

“Dumping the Dead Folks: Teaching U.S. Foreign Relations”

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The study of history is driven by questions. But how well do we convey this lesson to our undergraduate students? How do we, trained in the arts of questioning, analysis, and interpretation, transmit these skills plus our passion for inquiry to an undergraduate who views the study of history as no more than learning about “dead folks”? I have been wrestling with this question for some time, and it has been the subject of many discussions with colleagues at St. Joseph’s College.

For me, experimenting with new approaches to teaching is the intellectual equivalent of a vigorous Sunday morning run. Effective teaching and physical training both require a sound understanding of one’s objectives and the most effective way to attain them. I keep these two requirements in mind as I develop my courses. Given my teaching load and the number of students who take more than one course with me each semester,¹ I am very conscious of the dulling effects of repetition. Therefore, I alter my teaching methodology in each course to keep myself and my students intellectually energized. The nature of the reading and writing assignments as well as the manner in which I utilize them varies from course to course. By using a variety of materials and approaches I hope to give students a sampling of the many tools in a historian’s intellectual toolbox while serving as a model for my history majors, the vast majority of whom are preparing for careers in secondary education. (Only a precious few continue their study of history at the graduate level.)

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¹ The teaching load at St. Joseph’s College is four and four, though I often teach additional courses.

St. Joseph's College requires all history majors to write a senior thesis, an article-length study on a historical question of their choosing. In preparation for this undertaking, they are required to take a historiography course that serves as an introduction to the development of history as a field of inquiry and to those historians who have defined the discipline. They are also required to take a research methodology course in which they learn the nuts and bolts of conducting research while designing their own research proposal. The actual writing of the senior thesis is done the following semester. In recent years, guiding students through the senior thesis project has become more challenging. Students often find their search for a historically significant question frustrating. Because they have been reared since their primary school days on a "just the facts," approach to history, reading for historical questions and arguments rather than for content is a major intellectual hurdle for them.

U.S. Foreign Relations since 1920, which is a course I developed to meet both individual and departmental needs, is one of the required courses fulfills one of these requirements for history majors, so it must contain "the facts" that they are likely to encounter on the state-mandated teacher certification exams. Although I abhor the notion of teaching to a test, consistently poor results by our students on such exams could compromise the department's accreditation. Assessment is a reality from which we cannot escape! Yet I long for the day when I can ask my American Heritage Survey students, "How many of you absolutely hate history?" and not have 75 percent of them respond "yes." When I ask them to elaborate they usually cite a note-copying approach to teaching methodology, boring textbooks, and the rote memorization of "facts."

Despite the restrictions imposed by testing, teaching the next generation of secondary education teachers provides an exciting opportunity to arm them with the ability to identify and

formulate historical questions, to put questions and analysis rather than “dead folks” at the center of historical inquiry, to develop the writing and verbal skills to communicate and teach what they have learned, and, ultimately, to make history matter for their future students. I believe that a question-based approach can improve the educational experience for students by transforming the classroom experience from a professor-centered one, in which students passively take notes or provide brief factual responses to questions, to a student-centered one, in which the professor guides students in a dynamic exchange of ideas.² This approach should give students a more profound understanding of history while helping them retain what they learn better than rote memorization of “facts.”

The reading assignments for U.S. Foreign Relations since 1920 have been selected to foster an active approach to learning that emphasizes history as an interpretative discipline. During the first half of the semester, the reading assignments are taken from *Diplomatic History*. Not only is *Diplomatic History* free, which sparks a positive reaction towards the course among students, but most students also find the articles more interesting than a textbook.³ Students approach a textbook’s factual content with near reverence or complete boredom—or both. The two reactions stem from the fundamental flaw of textbooks: they strip history of its contentiousness. The questions that motivate and often divide scholars are not clear to students. Here *Diplomatic History* offers another advantage. The authors lay out their historical questions and arguments in a way rarely seen in textbooks. They include cues that enable students—once they have been taught to identify them—to answer the questions that accompany each reading assignment. What is the primary question the author wants to answer? How does the author construct his or her argument? What primary sources and secondary sources did the author use to

² My intention is not to demean lectures as an educational tool; I use them in many of my courses and I can think of many professors I had during my undergraduate and graduate studies that mastered the art.

³ The library at St. Joseph’s is a subscriber.

write the article? How have other historians approached the same or similar questions in the past?⁴

In order to evaluate students' critical reading skills and begin creating an educational environment based on questioning, I dedicate the first full day of class entirely to discussing Ross A. Kennedy's "Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and an American Conception of National Security," Thomas Knock's "From Peace to War: Progressive Internationalists Confront the Forces of Reaction," and Tony Smith's "A Workable Blueprint for a Broken World."⁵ I start with a fifteen-minute introduction, drawn largely from the articles, to frame the major questions that President Woodrow Wilson faced during World War I and in its immediate aftermath. Weaving the material covered in the reading assignment into the introduction provides students with a pedagogical lattice upon which their ideas can grow. The first day is always the toughest. Students want to discuss the content, which I encourage as a way of moving them from the familiar to the uncertain. More than anything else, I want to set the stage for a semester-long pursuit of questions and themes, and now is not the time to stymie conversation. Once they have explored the subject, I redirect their attention by asking, "OK, but what is the question that the author is trying to answer?" I then proceed to guide them through each article, focusing on historiography, the manner in which the arguments are constructed, and the use of primary and secondary sources. Students are encouraged to evaluate and critique each author's work. By the

⁴ While monographs offer many of the same benefits as articles, most students find them inaccessible. I can also assign many more articles than monographs, thus allowing students to better develop their skills through practice. While I believe wholeheartedly in incorporating primary sources into my courses, and Matt Loayza's article in the December 2006 issue of *Diplomatic History* offers an exciting way of doing so, I do not include them in U.S. Foreign Relations since 1920.

⁵ U.S. Foreign Relations meets twice a week for 85 minutes. Ross A. Kennedy, "Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and an American Conception of National Security," *Diplomatic History* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 1-32; Thomas Knock, "From Peace to War: Progressive Internationalists Confront the Forces of Reaction," in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: Since 1914*, sixth edition, eds. Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson (Boston, 2005), 48-57; and Tony Smith, "A Workable Blueprint for a Broken World," in *Major Problems*, 65-69.

end of the first class, students understand that I am more interested in the questions that generated the content than the content itself.

I have found that these three articles complement each other extremely well. Kennedy challenges students to think about how Wilson conceptualized the relationship between militarism, national security, and democracy. Knock challenges them to examine the domestic political reasons behind Wilson's failure to secure Senate approval of the Treaty of Versailles and his beloved League of Nations. Finally, after recalling Wilson's short-term missteps and failures, Smith challenges students to consider Wilson's foreign policy objectives from a long-term perspective. Once students have analyzed the articles, then they discuss how they would link the arguments to get a more comprehensive view of Wilson's presidency. The last question, in many ways, is the most important. I ask students to develop a list of the analytical tools, in the form of major questions, which they can apply to their study of U.S. foreign relations in general. In recent years, these questions have led to a discussion of the war on terror and the war in Iraq.

Once we have gone through this process twice, students then write the first of four two-page historiography papers. I advise them that they are likely to experience difficulty and frustration and that this is quite normal. The first writing assignment is due no later than the third week of class so I can evaluate their writing skills and progress in making the transition from writing about content to writing historiographically. The first two writing assignments are based on one article each so that students can read them twice, and many of them opt to do so. I found that including more than one article per assignment only results in more of the same mistakes, because the students have to struggle so hard to overcome their urge to describe the article's content rather than to examine the questions. On the day the paper is due, I allow them to keep their papers during our forty-minute (or more) discussion so that they have their "notes" in front

of them. The discussion progresses in the manner previously described. An important final step is to return papers the next time the class meets so the material is still fresh in their minds. One thing they will not find on their papers is a grade. Having judged by the looks on their faces when we discussed the article that the writing assignment had indeed proved challenging, I remind them that I am more concerned about the results of their fourth paper than I am their first. I ask them to review their papers and compare them with the notes they took during the discussion and with my written comments. Together, these should serve as a guide for writing the second paper. This approach is designed to take the emphasis off grades and assessment and place it where it belongs, on learning.⁶

The third and fourth historiography papers are more challenging. The third assignment has students write a paper on four articles from “The Future of World War II Studies: A Roundtable.”⁷ Since many of my senior thesis students choose a topic on World War II, these articles provide a methodological model for how historians assess the state of their field. This assignment also makes students aware that they should be reading for content, for the questions that drive the content, and for the questions that still need to be asked. Herein lies the genesis of future research proposals! The fourth assignment has students read Fredrick Logevall’s “Bernath Lecture: A Critique of Containment” and Tony Smith’s “A Pericentric Framework for the Study of the Cold War.” Students often view the Cold War as a bilateral struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union that was eventually won by the former. While there may be a great

⁶ A student once came to class visibly frustrated by the experience of having to write a paper and revise it several times. After letting him vent, I calmly responded, “So you’re mad at me for making you think?” He just smiled. This semester the first writing assignment is on Jason M. Colby, “Banana Growing and Negro Management: Race, Labor, and Jim Crow Colonialism in Guatemala, 1884-1930,” *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 4 (April 2006): 165-196. The second writing assignment is on Barbara Keys, “Spreading Peace, Democracy, and Coca Cola: Sport and American Cultural Expansion in the 1930s,” *Diplomatic History* 28, no. 2 (April 2004): 165-196.

⁷ I change the selection each semester to reduce the possibility of plagiarism. For Spring 2007 I am using Warren F. Kimball, “The Incredible Shrinking War, Not Just the Origins of the Cold War,” Loyd E. Lee, “We Have Just Begun to Write,” Yukiko Koshiro, “Japan’s World and World War II,” and David Reynolds, “World War II and Modern Meanings,” in *Diplomatic History* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2001).

deal of truth to this, Logevall challenges students to assess the methods the United States used to fight the Cold War, while Smith challenges students to analyze how “junior members of the international system . . . played a key role in *expanding, intensifying, and prolonging* the struggle.” Pairing these articles sparks questions about the design and implementation of U.S. foreign policy and the analytical tools historians use to evaluate it. Equally important, students no longer see other states as pawns on a U.S.–controlled chessboard.⁸

The reading assignments for the second half of the semester are comprised of a series of case studies. Why so much emphasis on case studies? In keeping with the methodological approach I have taken in U.S. Foreign Relations since 1920, they are organized around a historical question and offer students a more detailed factual background than most textbooks. Rather than continuing to focus on how historians have approached the study of history, I now move historical actors and debates onto the center stage. Students examine how people and nations have responded to complicated historical questions. To date, student response has been overwhelmingly positive. Most of the feedback I have received, some of which was solicited but most not, centers on their becoming invested in the material and its outcome rather than cruising through history as a casual observer, their welcoming the opportunity to exchange ideas with their peers, and their improved retention of the material. I believe that the key to achieving these benefits is creating a comfortable classroom environment that allows for experimentation. Students’ arguments invariably become more sophisticated as the discussion progresses. One cannot underestimate the importance of establishing a rapport with the students, knowing when

⁸ Fredrick Logevall, “Bernath Lecture: A Critique of Containment,” *Diplomatic History* 28, no. 4 (September 2004): 473-499; and Tony Smith, “A Pericentric Framework for the Study of the Cold War,” *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 567-591.

to interject in the discussion and when to accept periods of silence, knowing which student to ask which question, and providing positive reinforcement.⁹

Having spent the first half of the semester being guided through secondary sources, students now apply the skills they have learned to case studies. The student is placed at the center of the learning experience. Though I conduct case studies in a variety of ways, let me start by describing my general approach. Before each case study, students are assigned a national identity or the role of a historical figure, or they are given a historical position to defend, depending on which is appropriate. They then read the case study and write a two-page paper supporting their assigned position. Building on the historiography writing assignments, students must identify the main argument and all supporting arguments, and at the end of the paper they must include three questions to ask the other team(s). Having questions readily available keeps the discussion moving.

On the day the assignment is due, students discuss their paper with their team members for approximately twenty minutes. This gives them a chance to exchange ideas and answer any lingering questions they might have before engaging other teams or the entire class. Then, either I select two volunteers from each team to lead the discussion or we meet as a group. At no point are students required to stand alone before the class. Instead, I rotate discussion leaders every couple of minutes, which brings new information and arguments to the discussion and gives everyone a chance to participate. Throughout the process, I remind students that they are not expected to be able to answer every question. While I might appear to be letting them off the

⁹ My discussion of how case studies can be used as an instructional tool has benefited from conversations with my students and from Vicki L Golich, Mark Boyer, Patrice Franko, and Steve Lamy, *The ABCs of Case Teaching: Pew Case Studies in International Affairs* (Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, GUISD Pew Case Study Center, 2000). Available at <http://guisd.org/> (accessed February 12, 2006).

hook, my purpose is to involve as many students in the process at any given time. Rather than watching the debate, teammates are expected to actively join it!

One of my favorite case studies is *A Madman's Appetite—Operation Menu: The Nixon Administration and the Secret Bombing in Cambodia*. The writing assignment and class discussion are organized around one of the central questions raised in the case study: should President Richard Nixon have authorized the bombings in Cambodia? Students spend the first twenty minutes analyzing details and sharpening their arguments for or against the bombing, depending on the position I assigned them. The two teams are then invited into the Oval Office for a meeting with Nixon, played by yours truly. At this stage I ignore Nixon's own views on the subject in favor of having him act as a neutral party seeking counsel. The meeting often begins with students struggling to define the terms of the debate or offering narrow versions of their team's arguments. Rather than succumb to the temptation to insert my voice into the debate, I give the students the chance to build on these initial arguments. One of two things generally happens. A teammate contributes additional facts or analysis that strengthens the argument, or the other team attacks the argument's weak points, thus evoking a more thoughtful reply. Once the two sides have presented and defended their positions, the teams are asked to consider which advisors and government departments were the strongest advocates of their position and why.¹⁰

In *Operation Menu* students confront a range of questions relating both to the material covered in the case and to U.S. foreign policy in general. The dynamic interaction between domestic politics and foreign policy—a theme that permeates the course—manifests itself in Nixon's attempt to gauge how the American public will react should it learn of the top-secret bombings in Cambodia. The case study also raises questions about how a president's personality

¹⁰ Tara Baird and Lynn M. Kuzma, *Case 242: A Madman's Appetite—Operation Menu: The Nixon Administration and the Secret Bombing in Cambodia* (Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, GUISD Pew Case Study Center, 2001). Available at <http://guisd.org/> (accessed February 12, 2006).

and his advisors impact “foreign policy decision making.” After analyzing Nixon’s decision to bomb Cambodia, students explore exit strategies, war termination policies, and possible “alternative courses of action.” Last, but certainly not least, students evaluate the long-term consequences of Nixon’s decision for Vietnam, Cambodia, the United States and his own political future.¹¹

The last three class meetings are dedicated to *Nations: A Simulation Game in International Politics*. I have to thank one of my former colleagues for making me aware of this universally loved game. Students are divided into seven teams, each representing a nation from the fictitious continent of Lostralia. Each team has a clearly defined national identity and a set of national objectives, which, not surprisingly, stand in stark contrast to those of the other nations. Solutions are neither obvious nor easily obtained. The challenge is to achieve your national objectives without compromising your nation’s identity. The World Council—me—ensures that students do not violate the rules or act contrary to their national identity.¹²

I have not found another teaching device that reinforces as many of my course objectives as *Nations* does. *Nations* challenges students to identify the major issues and questions affecting their own nation and to place them in an international context. They must prioritize national objectives, develop a strategy for achieving them and constantly reevaluate it as negotiations and changing international conditions demand, and take into account the multifaceted nature of international problems. Having spent the first half of the semester examining how historians formulate questions and construct their arguments and the second half of the semester examining how historical actors have dealt with critical historical questions, students are now placed in the

¹¹ See Baird and Kuzma, *A Madman’s Appetite*.

¹² A student once volunteered to dress in camouflage as part of his ongoing espionage activities. What such an outfit would look like for a class that was held in the library remains unclear. See Michael Herzig and David Skidmore, *Case 169: Nations: A Simulation Game in International Politics* (Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, GUISD Pew Case Study Center, 1995). Available at <http://guisd.org/> (accessed February 12, 2006).

hot seat. The fate of their nation rests solely in their hands. What becomes apparent in our debriefing session is that the students and teams who best understand and negotiate the fault lines of domestic policy and international relations generally win the game. Analytical, communication, and negotiation skills figure prominently. After three days of *Nations*, the simplistic resolutions to international problems that students offered early in the semester disappear. Finally, at the end of the simulation I remind them of their role as historical actors. I ask them to reflect on how future historians would write the history of Lostralia in general and of their actions in particular.

This is the direction my U.S. Foreign Relations since 1920 course has taken in recent years. Having the class size capped at twenty students makes much of what I do easier, perhaps even possible. It affords me the time to help students who need assistance with their critical reading skills and with identifying questions and arguments, and it allows me to organize students efficiently without interrupting the class flow. It keeps students more engaged and gives them more opportunities to express their ideas. It also creates a more secure learning environment, because I know most of them already and they know most of their classmates.

If the many variables that comprise the educational experience aligned in the manner I intended, none of my students would ever think about history again as the study of “dead folks” or “just the facts.” But of course, some students will continue to struggle. One student came up to me after the midterm and said, “Professor Fuchs, I just want to memorize stuff.” That stung. However, I believe the majority of our students, whether they are future historians or teachers, will be able to assimilate the idea that history is an interpretative discipline driven by questions if they are given the opportunity and the means to do so.