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Africa Beckons Laura Seay

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When the Rules Don't Apply

Laura Seay comes to central Africa from a different direction

As the only first-year student on the Baylor University Model United Nations Team some 15 years ago, Laura Seay got the last pick of the available topics, and that meant one thing—Africa.

Charged with tracking refugee movement in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Seay found herself considering a country where civil war had broken out and tens of thousands of people were fleeing every day. The fluid situation made the project impossible, but her curiosity was piqued.

“It just got me,” she said. “This is a place where there are a lot of questions that haven’t been answered.”

Seay (pronounced “See”), assistant professor of government, has been seeking to answer them ever since, considering the way people organize to survive in the DRC, Rwanda, and Nigeria, and doing extensive on-the-ground research in central Africa, where conflict is all too common. How do people respond, she asks, when government can’t or won’t provide basic services and security?

“It’s actually inspiring,” Seay said of her work. “You’re talking about people who are finding ways to use very limited resources, very limited human capital, and yet continue to keep a school system open, continue to keep a hospital running. And continue to provide—to do the things that government does—when the state is largely absent.”

Her research takes her to some of the continent’s most fragile states, where courage sometimes stands in stark contrast

with violence and tragedy. The horrendous violence can be dispiriting, but Seay continues to be fascinated by places where Western rules don’t apply. “What a state is, who interacts with whom, who’s making the decisions, what accountability means—none of it fits in with the things you learn in a standard freshman international relations class,” she said. “You learn it in mine.”

This summer Seay is to do research in four provinces in the DRC, including sites three days’ walk from the nearest road. The question: has a multimillion-dollar program to change the form of governance there succeeded?

This fall a team of students, including graduate students from University of California, Berkley, and a Colby team that will include Leah Breen ’15 and a to-be-selected incoming Presidential Scholar, will analyze the data collected by the DRC researchers, including some 30 Congolese researchers who will work with Seay to gather information.

“It’s really important to have your facts right and to have the methodological tools and skills,” Seay said, “that whatever career you go out into—a lawyer, an aid worker—you’re going to bring to the table the skills of making smart, evidence-based arguments rather than heartwarming anecdotes. A lot of money has been spent in the past on heartwarming anecdotes, and it hasn’t actually made anybody’s life better.” —Gerry Boyle ’78

For more read Laura Seay’s blog, Texas in Africa, and her posts in [theatlantic.com](#), the Christian Science Monitor’s Africa Monitor, and the Washington Post’s blog The Monkey Cage. Follow Seay on Twitter at @texasin africa.

☐ Summary of Seay’s next project: colby.edu/mag