

**Tuesday/Thursday
2:30-4.00 PM
Robert B McKersie**

**15. S40
TACKLING BIG POLICY ISSUES THROUGH LITERATURE AND FILM
6 units. Pass/Fail Grading.
Class begins April 2, 2018**

COURSE OVERVIEW

Big problems are everywhere. By studying literature that depicts human beings coping with tough issues in a variety of settings, we can gain understanding and new perspectives that will inform our consideration of policies and managerial issues presented by these major challenges.

Each week we will address a new topic. The first session of the week is devoted to an in-depth discussion of a story or film, where we identify major dilemmas and issues present in these pieces of literature. The second session of the week analyzes the “big picture.” We will draw on the expertise of MIT faculty to help us understand the latest thinking about these problems and how leaders confront these policy challenges.

For some stories, we will use video segments to dramatize the challenges confronting the main characters. These are drawn from movies that are available for the stories we will study during the course.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

For the workload to be manageable, we need a division of labor. So we will organize six teams for this purpose. Therefore, each team will be responsible for **one week** - briefing the class on the story and other resources assigned for that week and helping manage class discussion.

After each class (Tuesday’s session devoted to the story; Thursday’s session devoted to a policy discussion), I would like each student to prepare a short (max one page) write-up that addresses: (1) important lessons in the story; and (2) takeaways for how we think about policy in this domain?

ATTENDANCE POLICY

This course will be graded Pass/Fail. The course relies heavily on discussing and learning from stories and the Big Problems facing us all, an interactive process designed to surface multiple viewpoints.

Given the important role of this classroom interaction, attendance and participation in the discussion is required for every session. If for some reason you cannot attend a session, please notify the teaching assistant via email before the class.

COURSE OUTLINE

To provide a better picture of this half-semester course, the six working sessions (over seven weeks) are outlined below. The team responsible for briefings that week will generate questions for class discussion. To “prime the pump,” I offer here sample questions for each class.

Week 1: Security of the State vs. Matters of Conscience

April 2—*Antigone*, by Sophocles

Question:

- Is it possible to enact the security of the state (Creon) and not violate personal standards and freedoms (Antigone)?

April 4—“Snowden” movie (2016)

Resource: faculty member from Political Science

Questions:

- What are some similarities and differences in the actions taken by Creon as compared to President George W. Bush after the terrorist event of Sept. 11, 2001? (both were facing existential threats)
- Are Snowden’s actions and matters of conscience similar to those of Antigone?
- How do we assess President Truman’s decision to drop two A bombs on Japan in 1945?

Week 2: Social Movements—An Appraisal

April 9: *Gandhi* (the movie)

Question:

- To what extent did the movement (*Satyagraha*) arise from Gandhi and his teachings or from the underlying conditions (i.e., the time was ripe for change)?

April 11: Examples of contemporary social movements

Resource: faculty member from Urban Studies

Question:

- Since Gandhi’s time, the US has witnessed several social movements, including the civil rights movement during the 1960s, Occupy Wall Street, the Women’s March(es) on Washington, and Black Lives Matter. How successful have these movements been in achieving their objectives? Are there similarities in the profiles of the leaders who have led these movements?

Week 3:

April 16: No Class

April 18: Review and Course Calibration

Week 4: The American Dream, Reconsidered

April 23 *Death of a Salesman*, by Arthur Miller

Question:

- Does Willie Loman have the wrong dream, or was he just unlucky?

April 25 *The Market as God*, by Harvey Cox

Resource: faculty member from Harvard Divinity School

Question:

- Is the capitalist system, with its emphasis on the market, responsible for our focus on financial success?
- Are modern day tycoons (like Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, George Soros) emblematic of the best examples and reasons for a market economy?

Week 5: Activism on Behalf of the Environment

April 30 *Enemy of the People*, by Henrik Ibsen

Question:

- Why was the whistleblower (Dr. Stockman) not more effective in achieving his objectives?

May 2 A Case Study of Water Problems in Flint, Michigan

Resource: faculty member with expertise in sustainability

Question:

- Why did Flint leaders not take action when they became aware of problems with the water supply?
- What can we learn from the roles played by leaders such as Al Gore and Bill McKibben?

Week 6: Crime and Punishment

May 7: *Billy Budd* by Herman Melville

Question:

- Does Captain Vere have any options other than the course he followed?

May 9: *Restorative Justice*: a TED talk by Bryan Stevenson

Resource: Expert in Restorative Justice

Questions:

- Can punishment ever be creative?
- What are the advantages of restorative justice?

Week 7: Scientific Inquiry and its Ethical Dilemmas

May 14: *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley

Questions:

- Why is Frankenstein referred to as the “modern Prometheus”?
- What drives him to create life?

May 16 *Day After Trinity*, a film about Robert Oppenheimer

Resource: faculty member from Biology

Question: Is it possible to push the frontiers of science and at the same time honor human values?