

# War in American Culture

American Studies 3803  
Oklahoma State University, Spring 2016

Dr. John M. Kinder  
Class Room: Business 009 - Stillwater  
Office: 159 Murray Hall  
Office Hours: TTH 12:00-1:00 or by appointment

Class time: TTH 10:30-11:45  
Email: [john.kinder@okstate.edu](mailto:john.kinder@okstate.edu)  
Phone: (405) 385-9413

## Course Introduction

*Our Republic has never been a military Nation. Our people do not lean toward militarism, imperialism, and conquest. We have never believed in large standing armies or great navies. We are a giant, young Republic, whose only purpose has been to build and perpetuate the freest, truest, and bravest Republic in all the world.*

- Scott Ferris, U.S. Representative from Oklahoma (1917)

*Americans delude themselves when they insist that we are a peace-loving people who will go to any extreme to avoid violence. War is the American way of life. The American project began in violence, the nation was born amidst blood and the growth of the American republic is matched by a corresponding chain of carnage from the Pequot Massacre to Wounded Knee to My Lai and to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; all alleged to be the fault of others.*

- Paul L. Atwood, Historian (2010)

From the American Revolution to the War in Iraq, armed conflict has played a central role in the American experience. War-related imagery, narratives, and metaphors saturate American politics and popular culture. In this class, we will examine how war has shaped American culture and national identity, from the earliest days of the republic to the present. Along the way, we will explore representations of war in a wide variety of cultural forms, including Hollywood films, documentary photography, memoir, propaganda posters, and Pentagon-funded “militainment.”

Although this course is broadly chronological in design, it is not meant to offer a comprehensive survey of war’s impact on U.S. history. Rather, its chief purpose is to illustrate various ways artists, writers, filmmakers, former soldiers, the U.S. military, and ordinary citizens have attempted to make sense of war and its effects on American life. We will pay especially close attention to what historian Daniel Pick has called the “discursive support” of modern war—the collection of images, mass mediations, and popular culture “truths” which render war understandable and socially palatable, despite (or because of) its overwhelming violence. To this end, much of the semester will be devoted to studying the mass-mediated wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including World War II, the Vietnam War, and the “Global War on Terror.”

Ultimately, this class will probe the implications of Americans’ fascination with war, both actual and imaginary. How have cultural representations of war influenced Americans’ understanding of past conflicts? And to what extent do war memoirs, photographs, and films create an appetite—or distaste—for future battles?

**Note:** You should be aware that some of the material covered in class is potentially offensive. Students unable or unwilling to examine and discuss violent, exploitative, and/or sexually explicit content are encouraged to reconsider their enrollment.

## Course Format

This course is designed as an undergraduate colloquium. Class time will be divided between introductory lectures, media presentations, and in-depth discussions of course material. On occasion, students may be asked to bring in their own research for class discussion and analysis. I reserve the right to administer brief in-class writing assignments or quizzes to measure students' preparedness and participation.

## Desire2Learn

This class will have a Desire2Learn site (<http://oc.okstate.edu>), where I will post important announcements, assignments, grading guidelines, and the course syllabus. Students will also use the "Discussion" section of D2L to post online responses to the week's reading assignments (see below).

## Facebook

The American Studies Program now has its own Facebook page: **American Studies Oklahoma State University**. Students are encouraged to become "fans" (although doing so is strictly voluntary). The site is designed to keep users up to date on the latest American Studies news, internship and job opportunities, links, websites, events, and discussions—in short, anything and everything relating to American Studies at Oklahoma State University.

## Assigned Texts

### a) Books

All students are required to purchase and read the following four books:

- Mark M. Smith, *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege: A Sensory History of the Civil War* (2014)
- Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (2015)
- Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (2016)
- Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (2014)

In addition, all students are required to purchase and read **one** of the following books on war and American culture:

- John M. Kinder, *Paying with Their Bodies: American War and the Problem of the Disabled Veteran* (2015)
- Susan A. Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (2011)
- Shane Harris, *@War: The Rise of the Military-Internet Complex* (2014)

#### b) Media

- Assorted in-class music, images, film, and video clips

#### c) Articles on Desire2Learn

The remaining required and recommended readings will be available in the “Content” section of the class’s Desire2Learn site (<http://oc.okstate.edu>). All readings need to be printed out and brought to class.

#### d) OSU Email Account

You are also required to check your OSU email account regularly for class announcements.

## Course Requirements

This course offers a somewhat unconventional approach to organization and requirements, one that affords students some degree of flexibility.

**A. Participation, Attendance, and In-Class Written Assignments (100 points)** In order to receive credit, students are expected to attend class lectures, participate in discussions and in-class activities, and come prepared to think critically about course material. They are also expected to complete all assigned readings prior to class. On occasion, I may assign brief writing assignments to evaluate students’ retention of assigned readings and understanding of course concepts.

#### **B. Online Responses (20 points each – maximum 100 points)**

Each student will write up to **5** informal online responses (20 points each) to the course readings in the “Discussions” section of D2L (<http://oc.okstate.edu>). These can be short (approximately **200-300 words**) but they must be “critical”—in other words, they should do more than summarize the readings; rather, they should attempt to apply, extend, and challenge course concepts by asking questions, making comparisons, and providing examples to elaborate the readings’ arguments. Responses must be posted at by **12:00 a.m. (midnight)** prior to the start of class; moreover, you will only receive credit for **one posting per week**. Students are highly encouraged to read (and respond to) their classmates’ postings, as they will often form the basis of in-class discussions. I will provide questions or topics in advance to help spark online discussions.

### **C. War and Culture: Book Analysis (200 points) – due Feb 16**

In a short essay (4-5 pages), students will read and analyze **one** of the following books: John M. Kinder, *Paying with Their Bodies*; Susan A. Brewer, *Why America Fights*; or Shane Harris, *@War*. See D2L for complete instructions.

### **D. Research Paper or Two Miscellaneous Assignments (350 points)**

Students have a choice between a pair of options for earning up to 350 points.

#### **Option #1: Research Paper – due April 19**

In a substantial essay (8 pages), students will draw upon scholarly sources to examine some aspect of war in American culture. See D2L for complete instructions.

OR

#### **Option #2: Two Miscellaneous Assignments (175 points each)**

Students can complete **TWO** of the following miscellaneous assignments:

- World War II Letters – Student will write a short essay (4 pages) responding to a one of the digitized collections of World War II letters archived by the Institute of World War II and the Human Experience at Florida State University (<http://ww2.fsu.edu/Digitized-Collections>). See D2L for complete instructions. **Due – March 10.**
- Film Analysis – In a short essay (4 pages), students will analyze representations of war in a feature film of their choice. See D2L for additional instructions. **Due – March 22**
- Veterans in Oklahoma – In a short essay (4 pages), students will analyze an issue that affects veterans at OSU, in Stillwater, or in the state at large. Students can examine how OSU is addressing (or failing to address) veterans' needs; they can volunteer in veteran-related charities or service organizations; they can investigate some of the problems facing veterans in Stillwater; and so forth. See D2L for complete instructions. **Due – April 5.**
- Voices Against War – In a short essay (4-5 pages), students will find and analyze an argument—historical or contemporary—critical of war-making or American militarism. See D2L for additional instructions. **Due – April 26.**

### **E. Final Examination (250 points) – due May 5**

This comprehensive take-home examination will require students to construct essays and answer questions analyzing key themes from class discussions and readings. Students will receive the examination questions on the final day of class.

There will also be one revision option and limited opportunities for extra credit throughout the semester.

## **Major Due Dates**

February 16 – Book Analysis  
March 10 – World War II Letters  
March 22 – Film Analysis  
April 5 – Veterans in Oklahoma  
April 19 – Research Paper  
April 26 – Voices Against War  
May 5 – Final Exam

## **Grading Policy**

On both written assignments and examinations, students will be awarded a number of points according to their performance. These points will accumulate throughout the semester. Final grades will be determined on a thousand-point scale.

A	900-1000
B	800-899
C	700-799
D	600-699
F	0-599

“A” range papers reflect work at the very highest level. These papers directly address the question or assignment at hand and cite materials from the readings and lectures to illustrate the points that are being made. Moreover, these papers offer fresh, creative examples to support their arguments, and they demonstrate a full grasp of course material. “A” papers are also very well written. They do not contain typos or spelling mistakes; their sentences are well developed, clear, and concise; and they avoid non-sequiturs and clichéd phrasing.

“B” range papers are solid papers that are good but not of the highest level. These papers address the question directly, and cite specific evidence to illustrate the points being made. They may even offer examples from readings or lectures to back up their arguments. However, “B” papers tend to lack the polish, lucidity, and firm grasp of course material and terminology of “A” range papers. The prose in “B” range papers is relatively clear, and thoughts tend to be organized into a coherent argument. However, “B” range papers usually contain a few typos or spelling errors.

“C” range papers are adequate and satisfy the requirement of the assignment. These papers address the question somewhat, but they either 1) do not explicitly cite specific material from the texts and discussion or 2) provide inadequate evidence to back up their main points. These papers tend to recycle examples from class discussion without showing how they fit with the analysis. Moreover, “C” range papers lack the polish and clarity of “A” and “B” range papers. They might contain awkward prose, multiple typos and spelling errors, and poor construction. Often these papers fall short of the page limit given for an assignment.

“D” range papers reflect inadequate work. These papers often fail to address the question at hand. They are off-topic, poorly written, and disorganized. They often meander from point to point without developing any kind of structured argument. Additionally, these papers tend to rely on “personal experience” as opposed to examples drawn from course readings or lectures.

“F” papers do not meet the basic requirements of the course. They are incoherent, or excessively late or never turned in.

If you do not understand why you received a certain grade on a particular assignment, I encourage you to meet with me. In most cases, a brief conversation can clear up any misunderstandings. If you wish me to reconsider your grade, you need to observe the following protocol:

1. Wait at least 24 hours but no longer than a week to contact the grader or professor.
2. In a brief memo (no more than 2 pages), you need to explain why you believe you deserve a higher grade, which you must specify.
3. Include the original evaluation and assignment with the memo.

There is no guarantee that a reconsideration of your work will result in a higher grade.

### Rules of Engagement

**Classroom Etiquette.** Students are expected to arrive on time, take thorough notes, treat their peers with courtesy and respect, and remain engaged and active throughout class discussion. They are also expected to complete all required reading assignments prior to the start of class. If students fail to meet any of these requirements, they may be asked to leave (in which case they would be considered “absent”). During class presentations and discussions, students need to refrain from any activity (chatting, eating, reading newspapers, surfing the net, texting, sleeping, etc.) that might impede the learning of their peers. In addition, cellular phones must be turned off prior to class, and if students have to leave class early, they should do so as quietly as possible.

**Attendance.** Attendance is mandatory. Students are responsible for all material covered in class, including lectures, media presentations, and discussions. An attendance sheet will be circulated at the beginning of every class, and it is your responsibility to make sure that you sign it. After the first class, students are allowed **three** absences without penalty during the semester. These are not “freebies” but are intended to account for illness, family emergencies, or job interviews. As I do not differentiate between excused and unexcused absences, please do not bring me notes from your doctor, traffic tickets, or obituaries from your hometown paper. An absence is an absence irrespective of the circumstances surrounding it. The only exceptions are school trips, athletic absences, and religious holidays. For every absence after that (that is, starting with the *fourth* absence), students will be docked 10 points from their final point total.

No less important, good attendance means more than occupying a seat in the classroom. It means arriving on time, staying for the duration of class, and actively contributing to class discussions or group work. Students who arrive late or leave early may miss important announcements or changes to the syllabus, as well as material that may be covered on exams. You should also bear in mind that some of the reading material is quite difficult and will only be completely clear to you after class discussion and analysis.

**Late Papers or Assignments.** Late papers or assignments will be penalized one third of a letter grade for each business day they are late.

**Special Accommodations.** If a student requires special accommodations to meet the requirements of the class, please contact me as soon as possible.

**Plagiarism.** This course defines plagiarism as the use of another person's ideas or expressions in your intellectual work without giving proper credit to the source. Plagiarism can include submitting a paper or test answer that is not your own; paraphrasing or quoting another text without providing proper documentation; purchasing, downloading or cut-and-pasting another paper from the internet; or representing the ideas, theories, or opinions of others as your own. Violation of plagiarism policy will result in either failure of the assignment (e.g., improper citation) or failure of the class (e.g., cheating on examinations, copying content from the internet), according to the instructor's discretion. Moreover, all work submitted must be original and unique to the class. Recycling papers from previous classes is considered cheating and will result in an "F" in the class. Consult OSU's Office of Academic Affairs for more information on the University's new Academic Integrity policy.

**Guidelines for Assignments.** Papers must be typed, double-spaced with 10- or 12-point font. Unstapled papers will not be accepted, while papers without a title or the author's name will be penalized one third of a letter grade. All papers or other assignments must be turned in at the beginning of class on the date due.

**Incompletes.** I rarely give incompletes and will consider them only under extraordinary circumstances and only if at least two-thirds of the required assignments have been completed.

**Changes to the Syllabus.** I reserve the right to alter the class schedule as the class proceeds. If changes are made, these will be minor changes to the reading schedule and/or the dates of film screenings and will not affect the assignments.

## **Key**

Required	This refers to the day's required readings, which must be completed prior to the start of class.
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Recommended	These readings are not required but will provide additional depth and nuance to the day's lectures and discussions. Hence, they are highly recommended.
D2L	This indicates that a reading can be found either on the D2L site under "Contents."
Screening	This refers to films that will be screened and discussed in class.
Due	This refers to assignments due at the start of class.

### **Class Schedule**

#### **I. A NATION BUILT ON WAR?**

##### **Week 1**

Jan. 12 Course Introduction

Jan. 14 War and American Identity

Required Paul L. Atwood, excerpt from *War and Empire: The American Way of Life* (D2L); Stephen M. Walt, "Is America Addicted to War?" (D2L)  
Recommended Nick Turse, excerpt from *The Complex: How the Military Invades Our Everyday Lives* (D2L)

##### **Week 2**

Jan. 19 Why (and How) Americans Fight

Required Excerpt from Dominic Tierney, *How We Fight* (D2L); "Jeffrey Brace Fights for Liberty (1778) (D2L)

Jan. 21 War: A Sensory Experience

Required Smith, *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege*, Introduction and Chapter 1

##### **Week 3**

Jan. 26 Smelling and Tasting the Civil War

Required Smith, *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege*, Chapters 2-3

Jan. 28 Experiencing Total War

Required Smith, *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege*, Chapter 4 and Epilogue  
Recommended Smith, *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege*, Chapter 5

##### **Week 4**



Feb. 2 Still Fighting the Civil War

Required  
Recommended

Tony Horwitz, excerpt from *Confederates in the Attic* (D2L)  
Adams, *Living Hell*, Chapter 6-7

## II. MODERN WAR AND MASS SOCIETY

Feb. 4 Future War and the Allure of American Militarism

Required

H. Bruce Franklin, “Fantasies of War: 1880-1917” (D2L); Theodore Roosevelt, “The Strenuous Life” (D2L)

Handout

Excerpts of militarist writings

### Week 5

Feb. 9 Seeing War

Required

Susan Sontag, “Looking at War” (D2L); H. Bruce Franklin, “From Realism to Virtual Reality: Images of America’s Wars” (D2L)

Feb. 11

The Great War as Modern War

Required

Margaret MacMillan, “The War That Changed Everything” (D2L); brief collection of WWI writings (D2L)

Recommended

Excerpt from John Keegan, *The First World War* (D2L)

### Week 6

Feb. 16 World War I and Its Aftermath

Required

Smedley Butler, excerpt from “War is a Racket” (D2L); John M. Kinder, “What is Wrong with This Picture?” (D2L)

Due

Book Analysis

Feb. 18

The Problem of the Disabled Veteran

Screening

Ric Burns’ *Debt of Honor* (2015)

## III. GOOD WAR, COLD WAR, BAD WAR

### Week 7

Feb. 23 The Myth of the “Good War”

Required  
Recommended

Adams, *The Best War Ever*, Preface and Chapter 1  
Adams, *The Best War Ever*, Chapter 2

Feb. 25	Consensus Through Culture
<u>Required</u>	George Roeder, "Censoring Disorder: American Visual Imagery of World War II" (D2L)
<u>Screening</u>	Frank Capra's <i>Prelude to War</i> (1942)
<b>Week 8</b>	
Mar. 1	Fighting and Dying in World War II
<u>Required</u>	Adams, <i>The Best War Ever</i> , Chapters 3-4
Mar. 3	Hollywood's Good War, Part I
<u>Screening</u>	Lewis Seiler's <i>Guadalcanal Diary</i> (1943)
<b>Week 9</b>	
Mar. 8	Hollywood's Good War, Part II
<u>Screening</u>	Lewis Seiler's <i>Guadalcanal Diary</i> (1943)
<u>Required</u>	Guy Westwell, <i>War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line</i> , Chapter 2 (D2L)
Mar. 10	Homefront U.S.A.
<u>Required</u>	Adams, <i>The Best War Ever</i> , Chapter 5
<u>Due</u>	World War II letters
<b>Week 10</b>	
Mar. 14-18	No class – Spring Break!
<b>Week 11</b>	
Mar. 22	The Good War's Legacies
<u>Required</u>	Adams, <i>The Best War Ever</i> , Chapter 7 and Afterword
<u>Recommended</u>	Adams, <i>The Best War Ever</i> , Chapter 6
<u>Due</u>	Film Analysis
Mar. 24	Cold War Fantasies, Nuclear Fears
<u>Required</u>	Paul S. Boyer, "How Americans Imagined the Bomb They Dropped" (D2L); "Plain Facts about Fallout Shelters" (D2L);
<u>Recommended</u>	Chris Hables Gray, "Postmodern Wars Imaginary and Real: World War III and Vietnam" (D2L); Tom Engelhardt, "War Games" (D2L)

## Week 12

Mar. 29	Why Were We in Vietnam?
<u>Required</u>	Appy, <i>American Reckoning</i> , Introduction and Chapters 1-2
<u>Recommended</u>	Appy, <i>American Reckoning</i> , Chapters 3-4

Mar. 31	The Vietnam War at Home and Abroad
<u>Required</u>	Appy, <i>American Reckoning</i> , Chapters 5 and 7
<u>Recommended</u>	Appy, <i>American Reckoning</i> , Chapter 6

\* On the afternoon of March 31, I will deliver a lecture on medicine and casualties in World War I in Edmon Low Library. Students who attend and write a 1-page response can earn extra credit.

### Week 13

Apr. 5	Contested Narratives: History vs. Hollywood, Part I
<u>Screening</u>	George Cosmatos' <i>Rambo: First Blood Part II</i> (1985)
<u>Required</u>	Appy, <i>American Reckoning</i> , Chapter 8
<u>Due</u>	Veterans in Oklahoma

Apr. 7	Contested Narratives: History vs. Hollywood, Part II
<u>Screening</u>	George Cosmatos' <i>Rambo: First Blood Part II</i> (1985)
<u>Required</u>	Appy, <i>American Reckoning</i> , Chapter 9

### Week 14

Apr. 12	No More Vietnams?
<u>Required</u>	Appy, <i>American Reckoning</i> , Chapter 10
<u>Recommended</u>	Marilyn B. Young, "The Vietnam War in American Memory" (D2L)

## IV. AMERICAN WAR TODAY...AND TOMORROW

Apr. 14	The Normalization of American Warfare
<u>Required</u>	Andrew J. Bacevich, "The Normalization of War" (D2L)

### Week 15

Apr. 19	American War in the Digital Age
<u>Required</u>	Roger Stahl, "All-Consuming War: From Spectacle to Interactivity" (D2L)
<u>Recommended</u>	Roger Stahl, "War Games" (D2L)
<u>Due</u>	Research Paper

Apr. 21                      Soldiers' Stories

Required                      Klay, *Redeployment* – of the first six stories, read “Redeployment,”  
“Frago,” “After Action Report,” and at least one more

## **Week 16**

Apr. 26                      Narrating the “War on Terror”

Required                      Klay, *Redeployment* – of the final six stories, read “In Vietnam They Had  
Whores,” “War Stories,” “Unless It’s a Sucking Chest Wound,” and at least  
one more

Due                              Voices Against War

Apr. 28                      American War(s) in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Forecasts and Fears

Required                      Appy, *American Reckoning*, Chapter 11; Barbara Ehrenreich, “Robot Armies: The  
Future of Modern Warfare” (D2L)

## **Final Exam Week**

May 5                         Final Examination – due (via email) at 12 p.m. (noon)