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## Unconventional Wisdom: Colby professors teach students to examine the complex forces that shape cultures--and conflicts

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# » un Conven tional

Story by Stephen Collins '74

Illustration by Jon Reinfurt

*Colby professors teach students to examine  
the complex forces that shape cultures—and conflicts*

# Wisdom

Conventional wisdom has it that the cold-blooded killing in Iraq is sectarian. That wars raging in sub-Saharan Africa are tribal. And that the coiffed (and perhaps crazed) North Korean dictator launching missiles and testing nukes is the biggest danger lurking in East Asia.

In a world as complex and confounding as ours, such clichés can provide a rough conceptual shorthand, and perhaps even some cold comfort, as we try to understand geopolitical conflicts thousands of miles away and as we struggle to keep track of what seems like a growing list of 21st-century hot spots.

Of course it's never that simple.

As the recent American elections flowed into a winter of considerable discontent about the way the world is going, a round of visits with Colby professors who study and teach about these and other conflicts illuminated two things. First, the fascinating, often overlooked, complexities of each situation. Second, the unique opportunities in the undergraduate years, when a student's primary job can be to excavate and analyze one such hot spot while the rest of us rely on day-to-day or weekly news coverage.

#### Sectarianism?

In concert with his academic interests, Professor of Government Guilain Denoeux, who has lived all over the Middle East, does extensive consulting work for the U.S. government. He sees sectarian differences as part of a much larger problem, and said, "You cannot understand the Middle East today without studying history."

Iraq has been "historically hard to govern, to keep together. You can go back all the way to the Abbasid caliphs [in the ninth century]. Mesopotamia was known to be particularly unruly," Denoeux said. He moves nimbly from there to a list of contemporary developments that add a new order of magnitude in the very old instability. Most prominent: "the advent of the Internet and satellite television," which has led to a more informed public opinion—one that governments no longer can ignore.

#### Trouble in East Asia?

Assistant Professor of Government Walter Hatch said, "For people who teach international relations there is a truism about how much we have come to miss the Cold War, because it was so predictable and stable in so many ways that the current environment is not."

Hatch, who teaches Conflict in East Asia, sees the North Korea problem through the lens of U.S. and South Korean foreign policies

that are totally out of sync, such that the two allies can't even agree on what happened in either the missile test or the nuclear test conducted last year. It's a fertile and frightening field to plow, and students in his Conflict in East Asia course gravitate to the Korean nuclear crisis over other problems in the region. But, warns Hatch, the question of Taiwan's sovereignty "is just as likely to lead to war in East Asia, in this case between China and the U.S."

"I find the Taiwan issue much more difficult to explain to my students," he said. "Our [U.S.] policy—we call it 'strategic ambiguity'—it's so difficult to teach."

#### Tribalism?

About Africa, which she studies, Professor of Anthropology Catherine Besteman said, "People say, 'Oh, they're all killing themselves because they're different tribes,' and that's all the explanation that we need. ... Well, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that people don't kill each other just because they are

a member of a different ethnic group.

The entire world would be fratricidal if that was all somebody needed to kill somebody else."



Starting near the beginning, Professor of Classics Joseph Roisman uses

Thucydides's first analytical account of war in a Technology, War, and Society course he team teaches. "I always ask my students, 'Why do you study history?'" Roisman said. "They keep repeating what they heard in high school—that you study history to learn from the mistakes of the past.

"My next question is, 'Do they learn from the mistakes of the past?' And here most people say, 'No, they don't.' And why they don't? Because people always think the conditions are different, that it's not the same, that they can do better than their predecessors, they have a better way to solve this problem."

Roisman lines up with Thucydides, suggesting that wars are caused by human nature, that human nature doesn't change, that therefore we're not likely to prevent future wars. "The viability of historical lessons is very limited in my view," he said.

So why teach history? For the same reason Thucydides recorded it: "Because it gives you a better understanding," Roisman said, of what causes wars and how they progress.

Kenneth Rodman, the William R. Cotter Distinguished Teaching Professor of Government, studies international sanctions, the International Criminal Court, and various other

tribunals that operate in the transition from conflict to civil society.

“One of the things that students often have,” he said, “is an oversimplified view of these kinds of issues.” It’s not unusual for students to come into a discussion on one extreme end of the political spectrum. But by studying source documents—international treaties, conventions, and statutes—students learn how international law differs from criminal law, and they see a broad range of theoretical perspectives beyond what they get in episodic news coverage. This can “help them make more sense out of what they hear on NPR or read in the *New Yorker* or even *Newsweek*,” Rodman said.

“One of the things that students will get from taking a course like mine is a more sophisticated understanding of when and how international law actually does matter. And I think they might be more skeptical of people who either try to make sweeping claims that it’s completely irrelevant or that it plays the same role that domestic law does,” Rodman said. “The goal isn’t to make them less liberal or less conservative, the goal is to ground them in understanding what these tensions are or what the court can

with economic and massive military aid. Barre was a U.S. client in the Cold War balance, and Somalia was a strategic site for military bases if conflict were to erupt in the Middle East. The region was flooded with arms from both sides, but neither the U.S. nor the U.S.S.R. (which backed Ethiopia) had any accountability for their actions, she says. When the U.S. cut off aid to Barre, in 1989, he was finished, and civil society collapsed. “What’s ironic [about U.S. goals] is that, by the time there *was* conflict in the Persian Gulf, we were out of Somalia because there was a civil war,” Besteman said.

Among the reasons for the collapse were efforts to convert Somalia to a capitalist democracy, she said. Neoclassical, neo-liberal economic policy pushed individualizing and privatizing everything, she says. Study teams like hers also were sent to Uganda, Senegal, Kenya, and other countries. “What we found was remarkably similar and devastating. Individualization was a highly corrupt process. The people who were grabbing up the land were bureaucrats and businessmen, and the farmers were uniformly being dispossessed of their land. This frenzy of privatization was enabled, facilitated, and supported, in the case of

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*Kenneth Rodman, professor of government*

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**A**s an anthropologist, Besteman views conflict and reconciliation through an ethnographic lens. She is interested in what ordinary citizens do and feel, how they act and react. She has a book under review about South Africans’ views of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (“quite ineffective,” according to most people she talked to) and how some South Africans are trying to reinvent a social world in the wake of apartheid.

But earlier in her career she got dragged into the conflict in Somalia, where she had been studying the effects of land reform imposed by privatization and other Western economic structures. As the political situation in Somalia unraveled in the late 1980s, she ended up trying to explain the incipient conflict there, even briefing the American ambassador as the situation devolved.

“It’s a localized history, but it’s also a very globalized history,” she said. During the Cold War, the U.S. propped up dictator Siad Barre

Somalia, by European and American aid forces.”

Whether it’s Somalia or Rwanda or Darfur, “Anthropologists are interested in those [political] questions, but we’re also interested in what happened at the village level,” she said. “How does that translate into homicidal mania? What are peoples’ mind frames? What are the discourses that are operating? What are the kinds of emotional states that cause people to see murder as their best alternative in the immediacy of the situation?”

Racism, she said, often plays a huge role, and it certainly did in conflicts in Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda, and elsewhere in Africa. “It’s all about race and the ways in which political language operates to demonize or marginalize sectors of the population who then become targets for reasons that may have absolutely nothing to do with them. But as people’s frustrations play out—as people’s life opportunities or their hopes go unrealized, and the world is collapsing around them, and avenues for a sustainable, fulfilling life are being cut off left and right—people look for somebody to blame. Often it is the stigmatized minority that’s the easiest target. ‘It’s all their fault.’”

Besteman sees parallels in the current debate about

immigration in the U.S., where people sow paranoia with lines like: “[They’re] swarming over the border, taking our jobs, swamping our culture, our schools, our health systems, sticking people up in the alley.”

“It takes a lot to get people to kill each other,” Besteman said. “Most human beings do everything they can to avoid killing each other.” So, as an anthropologist she asks, “How do you get people to kill each other? It’s a profoundly unnatural human tendency.”

Hatch’s Conflict in East Asia course includes case studies and student debates about post-World War II reconciliation issues between China and Japan, about U.S. policy regarding Taiwanese sovereignty, and about nagging problems with Kim Jong Il and North Korea’s nuclear weapons program.

Hatch was in Seoul last July when North Korea tested a long-range missile, and he recalls his South Korean friends poking fun at him for being so concerned. “That’s all I wanted to talk about,” he said, “and their reaction was, ‘So what? What’s the big deal? You Americans just overreact all the time.’ I was really forced to reflect on this.”

“People [over there] seemed to be finding ways to defend North Korea in this whole process,” he said. “I thought it was bizarre that these two [the U.S. and South Korea] allies couldn’t even agree on what happened.”

Where the *International Herald Tribune* reported that the missile had fizzled and the test was unsuccessful, the South Korean press suggested that the North Koreans had probably detonated their own missile intentionally. Similarly, Hatch said, the Western press reported that, based on the small seismic fingerprint, the nuclear test was unsuccessful, while the South Korean press described it as just another step towards a successful nuclear program—a program it blamed on America’s belligerence.

The discrepancy reflects the difference in attitudes between the U.S., which refuses to negotiate with the “rogue state” and whose president called North Korea part of an “Axis of Evil,” and South Korea, whose current policy is “complete appeasement,” Hatch said.

The U.S. policy of refusing even to talk has created a situation “where you’ve got Kim Jong Il in the north acting like a six year old, making all these loud noises and screaming sounds, wanting attention, and behaving like a cornered animal, which North

Korea is to a large degree through its own fault,” he said.

Meanwhile South Korea, with a goal of reunification, refuses to acknowledge that there’s anything wrong going on, despite North Korea’s weapons tests, its widespread human rights abuses, kidnappings, and massive counterfeiting of American currency. “Whatever,” seems to be the South Korean policy. “We ignore it” Hatch said. “Toward the north in general, there’s a sentimental, almost nostalgic notion of a great national family divided.”

“I guess I can understand the goal [reunification], but the fact that these two long-standing partners are so out of sync on their policies makes for a disaster at this point,” he said.

So, how does he help students understand it? “The first thing in this course, and I think its useful in a lot of approaches to security issues, is to get away from teaching the students that everything is up the U.S. to solve,” he said. “It’s a truly regional issue. ...

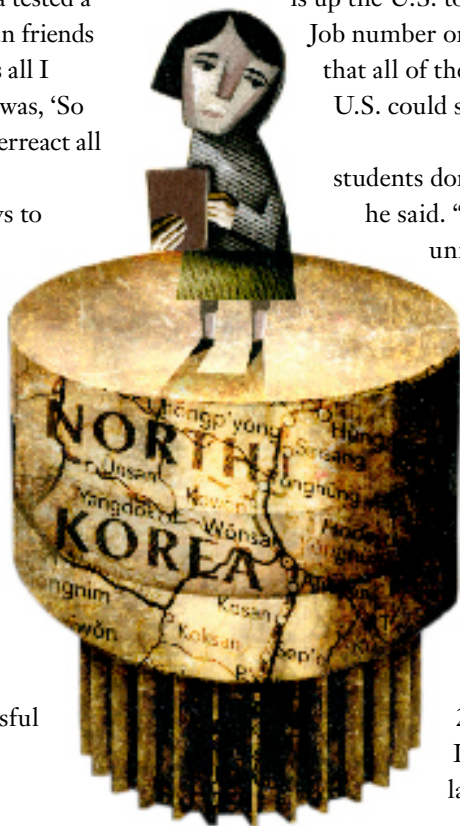
Job number one is to try to get the students to quit thinking that all of these things are merely bilateral problems that the U.S. could solve with a magic wand or a preemptive strike.”

It’s easy to forget that today’s college students don’t really remember the Reagan administration, he said. “They’ve been brought up in this incredibly unique time—probably unique since the Roman Empire—where you have one country that is truly the only superpower in the world.”

Beyond his work at Colby, Denoeux accepts assignments from the U.S. State Department and other organizations, often analyzing political realities and governmental functions in far-flung countries. “I was in Morocco in August,” he said in November. “I was in Lebanon, actually, in December of last year [2005]. I was in Azerbaijan before that. Palestine in 2005, doing an evaluation of the Palestinian Legislative Council. Those would be the last four.”

Besides giving him access to places and officials he could not get to otherwise, his consulting work employs an analytical framework that’s valuable in teaching students how to approach the world’s hot spots. In his seminar titled Political Violence, Revolutions, and Ethnic Conflict, he spends half the semester giving students “the analytical tools to make sense of specific instances of political conflict,” then turns each student loose on one area.

They are likely to identify dozens of factors or variables in a



given situation, but they need to be able to narrow the field to three or four, Denoeux says. “Ultimately, what does it boil down to? What are the structural forces that account for the distinctive features of that conflict?”

Student papers show elaborate diagrams of, for example, causes of the second war in Chechnya in the late 1990s. András Rozmer ’05 charted underlying factors ranging from economic opportunities to corrupt Russian leadership to Islamist radicals, with immediate causes including Russian political opportunism and an intra-Chechen split that created instability.

In an analysis of the Sudan, Shane Hoffman ’00 looked at “resources, internal and external political actors, and the extensive manipulation of ethnic and cultural identity” to try to understand the ongoing civil war.

In 2003 Denoeux published an acclaimed article in the magazine *Arabian Trends* debunking as simplistic the notion that the world is engaged in a “clash of civilizations.” In it he wrote that, “Neither Islam nor the West can afford to see the clash of civilizations become a self-fulfilling prophecy,” and he suggested

among the different Arab countries. “What I particularly dislike is the expression ‘the Arab Street,’” Denoeux said. “It conveys the idea of a manipulative elite and an easily manipulated, easily aroused, and rather poorly informed mass Arab public.” In fact the average Arab is well informed, he maintains, and is quite sophisticated in understanding politics. Savvy populations that are being heard and seen in great numbers are creating constraints on Arab governments and even on American policy.

While Denoeux focuses on giving his students the analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of a place as complicated as the Middle East, those skills come with a warning. “I tell my students, ‘once you’re hooked, once you get the bug, that’s it,’” he said, counting himself as one irrevocably fascinated by the region and its politics.

In January a second-annual briefing on world conflict issued by the Human Security Centre ([www.humansecuritycentre.org](http://www.humansecuritycentre.org)) at the University of British Columbia suggested that, though it may seem counterintuitive, armed conflicts, genocides, military coups, and the numbers of refugees worldwide actually continued a decline in 2006.

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*Walter Hatch, assistant professor of government*

nine crucial points for leaders to try to avert such a catastrophe. (See [www.mafhoum.com/press4/127P56.htm](http://www.mafhoum.com/press4/127P56.htm))

In November 2006 Denoeux identified a range of factors beyond religion, geostrategic location, and oil that complicate—and help to explain—the political situation in the Middle East. Among them: population explosions that have created major youth bulges throughout the region, failed political and economic development models, and the spread of information through the Internet and satellite television. “The media revolution has led events taking place in Palestine to almost immediately reverberate in Islamabad or Rabat. Like that,” he said, snapping his fingers, “these images are sent into peoples’ living rooms.

“These are forces that have nothing to do with Islam ... that are fundamentally reshaping the politics of these countries—that are driving a lot of these conflicts,” he said.

Look closer, though, and you’ll see tremendous differences

But the report was not all positive, and Colby professors will not run out of case studies anytime soon. Four of six regions in the world have seen conflicts increase since 2002, there has been a “huge spike” in the death toll from terrorism, and negotiated settlements to end conflicts fail far too frequently, the report said.

For the foreseeable future, the need to analyze such complex situations continues unabated, and students who can understand the world’s troubles in ways that can help lead to solutions provide hope for the future. Denoeux and others on the faculty are doing all they can to make sure Colby students are ready.

Denoeux said that in the 16 years he’s been at Colby, “the caliber of the students has increased—there’s no doubt in my mind. But the students will only do it if they’re challenged and pressed to do it. Press them very hard and they can deliver creative work. ... That puts more pressure on us; we need to make sure we aim higher in what we demand from students.”