Why Empires? What are empires, and what distinguishes them from states? Are there distinguishing features that all empires share, and, aside from these characteristics, how do empires vary from one another? Have empires themselves changed over time—for example, empires of the Nineteenth Century (often referred to as the “age of empire”) versus more recent versions? Why and how do empires form? How are they structured; how do they operate; and how are they experienced by the dominant group at the center and by individuals and groups located in the periphery? Why do empires end—and in such different ways? What are the consequences of empire—for the rise of nations, states and regimes and for domestic and international cooperation and conflict? These are the issues that we will be addressing in this seminar—through discussions in class and through four papers that you will be writing over the course of the term.

Empires merit our attention for several reasons. One is that they have been a central part of the international landscape for more than two-thousand years. Thus, they have defined the rationale for and the spatial contours of political authority and economic interactions for a much longer time than the more familiar political and economic unit, the state—which only came into being, we must remember, about six hundred years ago in the northwest quadrant of Europe. Moreover, predictions to the contrary, states have not replaced empires—though the number of states in the international system has grown sharply in response to imperial decline, especially during the Twentieth Century.

A second reason is that we are living in a time when the term, empire, figures prominently in public debates. This interest in empire began when communism and the Soviet Union collapsed from 1989-1991. A common argument then was that what we were witnessing was the end of the world’s last major empire. More recently, there have been a number of heated discussions both within and outside the United States about whether American foreign policy is imperial and, if so, by design or by accident. Indeed, this characterization is so widespread that Vice-President Cheney felt it necessary to respond by arguing that: “If we were a true empire, we would currently preside over a much greater piece of the earth’s surface than we do. That’s not the way we operate” (as quoted in the New York Times, Jan. 25, 2004).

Finally, empire is a highly contested term. On the one hand, there are objective understandings of empire. Thus, empire is a particular way of organizing political
authority, cultural interactions and economic exchange at the international level. Like a state, empire is a geographically-bounded unit claiming a coercive monopoly. However, unlike a state, an empire is always multinational and often multi-religious as well, and an empire always features significant political, social and economic inequalities that differentiate between a core area, on the one hand, which is widely-recognized as sovereign, dominant and national in composition, and peripheral units, on the other, which are different in their national composition and which lack the sovereignty and the political, economic and social resources that distinguish the core. A more succinct definition is that empires are political units composed of many nations, but dominated by one in particular. In this sense, some states can be seen as empires.

However, empire is also a subjective term, referring, for example, to how policy-makers and attentive publics view the motivations of states when they interact with their constituent nations or with other states. Thus, for example, empire is a common charge leveled by nations within multinational states who question the right of the state to rule them, just as empire is a common summary term used to characterize the behavior of powerful states in the international system. In these respects, empire connotes illegitimate authority, threats to international peace and state sovereignty, or, finally, asymmetric influence.

The concept of empire, therefore, opens up a number of questions about how we think about political power—its purposes and consequences, how it is organized and whether it is legitimate. Empire, therefore, is not just a form of politics; it is also a site for debating about the uses and abuses of political authority.

**Organization of the Course.** The course will be divided into four parts. In the first few weeks, we will discuss the variable meanings of empire and some theories about imperial rule. You need to be patient here, because the discussion will often seem too abstract. However, the issues we address at this time will be relevant for the rest of the course. After this foray into theory, we will then look more closely at two empires that existed at the same time and that competed with one another—the Habsburg and the Ottoman empires. Here, we will read and discuss some studies of these empires and then turn to a novel, based in Bosnia prior to World War I, that gives us some insights into the experiences of one town that was ruled by the Ottomans and then by the Habsburgs. We will also see a move, “Sunshine,” that traces the experiences of one Jewish Hungarian family during and after the Habsburg empire. In the third part of the course, we will continue our study of actual empires by looking at two very recent examples, both of which disintegrated slightly more than a decade ago: the Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union itself. As we will discover, while their dissolution was in some respects a familiar story, including their simultaneous collapse as with the Habsburg and Ottoman cases during World War I, these two empires were nonetheless unusual in some respects. For example, while the first was external (linking the Soviet Union, the dominant power, to other far weaker neighboring communist countries), the other was internal and thereby blurred the conceptual boundary between state and empire. These empires were also founded upon a commitment to radical economic and social change—in sharp contrast to the Habsburg and especially Ottoman examples. Finally, we will close the course with a discussion of the rise of the United States after the end of the Cold War and debate
whether the U.S.—by design or by accident—has become, or is becoming, an imperial power. A related question is whether the label matters.

Format and Assessment. The purpose of a sophomore seminar is to develop the speaking and writing skills of students through topics and materials that provide an introduction to a discipline—in our case, both history and political science. To work well, therefore, our seminar requires that students do the readings and on time; that we come together twice weekly committed to debating issues with each other in class; and that I help you write and re-write. With regards to the final point: my goal is to help you write well as social scientists. What that means in practice is that you grapple with puzzles and respond to them by making clear arguments based upon evidence.

Readings: There are a number of readings that are available in a reading packet at the Campus Store. In addition, I ask that you purchase the following books (which are available at the Campus Store):


August 30 (Monday): Introduction to the Class. I will not be able to meet with you this day, which is terribly unfortunate, since this is our first meeting. I apologize. As you can understand from personal experience, I will be taking my son to his first year at college! We will have ample time to make up for this session during the term. I will leave syllabi by my door at 209 White Hall.

Part I: Definitions and Theories of Empire

September 1 (Wednesday): Introducing Empire and Ourselves. Our focus in this session will be with Lieven’s definition of empire and his characterization of the “modern debate.” What I would like you to think about before class is how our understanding of empire has changed over time (and why), and the utility of the distinction made above between the objective and the subjective definitions of empire. Please read the following for this session:

1. Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals*, Preface and Ch. 1. Please take a look at the maps he provides as well—especially Maps 3-8. This will help situate you for the readings that follow.
September 6 (Monday): Other Definitions and Issues. Dominic Lieven comes to the study of empire from the vantage point of both an historian and a specialist in domestic politics, particularly of Russia. By contrast, Alexander Motyl is a political scientist whose primary interest has been in nationalist mobilization against the Soviet state. Finally, Michael Doyle is a specialist in international relations. What we will discuss during this session is their competing understandings of empire—particularly, its defining features, its mission and its structure. What I would like you to think about before class is how their approaches vary and the trade-offs among their competing approaches.

1. Michael Doyle, Empires, Preface and Ch. 1.

September 8 (Wednesday): Subjective Understandings of Empire. Can we argue that, despite all the emphasis on empire in terms of mission, structure and boundaries, the real question is whether people accept the legitimacy of their government and that, when they do not, a state is transformed into an empire? By the same token, can an empire become a state—at least in terms of popular perceptions about political authority? Please read the following:


MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 13: FIRST PAPER DUE. It is a common observation in the social sciences that how one defines terms shapes the kinds of questions posed, the analytical approaches taken and sometimes even the conclusions drawn. Definitions, in short, matter. In a 5-6 page, double-spaced paper, compare two definitions of empire and, in line with the observation about the social sciences, assess several consequences of these definitions.

TIPS FOR WRITING. In your answer, be sure to make tight arguments that are backed up by evidence and logic. Remember to use the first paragraph to define the question, provide an overview of your approach and conclusions, and, more generally, set the terms of your paper. Also remember that fewer arguments done well are preferable to a rapid survey of relatively superficial observations. When relying on the readings, be sure to cite authors. For example: “As Dominic Lieven (2001) has argued” or “Some scholars have argued (Lieven, 2001) that.” When directly quoting the readings, provide an author, year and page in the following way: (Lieven, 2001: 24). However, in a short paper, such as this one, you should refrain from many quotations—especially long ones. I can imagine, for example, no more than three or four lines of the entire paper devoted to quotations.
September 13 (Monday): Imperial Consequences: Nation- and State-Building. In the process of defining the boundaries of political authority and political, economic and cultural relationships between the core and the periphery, empires have often—and usually by accident—built new nations and potential states within their midst. Sometimes these new nations press for greater representation or autonomy and sometimes they go much further—for example, adopting a secessionist agenda that involves either founding a new state or joining a neighboring states. In this session, we will examine this linkage between empire and nation. Please read the following:


September 15 (Wednesday): Comparative Perspectives on Empire, I. Do empires have a predictable cycle of expansion, contraction, decay and collapse? Why are some empires more durable than others? To what extent are empires brought down by economics versus nationalism? The former argument addresses the growing costs of imperial maintenance and declining economic efficiency, whereas the latter refers to an issue we discussed in the last session; that is, the costs of nationalism. Please read the following:

1. Alexander Motyl, Imperial Ends, Chs. 2-3.

September 20 (Monday): Comparative Perspectives on Empire, II. What factors are critical for distinguishing among empires, and why are they critical? The key point here is that we can always catalogue differences, but, as social scientists, we are primarily interested in differences that “make a difference;” that is, that have consequences for how empires operate, evolve and the like. The Cooper reading is helpful, because it confronts directly the current debate about an American empire and, at the same time, adds the African experience with empire to our discussions. It would make a great deal of sense for you to start on the novel, Bridge on the Drina, which will be discussed in several weeks. It is not hard reading, but it will take some time.

September 22 (Wednesday): Comparative Perspectives on Empire, III. This is an open session. What I would like us to do is to follow up on some comparative issues that we have failed to address fully.

SECOND PAPER DUE: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 1 (3:30 PM). In a 6-7 page, double-spaced paper, address one of the following questions:
1. Can an empire be accidental?
2. If both states and empires are defined as spatially-bounded political authority, then what distinguishes between them?
3. Do imperial powers acquire territory primarily for economic reasons?
4. How do the missions of empires vary?
5. What are some of the major consequences of the structure of empires?
6. Can empires be democracies?
7. All states feature inequalities—in power, money and social status. Does it then follow that all states are empires?
8. If states can become empires under certain circumstances, is it also true that empires can become states—and, if so, under what circumstances?

TIPS FOR WRITING (AS I ALSO MENTIONED FOR PAPER # 1). In your answer, be sure to make tight arguments that are backed up by evidence and logic. Remember to use the first paragraph to define the question, provide an overview of your approach and conclusions, and, more generally, set the terms of your paper. Also remember that fewer arguments done well are preferable to a rapid survey of relatively superficial observations. When relying on the readings, be sure to cite authors. For example: “As Dominic Lieven (2001) has argued” or “Some scholars have argued (Lieven, 2001) that.” When directly quoting the readings, provide an author, year and page in the following way: (Lieven, 2001: 24). However, in a short paper, such as this one, you should refrain from many quotations—especially long ones. I can imagine, for example, no more than three or four lines total using quotations.

Part II: Comparing the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires

September 27 (Monday): The Habsburg Empire. The Habsburg Empire has recently been viewed with considerable favor, given, for example, its decentralization and Austria’s role in particular as a modernizing force within the empire. During this session, we will analyze the structure of the Habsburg empire and its internal dynamics. In the next session, we will look more closely at whether this was in fact such a distinctive and distinctively “good” empire. Remember to keep reading the Andric novel.
1. Doyle, Ch. 5
2. Review Motyl, Chs. 2-3.
September 29 (Wednesday): The Habsburg Empire. How does Lieven’s understanding compare to that of Doyle’s?
   1. Lieven, Ch. 5

October 4 (Monday): Sunshine (Movie), Part I. There is no assigned reading for this session or the next one. However, it would make a lot of sense for you to keep reading the Andric novel (which will be discussed October 18) and to start reading Lieven, Chs. 6-8 on the Russian Empire (which will be discussed on Oct. 20).

October 6 (Wednesday): Sunshine (Movie), Part II.

OCTOBER 11: FALL BREAK. NO CLASS.

October 13 (Wednesday): The Ottoman Empire. Was the Ottoman Empire so different from the Habsburg, as has often been assumed—in terms of their structure and the goals of the imperial powers? Can it be assumed that they declined for the same reasons? Here, it is striking that, while the Ottoman Empire was often characterized as “the sick man of Europe” in the period preceding World War I, such a characterization was not applied to the Habsburg Empire—despite the fact that both empires collapsed during World War I. Aside from the assigned reading, plan to finish the Andric novel.
   1. Lieven, Ch. 4.

October 18 (Monday): Comparing the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empire. Thus far, we have read some analyses of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, and we have gained a “visual sense” of how the Habsburg Empire was experienced over time by one family (and a relatively well-educated and well-to-do family at that). What we have not done as yet is compare these two imperial experiences and look more closely at everyday life. In this session, we will address both issues by discussing Bridge on the Drina, which was written by the Nobel prize-winning Bosnian writer, Ivo Andric. What I would like you to think about before we begin our discussion is how local traditions interacted with imperial interventions—in culture, politics and economics. Put baldly: how much impact did the Ottomans and their successors, the Habsburgs have on daily life in Visegrad?
   1. Finish Ivo Andric, Bridge on the Drina.
   2. Lieven, Ch. 6 (we will discuss this on Wednesday, together with the two chapters that follow).

Part III: Adding the Russian and Soviet Empires to Our Comparisons

October 20 (Wednesday): The Russian Empire. Thus far, we have looked at two neighboring empires, the Habsburgs and the Ottomans. There was, however, a third empire that also abutted these two and that played a critical role in European history: the Russian empire. In this session, we will pull together the readings you have been doing
on the Russian empire (Lieven, Chs. 6-8). Our goal is not to get a deep sense of the Russian empire, but, rather, to bring it in as what is called a “shadow case.” By that term, we mean an additional case that allows us to test the limits of our generalizations and to gain further insights about empire—albeit in the absence of a commitment to a full-blown comparison. Thus, our discussion will focus on similarities and differences among the Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian empires. Please read:

1. Lieven, Chs. 7-8.

October 25 (Monday): Third Paper Due. You can choose either to do this paper or one that is due November 8. In a 5-6 page, double-spaced paper, please address one of the following questions:

1. “Despite all their differences, the Habsburg and the Ottoman empires ended for quite similar reasons.” Do you agree with this statement?
2. There is a surprisingly clear divide in eastern Europe since the collapse of communism that differentiates between those countries that were under the Habsburgs versus those countries that were in the Ottoman Empire. Thus, the countries that became democratic quickly were in once Habsburg lands versus those countries that followed a much more circuitous route to democratic politics were in Ottoman areas. Are there aspects of these two empires that might account for such a contrast?
3. What explains the different trajectories of the Habsburg versus the Ottoman empire in the Nineteenth Century—that is, the stability and, to some limited degree, expansion of boundaries of the former versus contraction of the latter?
4. It is commonly noted that the Habsburg Empire was quite decentralized whereas the Ottomans were centralized. Is this accurate, and what difference does the degree of centralization actually make?
5. “The Habsburgs laid at least some of the foundation for democratic politics in their empire whereas the Ottomans did not.” Please evaluate.
6. Divide and rule is understood to be a common policy by imperial powers when trying to control the diverse peoples that make up their imperial dominions. To what degree did the Habsburgs and the Ottomans carry out such policies, and what were their consequences?
7. Would you term the Russian empire unique in terms of its design, purpose and evolution?

October 25 (Monday): The Soviet Empire. Soviet domination over eastern Europe, which emerged during and especially after the Second World War, can be analyzed as an empire, given its structure, Soviet goals, and Soviet political and economic domination. However, in many ways, the Soviet bloc was different from earlier empires. In this
session, we will discuss why it was both similar and different from other empires. Please read:

One of the distinctive features of the events of the revolutions of 1989-1991 was that four major changes took place and they were inter-related—in particular, the collapse of communist regimes, states, the Soviet bloc, and the Cold War international order. The questions we will address in this session are the following. First, why did all of these developments take place—and in such close proximity? Second, can we argue that these were all aspects of imperial dissolution? Please read the following:
2. Alexander Motyl, *Imperial Ends*, Ch. 4 and Conclusion.

November 1 (Monday): The Collapse of the Soviet External and Internal Empire, Part II.
In this session, we will evaluate competing explanations of why the Soviet internal and external empire collapsed. In addition, we will also assess the extent to which explanations of the end of these empires are similar to accounts for the end of earlier empires.
1. Lieven, Ch. 9.

November 3 (Wednesday): Open Space. We have been rushing through a lot of material. Let’s use this session to follow up some issues (identified earlier by us) that we have ignored or touched on too lightly. It would make sense for you to begin reading Andrew Bacevich, *The American Empire*. We will be reading and discussing this book, beginning next week.

**NOVEMBER 8: ALTERNATIVE THIRD PAPER DUE. IN A 7-8, DOUBLE-SPACED PAPER, ADDRESS ONE OF THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:**

1. In what ways was the Soviet Union a mere continuation of the Russian empire, albeit under new leadership?
2. Are all authoritarian regimes imperial, or is there something distinctive about the Soviet version of authoritarian rule?
3. As we know from the Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian imperial experiences, empires often seem to end through war. This did not happen in the case of either the Soviet bloc or the Soviet Union. How can we explain this seeming anomaly?
4. Do you think that David Ost’s interpretation of the end of communism provides a compelling explanation from the perspective of scholars who have analyzed the end of empires in general or the Soviet empire in particular?

5. “It can be argued that the Soviet empire declined because it was too ambitious, whereas the Ottoman empire declined for precisely the opposite reason.” Please comment.

6. Some empires build nations more effectively than others. Compare the Russian empire with one other empire with respect to this issue.

7. Lieven and Bunce have very different explanations of why the Soviet empire collapsed. Which explanation do you find more convincing and why?

Part IV: An American Empire?

November 8 (Monday): Debates about the U.S. as an Imperial Power. For the final month of the course, we will take what we have learned about empires—their meaning, origins, design, mission, consequences and evolution—and apply these insights to the case of the U.S. after (and even before) the end of the Cold War. As I am sure you recognize, this is a very controversial topic, not just in the U.S., but also throughout the world. For example, people disagree about what imperial and empire mean; whether the U.S. is imperial and, if so, in what ways and for how long; what goals drive American foreign policy; whether American foreign policy is good for the world, for only parts of the world, or for only the U.S. We will be reading two books on recent American foreign policy, together with some articles. We will begin with a book that focuses primarily on the Clinton administration, albeit with the understanding that Clinton merely continued certain fundamentals of American foreign policy. Please read the following:

1. Andrew Bacevich, American Empire, Chs. 1-4. Plan on finishing this book by next Monday. It is not a difficult read, especially since the major thesis becomes apparent quite early in the text.

November 10 (Wednesday). We will finish our discussion of the Bacevich book (except for the final chapter) in this session.
1. Bacevich, American Empire, Chs. 6-8.

November 15 (Monday) and 17 (Wednesday): Empire and the Bush Administration Prior to the War in Iraq. This week, we will be focusing on American foreign policy during the Bush administration (2001-2004). It is important that you ask yourselves the following questions. First, were there in fact substantial continuities in the foreign policies of Clinton and Bush—as Bacevich, for example, argues and as did Daalder and Lindsay contest? Second, to what extent did Bush and his advisors have an activist foreign policy prior to 9/11? Finally, can we argue that the Clinton and Bush foreign policies were imperial, and, if so, by accident or by design? Please read the following:
1. Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, *America Unbound*, Chs. 1-4 (for Monday).
2. Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, *America Unbound*, Chs. 6-9 (for Wednesday).

November 22 (Monday), November 24 (Wednesday) and November 29 (Monday): Debating the War in Iraq and American Interventions in General. The key issue here is: why did the U.S. invade Iraq, and what does our answer suggest about what drives American foreign policy—at least during the Bush administration? What explains, more generally, why the U.S. intervenes abroad—for reasons of power, money, or peace? Under what conditions should the U.S. intervene? What do our answers to these questions tell us, in turn, about whether the U.S. is—or is becoming—an imperial power? Please read the following:

1. Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire*, Ch. 9; Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, *America Unbound*, Ch. 10-12. For the discussion on Monday, Nov. 22.

December 1 (Wednesday). This is our last session. Let’s devote our discussion to anti-Americanism.


FINAL PAPER: DUE MONDAY, DECEMBER 13 BY NOON. YOU CAN HAND THIS IN EARLIER, IF YOU PREFER!!!!! From Nov. 29-Dec. 2 and on Thursday, December 9, I will be having extra office hours. Please sign up if you want help with the final paper—for example, working through your outline or ideas with me (though waiting for Dec. 9 might not be a good idea!). The assignment is to write a ten-page paper on one of the following two topics:

1. Imagine that you are a widely-recognized specialist in American foreign policy and that you have been asked by the newly-elected President of the U.S., as a
result, to write a memo that: 1) assesses the major successes and failures of the foreign policy of the Bush administration (2001-2004), and; 2) recommends some new policies for the future.

2. It can be argued that the U.S. is an empire because of its economic might and its economic goals in the world; because of its cultural influence; because of its military dominance and its predisposition to using military force; or because of its willingness, especially pronounced during 2001-2004, to “go it alone.” Compare these lines of argument and assess whether you find them convincing with respect to making the case for an American empire.

3. “America has never been an empire…We may be the only great power in history that had the chance, and refused—preferring greatness to power and justice to glory.” (George W. Bush, 1999, quoted in Daalder and Lindsay, p. 45). Do you agree?

4. “Empires thrive on fears of external enemies” (Dominic Lieven, p. 332). Please evaluate, comparing two empires we have analyzed in combination with the U.S. during the Bush years.