American conservative thought is unlike conservative thought anywhere else in the world. For one thing, and perhaps most obviously, American conservatism did not descend from an aristocratic world view steeped in the Middle Ages with its ordered ranks of classes, occupations, privileges, and responsibilities. When undertaken in the United States, attempts to resurrect such a world view must rest on an appeal to a social order that most Americans find quite alien. As a result, American conservatives have been forced to invent an historical tradition. Intimately related to the absence of a feudal past upon which a conservative tradition might rest is the lack of an established church. In other nations, an established church can serve as an authoritative promoter of moral values and can reconcile the everyday stress imposed by social reality and can answer the cosmological questions attending spiritual eternity. These things still need to be reconciled and answered but American conservatives, unlike conservatives elsewhere, have difficulty pointing to specific institutions that can serve this purpose.

American national identity is also, from a comparative perspective, somewhat problematic. The United States certainly has its share of historical heroes and some of them are firmly enshrined in the conservative pantheon. What is different is the way Americans have substituted documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution for a national origin that, in other nations, is strongly grounded in ethnic mythology. Americans are also comparatively obsessed with the competitive market as the progenitor of efficiency and the arena within which merit, skill, and virtue are demonstrated. Each of these dimensions of American conservatism rest on different principles and one of the major problems confronting American conservatives is the unavoidable tension between tradition, religion, reason, and the competitive market as they pull in somewhat strikingly different directions.

We will study the ways in which American conservatives have attempted to resolve that tension since the Second World War. At the beginning of this period, the world presented conservatives (and Americans generally) with an implacable and powerful enemy in the form of the Soviet Union and Communist ideology. The tension arising from the internal contradictions within American conservatism was often suppressed for the sake of unity in meeting this threat both home and abroad. In the 1940s and 1950s, conservatives also felt themselves to be a besieged minority within American politics and offered critiques of liberal programs while shying away from the articulation of conservative policy alternatives. This stance tended to downplay theoretical differences within conservative thought by focusing on a common enemy as opposed to actually governing the polity. In the latter half of the post-war period, starting with the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency, conservatives have been a much stronger force both in electoral politics and in policy-making. As we will see, this new-found influence has revealed just how deep and perhaps irreconcilable those theoretical differences have become.
Course Requirements

Because this is a seminar, the main focus of each session will involve continuing discussions with your fellow students and, for that reason, regular class attendance is essential. Students will be allowed one absence from class, no questions asked, but anything beyond that will require permission of the instructor and a legitimate excuse (e.g., medical necessity). In addition, you are expected: to complete reading assignments before the class in which they are discussed; to turn in your writing assignments on time; and to actively participate in all class proceedings.

Each week you will write a one page, double-spaced summary of the major reading for that week. In the first paragraph, you will provide a brief sketch of the author’s argument. In the second paragraph, you will identify the weakest point in that argument and justify your position. The weekly essay will be about 250 words in length and will be due at 10:30 Wednesday morning (two days before the readings are discussed in class).

You will also write a term paper of at least 20 pages (about 5,000 words) on a topic related to the course material. The topic will be discussed in class and must be approved before you begin your research. While you may draw upon some of the course readings for this paper, it is expected that most of your research will bring in materials that go substantially beyond the topics covered in class.

Fifty percent of the course grade will be based on the short weekly papers and class discussion, each weighted equally. The other fifty percent of the grade will be based on the term paper.

Books and articles for the course

The major reading each week will be taken from a book within the American conservative tradition. These books will be available from the bookstore and will also be on reserve in the library. In addition, we will also read articles from the National Review.

For many of the books, I have indicated the portions that are required reading for that week. However, each book was intended by the author to be read in its entirety. If you have time to read the entire book, please indicate that you have done so in your summary essay for that week and I will give you extra credit for that assignment.

For some of the assignments, I have also identified other readings that might be relevant to the topic that week. These are for your information only and are not required reading.

Required books:

The following books are required for the course and may be purchased at the Cornell Bookstore. I have indicated the particular edition that we will read. In some cases, that edition will be paginated differently from other editions and/or contain a preface or introduction that does not appear in other editions. If you choose to purchase another edition of the book, please make sure that it also contains the same material as the required edition. The books are listed in the order in which we will read them.

Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Later editions have a different pagination but are otherwise fine.


Laptops and all other electronic devices are to be turned off during class. There are no exceptions. Please bring with you hard copies of those materials to be used in class.

Weekly Reading Assignments

First Session (January 29): Introduction to the course.
Second Session (February 5): Hayek’s The Road to Serfdom is one of the most important texts in American conservative thought because it helps lay the foundation for a connection between (a) the organization and operation of the economy and (b) political freedom and individual liberty. Written during the Second World War when western democracy was threatened by fascism on the right and communism on the left, the book contended that those who valued freedom and liberty must oppose the hyper-rationalism and scientist pretensions of those who believed in the perfectability of human nature. Although Hayek’s polemic could be and was endorsed by almost the entire spectrum of what became modern American conservatism, he carefully denied that he himself was a “conservative.” Arising out of Austrian economics, Hayek’s theoretical framework also departs from many of the methodological assumptions that underpin modern social science, including much of mainstream neo-classical economic theory.

**Required reading:**


**Supplemental reading:**


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Third Session (February 12): When he wrote *Ideas Have Consequences*, Richard Weaver intended his book to be “a challenge to forces that threaten the foundations of civilization.” The decline of Western Civilization has long been one of the central concerns of American conservative thought and Weaver squarely positions his work within that theme. When he says that civilization has declined, Weaver must also maintain that civilization had reached a higher point in the past from which it has declined. As you read his book, keep track of the references to the historical period in which this peak was attained and the “choices” that society then made that put civilization on a downward trajectory. From these references and choices, you should be able to at least roughly imagine what kind of society might reverse this decline.

**Required reading:**


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Fourth Session (February 19): While Richard Weaver’s political theory is grounded in an idealism of eternal, unvarying principles, most American conservatives are more pragmatic in their theoretical orientation. The problem for them is the reconciliation of practice with principle and the solution they most often settle upon was originally proffered by Edmund Burke
in the late eighteenth century. As you read the selection from The Rage of Edmund Burke, ask yourself how tradition and custom should shape and constrain governance and why Burke is so hostile to the notion of "natural rights" and (not coincidentally) prefers "statesmen" to "professors." The selections from The Portable Edmund Burke will help you understand the connection between this fervent supporter of the British nobility and the adoption of his work as perhaps the most important foundation of American conservative thought. How would you utilize Burke’s principles as a guide for making choices between political alternatives?

Required reading:


Supplemental reading:


Fifth Session (February 26): Leo Strauss was the founder of a major school in modern political theory and those who follow in his footsteps can be found in most of the major political science departments in the United States. Although there are those who would disagree, most scholars regard Strauss and his philosophical school as a major pillar of modern conservative thought. However, the fit is far from perfect. You might pay close attention to two themes in Strauss’s writings: (a) the relationship between science, religion, and human nature (in some ways, Strauss is attempting to reconcile these three things but in other ways he seems to view them at odds with one another); (b) the characteristics of what he considers “good” political philosophy; and (c) how it is that we might come to know the true and the good. If some things seem unclear after you have read the selections, we will try to clear them up in class.

Required reading:


Supplemental reading:

Leo Strauss, Natural Right and History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).
Paul Edward Gottfried, Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), chapters one through three, five, seven, and the appendix.
Sixth Session (March 4): With the publication of The Closing of the American Mind, Allan Bloom entered the loftiest pantheon of Straussian thinkers. As you read the book, you will no doubt be deeply impressed by his indictment of modern academic and American culture. But try to set aside the spectacular elements of that indictment and concentrate on how Bloom grounds his critique in political theory by insisting on a particular, consistent orientation toward his targets. This is not a scattershot assault, if you trace the trajectory of his bullets back to their source, they were all fired from the same place from the same gun. You might also note how Bloom returns again and again to what he considers the historical, even cosmological constants of any proper or useful understanding of human civilization. With respect to the latter, you might keep track of his references to “nature” and “truth.” How would you define these terms?

**Required reading:**


**Supplemental reading:**


Seventh Session (March 11): Writing in the Straussian tradition, Harry Jaffa, among other things, interpreted Abraham Lincoln as one of the great men of history who both recognized “truth” for what it is (and should be) in human affairs and unrelentingly pursued its implications in political life. The selections from *Crisis of the House Divided* provide an introduction into: (a) what that truth might be and how we ourselves might recognize it; (b) how Abraham Lincoln pursued its implications in his debates with Stephen Douglas; and (c) a very creative reinterpretation of those debates as a crucial historical event. This is much more than a work of historical interpretation—it is also, in some ways, a guide to living a morally upright life.

**Required reading:**

Eighth Session (March 18): William F. Buckley’s *God and Man at Yale* made him a leader in what became the conservative movement. Parts of this scathing indictment of education at one of the leading universities in the United States might seem dated now. But other parts might seem all too timely. That is for you to decide. When Buckley subsequently founded the *National Review*, he became editor of what was far and away the most important journal shaping the intellectual trajectory of conservative thought. Under Buckley’s leadership, the *Review* unified conservatives by recognizing and sometimes adjudicating between the very different strains that make up conservative thought in America.

**Required reading:**


**Supplemental reading:**


Ninth Session (March 25): Discussion of paper topics.

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Tenth Session (April 8): Already famous when she wrote *Atlas Shrugged*, this book marked the peak of Ayn Rand’s creative thinking and became the single most important work within “Objectivism,” her distinctively original approach to politics and life. There are many powerfully described personalities in this novel but the two that most personify Rand’s ideal are Henry Rearden and Dagny Taggart who each uncompromisingly pursue irrepressible desires. That they are irrepressible marks them as natural in the sense that they are what all reasonable people would want to do if they were not blinded by social convention and artificially imposed beliefs, especially what Rand terms “altruism.” Only an heroic individualism can liberate people from their embedment in social convention and the political culture of the masses. However, while we are interested in how Rand constructs her leading characters as individualist heroes and models to be emulated, we are even more interested in her understandings of what a virtuous and liberated society would look like. And for that we must look at the long monologue that John Galt delivers to the world. What would be, for example, the role of capitalist markets in such a society? Would they be regulated or...
structured by government in any way? It is clear that Rand most highly values the self-realizing industrial entrepreneur as a model to be emulated. But not everyone can be an industrial entrepreneur. What do “lesser folk” do in order to be equally virtuous? And who in Heaven’s name is John Galt?

Required reading:


Eleventh Session (April 15): The Constitution dictates the separation of church and state but this principle is both difficult to enforce and, for perhaps most Americans, should be observed only when seriously breached. Despite the Constitution, religion pervades American politics in many, many ways. Public policy decisions are often motivated by moral values originating in religious precepts even if the United States does not formally endorse those precepts. The question for the Christian Right is how to interpret those precepts as policy principles, on the one hand, and how to use policy principles to build an effective political coalition, on the other. Strategic opportunism and religious doctrine sometimes make for odd bedfellows.

Required reading:


Supplemental reading:


Twelfth Session (April 22): There are three arenas in which conservative thought and principles enter into the mainstream of American politics: (a) direct action in election campaigns and the construction of political platforms; (b) the mass media, including periodicals such as the *National Review* and television with Fox News being the most prominent example; and (c) the colonization of educational institutions either by prescribing content for the public schools or the placing of faculty in leading university departments and law schools. With respect to the latter, Steven Teles provides an overview of what is arguably the most successful conservative movement in the American academy: the penetration of the ideas and personnel of the Federalist Society into law school curriculum and legal analysis. How could the strategies and tactics of the Federalist Society be justified as a necessary liberation of academic learning and professional training? What might be the dangers associated with those strategies and tactics?
Required reading:

Supplemental reading:

Thirteenth Session (April 29): For much of the twentieth century, the two most influential conservative economists were Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. From a distance, their philosophies and principles might appear very similar and, in fact, Hayek played an important role in promoting Friedman’s early career. However, within American conservative thought, they came to represent very different perspectives on, among other things, the relationship between morality and efficiency. Angus Burgin gives us an account of how they came to diverge and why that divergence matters.

Required reading:

Fourteenth Session (May 6): The Tea Party is today probably the most influential social movement in the United States and, like most social movements, its beliefs and principles combine firm, principled demands with vague pronouncements on issues that might internally divide the movement. In some ways, the primary challenge confronting the movement is similar to the problem confronting the National Review in the 1950s: how to unite disparate factions into an effective alternative to what they see as mainstream liberalism. However, in the 1950s, conservatives were out of power and did not have to actually propose policy alternatives that might divide their ranks. They could just concentrate their energy on criticizing the Left. The problem confronting the Tea Party is much more complex in that they, ultimately, must be for something as well as against liberalism. What is it that the Tea Party might do if the movement actually came to power? Would whatever they attempted to do split their ranks in practice? We will also review the course in this session.

Required reading:

Supplemental:

Academic Integrity:

You must conscientiously observe scholarly norms and principles at all times. When in doubt as to whether you are the creator of an idea or you have borrowed it from someone else, provide an explanation and complete citation to that other person. Do not use passages from other sources without citing the original and putting quotes around the copied material. If you are uncertain whether or how to cite a source, please ask me before you submit the writing assignment. Plagiarism or any other violation of academic integrity will be severely punished. Turn-it-in may be used to detect violations of these principles. For further guidance on these and related matters, please carefully read the Code of Academic Integrity and Acknowledging the Work of Others in the Policy Notebook for the Cornell Community, also available on the web at the Cornell University site.

Students with Disabilities:

In accordance with Cornell University policy and the law, accommodations will be made for students with disabilities. Please make requests for academic accommodations during the first three weeks of the semester. For information about eligibility for accommodations, please contact with Student Disability Services at phone number 607-254-4545.