strongly supported with evidence. At the weak end of the Satisfactory range, papers provide only generalized discussion of ideas or may provide adequate discussion but rely on weak support for arguments.	Papers make only weak generalizations, providing little or no support, as in summaries or narratives that fail to provide critical analysis.
STYLE	Overall, papers use a word choice appropriate to the context, genre, and discipline. Sentences display complexity and logical sentence structure. At a minimum, papers may occasionally use a less precise vocabulary, an uneven use of sentence structure, or inappropriate word choice or tone.	Papers rely on word usage that is inappropriate for the context, genre, or discipline. Sentences may be overly long or short with awkward construction. Papers may also use words incorrectly.
MECHANICS	Papers will feature correct or error-free presentation of ideas. At the weak end of the Satisfactory range, papers may contain some spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors that remain unobtrusive, so they do not muddy the paper's argument or points.	Papers contain so many mechanical or grammatical errors that they impede the reader's understanding or severely undermine the writer's credibility.

1. The student must earn a grade of C or better in the course.
AND
2. The student must earn an S (satisfactory) evaluation on the writing requirements of the course.

III. Annotated Weekly Schedule

Week	Topics, Homework, and Assignments
Week 1	• Topic: <i>What is America?</i> • Summary: How do we think about the United States of America? What are the fundamental ideas and debates that have formed the core of “America” as a concept? What does it mean to be an American, and has that changed over time? • Required Readings/Works: Read the Course Syllabus
Week 2	• Topic: <i>What is freedom in America?</i> • Summary: What are the foundational ideas of freedom in America? How unique is the Declaration of Independence in the annals of world history? • Required Readings/Works: Thomas Paine, Common Sense, 1-5 Olympe de Gouges Declaration of the Rights of Woman Arusha Declaration Influence of the US Declaration of Independence
Week 3	• Topic: <i>What is liberalism? And what is liberalism in America?</i> • Summary: What is classical liberalism? How is it part of America’s foundations and future? • Required Readings/Works: Francis Fukuyama on American Liberalism Patrick Deneen on Liberalism’s Failings

Week	Topics, Homework, and Assignments
Week 4	• Topic: <i>What is democracy in America?</i> • Summary: • Required Readings/Works: Federalist Papers No.10 Anti-Suffrage Documents Tocqueville on America Taxation and Representation Puerto Rico Statehood Debate over Puerto Rico
Week 5	• Topic: <i>What is the economy like in America?</i> • Summary: • Required Readings/Works: Marketplace of Revolution Slave Auction Documents Prosperity in America Levittown Rust Belt Malls

Week 6	• Topic: <i>What is America's relationship to progress?</i> • Summary: • Required Readings/Works: Futurity in American History Eugenics and Bad Progress Dream of Suburban Life 1990s American Internet Luddite Renaissance
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Week	Topics, Homework, and Assignments
Week 7	• Topic: <i>What is equality in America?</i> • Summary: • Required Readings/Works: • Assignment: Experiential Learning Assignment (Campus Lecture Report) due Thomas Jefferson on Slavery Slave Narratives Emancipation Proclamation Suffrage Civil Rights Digest Poverty in America 1980s
Week 8	• Topic: <i>What does faith in America look like?</i> • Summary: • Required Readings/Works: America as Religious Refuge Mormonism Cartoon The Second Great Awakening Billy Graham Buddhism in America

Week	Topics, Homework, and Assignments
Week 9	• Topic: <i>What does it mean to have rights in America?</i> • Summary: • Required Readings/Works: The Bill of Rights FDR's Four Freedoms Segregation and Massive Resistance Black Nite Brawl Disabled Veterans Indian Citizenship Act
Week 10	SPRING BREAK, NO CLASS
Week 11	• Topic: <i>What is America's "story"?</i> • Summary: • Required Readings/Works: Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address The Ideals of America JFK Ask Not The American Dream to Reagan

Week 12	• Topic: <i>What does “modern” America look like?</i> • Summary: • Required Readings/Works: The End of the Cold War The 1990s in America American Interventions War on Terror Through Photographs Looking Back at Obama Trump Announces Candidacy
Week 13	• Topic: <i>What is America’s relationship to the world?</i> • Summary: • Required Readings/Works: Big Stick Diplomacy Woodrow Wilson Making the World Safe Eisenhower on Civil Rights in the Global Cold War The Greater United States McDonalds Around the World George Washington on Entanglements
Week 14	• Topic: <i>What is America’s culture now?</i> • Summary: • Required Readings/Works: Classic Paranoid Styles Social Media Influencers Cultural Symbolism Anti-Elitism Technofeudalism

Week 15	• Topic: <i>What America's paths forward?</i> • Summary: • Required Readings/Works: Abundance Agendas Common Good Economics The Problem With American Elites Do We Need Democracy?
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IV. Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

At the end of this course, students will be expected to have achieved the [Quest](#) and [General Education](#) learning outcomes as follows:

Content: *Students demonstrate competence in the terminology, concepts, theories and methodologies used within the discipline(s).*

Assessments: Class discussions, Self-Reflection Presentation, Campus Event Report, and Final Paper.

- Identify and explain the methodologies used across humanities disciplines to examine the history and intellectual traditions of America. (H)
- Identify and explain the philosophical, political, literary, and ethical issues that relate to American history. (Q1)

Critical Thinking: *Students carefully and logically analyze information from multiple perspectives and develop reasoned solutions to problems within the discipline(s).* Assessments: Class discussions, Self-Reflection Presentation, Campus Event Report, and Final Paper.

- Critically assess and analyze an eclectic variety of sources that represent the complexity and tension within the ideas that form American identity and culture. (H)
- Attempt to understand a variety of diverse and conflicting viewpoints through a close reading of primary texts, while relating these historic figures to contemporary American experience. (Q1)

Communication: *Students communicate knowledge, ideas and reasoning clearly and effectively in written and oral forms appropriate to the discipline(s).* Assessments: Class discussions, Self-Reflection Presentation, Campus Event Report, and Final Paper.

- Clearly and effectively communicate by public speaking, discussion, and writing in such a way that demonstrates critical engagement with the texts and experiential learning activities (H & Q1)

Connection: *Students connect course content with meaningful critical reflection on their intellectual, personal, and professional development at UF and beyond.* Assessments: Class discussions, Self-Reflection Presentation, Campus Event Report, and Final Paper.

- Connect course content with their intellectual, personal, and professional lives at UF and beyond. (Q1)
- Reflect on their own and others' experience as Americans in classroom discussions, a reflective presentation, and a final analytical essay. (Q1)

V. Quest Learning Experiences

1. Details of Experiential Learning Component

In preparation for the Self-Reflection Presentation, students venture outside of a classroom setting to directly experience an expression of American culture that relates to the themes raised in this course. In order to encourage and accommodate a variety of viewpoints, students are granted freedom to analyze diverse cultural representations—from a work of art, museum exhibit, concert, drama, film, or song. Furthermore, in order to construct a Campus Event Report, students will be asked to attend a public

lecture sponsored by the Hamilton Center for Classical and Civic Education or the Bob Graham Center for Public Service. Students are then asked to submit a 500-word report on this experience.

2. Details of Self-Reflection Component

This component prominently features in the Self-Reflection Presentations, where students are encouraged to reflect upon their own contemporary place in light of the various themes, principles, and identities within American culture. Self-reflection also takes place in the Final Paper, as students are asked to personally place themselves in the mind of a variety of figures from different eras who have shaped the idea of America throughout history, while fairly and accurately representing their ideas in a reflective manner. Furthermore, self-reflection features in the Campus Event Report, where students are asked to reflect on how an event on the UF campus relates to the ideas presented in this course.

VI. Required Policies

All academic policies in this course are consistent with university policies, which can be found here: <https://go.ufl.edu/syllabuspolices>