America In The World: Benevolent Giant or Just Another Superpower?

From the moment of its birth, the United States has told a story about itself: That it was not simply a nation among nations but a beacon of democracy and individual freedom. As it became a world power at the end of the 19th century, the U.S. began to deploy its wealth and force abroad to advance its national interests, as other great powers did--but also, or so it said and its people deeply believed, to shape a more peaceful, democratic and just world order. The United States continued to pursue that self-assigned mission through two world wars and the Cold War, and now in the face of terrorism. America is unlike any previous world power both in the beliefs on which it was founded and in its geographical situation, surrounded by oceans and far removed from the conflicts in which it intervenes. And yet it is also a hegemon--a dominant power--and shapes the world to its perceived interests, as all hegemons do. Over the last century, critics have never stopped accusing the U.S. of hypocritically pursuing narrow interests in the name of global good. In electing a new president, American voters may finally have put that claim to rest by choosing someone who does not accept the nation's historic mission.

This class will examine a series of critical points--war, colonialism, the founding of global institutions, interventions abroad--in order to understand the tension between America's idealistic global mission and the brute fact of its power and dominance. The subjects of the class will be:

The Spanish-American War and Colonialism

Wilson and the League of Nations

The Building of Post-World War II Order

The Cold War 1946-60

Vietnam

The Cold War 1970-90

The New World Order

Bosnia, Haiti, Rwanda

The Iraq War

Democracy Promotion

Israel/Palestine

Obama's War on Terror
Syria

Donald Trump's America