Belgium’s Returning Foreign Fighters
How European State Declarative Strategies Influence Domestic Terror Incidents

Intellectual Autobiography

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Introduction

I knew at an early age that I would join the armed forces and become an Army officer following in my parents’ footsteps. My father was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam and after earning a masters from Penn State in nuclear engineering, he provided one of the first on the ground assessments of the Three Mile Island incident. My mother graduated with the last class of the Women’s Army Corp and became a finance officer who sat on the approval board of the Patriot Missile System. It is a testament to the “Jemson Family Business” – and how small the Army is – that my path crossed with my father’s in Afghanistan when I served Major General Robert Abrams whose father, General Creighton Abrams, was my father’s commanding general in Vietnam and when I participated in combined exercise Ulchi Freedom in South Korea, an exercise my mother supported in the 1970s. Needless to say, I chose the right path. When I completed my bachelor’s degree in 2007 and commissioned as a Military Intelligence officer, I was eager to get on with my career and put my undergraduate academic lessons into practice. Nine years later, I was fortunate enough to be selected for advanced civil schooling and find myself in a university setting once again. I selected the University of San Diego’s (USD) Masters in International Relations (MAIR) program because I believe the program offers the best combination of career-relevant courses, travel opportunities, student to professor ratio, and (of course) geographic location of all the private Catholic universities in the nation. What follows is a snapshot of my academic journey through the MAIR program.

Theory of International Relations

As a young person, I possessed little interest in politics and current events however, the events of September 11, 2001 changed that. My interest in foreign affairs grew exponentially when I departed for my first overseas assignments. Over the years I understood more about the role that the United States’ military plays in domestic and foreign affairs as well as how the armed services put senior-level policy making into effect. However, it was in Dr. Nadkarni’s theory class that I began appreciating and understanding the rationale behind the military’s utilization. Not having a political science background ensured a steep learning curve while we discussed traditional and modern theories, the conditions of war time and peace, what role morality and self-preservation plays in state governance, and how realism must be tempered despite the necessity for security. My final project in Nadkarni’s class compared realist, critical theory, and historical sociology theoretical approaches to Russian espionage in the United States in the 21st century.

International Environmental Governance

Dr. Tirrell’s environmental policy class was equally invigorating in terms of increasing my understanding of global processes and the consequences imposed on the
living world. I was enthralled and motivated by topics like climate change, the tragedy of the commons, global population increase, whaling practices, international environmental negotiations, green washing in advertising, and so many other green topics. Prior to my posting in California, I was stationed in Washington where I fell in love with the Pudget Sound and the Pacific Northwest. Therefore, I conducted my environmental governance research project on the Pudget Sound Partnership as they monitor six vital signs associated with the overall health of the estuary and make progress towards several 2020 action targets.

*Politics of Germany*

Having spent a quarter of my life in Baden-Wurttemberg and speaking an embarrassingly minimal amount of German, Dr. Pfau’s German Politics class was a welcome look behind the curtain into how the European Giant conducts itself. The adage “for every action, there is a reaction” is poignantly true of how the German constitution came into existence and how their political structure operates today (both of which are examples of a collective attempt to avoid another WWII, Holocaust, and/or Hitler because trust is nearly an impossible commodity to regain). The timing of Pfau’s class in fall 2015 was particularly fortunate given Germany’s consistent spotlight over the Syrian refugee crisis and their role in the Volkswagen emissions scandal. My final paper was a predictive analysis of American and German intelligence service relations going into the next presidential term from 2016-2020.

*Ethnic Conflict*

Dr. Gupta reviewed major conflicts and explored the circumstances which facilitate a collective madness that can result in genocide, terrorism, or mass suicide. Learning that the difference between a perpetrator of extreme violence and a moral, law-abiding citizen is negligible, demonstrates how quickly a situation can go from bad to horrific. Circumstances such as dictatorship, unequal political representation, a lack of basic services, poverty, bigoted advisors, denial of external intervention, and censorship can stoke the flames of extreme faith or ethnic-based narratives. We also reviewed those international systems in place designed to hold criminals accountable such as the United Nation’s International Court of Justice. To complete the course, I examined the phenomenon of young, Western Muslim females travelling to Iraq and Syria in support of the Islamic State. Unbeknownst to me at the time, this study was the spark for my Capstone project.

*International Law of the Sea*

A glutton for punishment, I took a second class from Dr. Tirrell and learned just how much the laws that govern Earth’s waters are still disputable and up for interpretation. I now understand how precarious military, private, and commercial
operations are on the high seas; that developments in the South China Sea impact the entire Pacific region; and how states and multinational organizations can influence the future of transportation, trade, and conservation activities (for better or worse). Having next to no personal maritime experience, the MAIR program’s inclusion of naval officers was a tremendous resource of current and relevant knowledge. Returning to my affinity for the Pacific Northwest, I conducted my final project on the Swiftsure Bank, a territorially disputed ecosystem located between the coasts of Canada and the United States.

**Politics of Intelligence**

This course was of particular interest to me given my association with the intelligence community. Dr. Turner, a former CIA case officer and current security consultant, and I collaborated on a project evaluating the effectiveness of intelligence fusion centers. Following the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007, the Department of Homeland Security was charged with restructuring information sharing and analyst placements throughout its 70+ fusion centers. I created a study to obtain qualitative responses from analysts on a variety of topics which influence fusion center effectiveness including personnel assigned, institutional and on-the-job training, day to day operations, equipment, physical organization of the fusion center, as well as leadership qualities such as communication flow and interaction. The end result was a 45 page assessment covering 15 fusion centers from civilian, military, and law enforcement analysts operating at the local, state, and federal levels. When I pursue a PhD., this work will be likely be revisited.

**Politics of Immigration & Human Migration**

Simply put, Dr. Shirk’s Politics of Immigration & Human Migration class challenged my beliefs about American immigration policies. Through a review of applicable literature, guest speakers, and Mexican border excursions it seems to me that our nation’s attitude resembles “Mean Girls” more so than “The New Colossus”. Furthermore, having learned how frequent and groundless race-based exclusionist rhetoric exists in American archives, I am more inclined to scrutinize immigration-focused politicians (let me clarify- politicians who focus on prohibiting admittance to “undesirables”) as campaigns lacking original or progressive substance. The fact that USD is so close to the Mexican border and the San Ysidro crossing point makes this topic even more tangible and relevant to international relations. The United States’ visa overstay problem was the topic of my final paper where I evaluated the merits and challenges of an automated biometric entry-exit system vs. a complete border fence along the southern border.
Data Analysis & Visualization

Where the rest of this program is art, Mr. Lison’s Data Analysis and Visualization class brought in the science. This class explored data mining techniques, data manipulation, and visualization tools. I have a new-found respect for those who can wield Microsoft Excel and SPSS at their whim presenting complex issues that are readily digestible and visually appealing. While this class is a must for graduation, I sincerely recommend taking it with Mr. Lison.

Summary

One of the prompts I had to answer when applying to graduate school was: “Describe how you believe a master’s degree in international relations will improve your professional capabilities”. My (abbreviated) answer was that as a military officer, it is my duty to respond and deploy when diplomacy fails. The USD MAIR program provided a perspective which enlightened me and challenged beliefs I previously possessed about how and why the world works in the manner it does. The program has not only enabled me to confront my professional responsibilities with eyes wide open but, has also provided a pleasant liberal balance to an otherwise conservative career. Following my degree completion at USD, I will be reassigned and promoted to Major. I do not yet know my follow-on posting but, I welcome the next chapter with spirited enthusiasm.
Fall 2015
Theory of International Relations  Dr. Nadkarni
International Environmental Governance  Dr. Tirrell
Politics of Germany  Dr. Pfau

Spring 2016
Ethnic Conflict  Dr. Gupta
International Law of the Sea  Dr. Tirrell
Politics of Intelligence  Dr. Turner

Summer 2016
Politics of Immigration & Human Migration  Dr. Shirk
Data Analysis & Visualization  Mr. Lison

Fall 2016
European Security  Dr. Willoughby
Comparative Politics  Dr. Willoughby
Capstone  Dr. Shirk