

# A Classroom Simulation on Humanitarian Intervention

Philip Nash

*The editors of Passport would like to thank the SHAFR Teaching Committee for soliciting the following essay. Like other teaching-related articles that have appeared in Passport, this one may also be found on the SHAFR website, under "Teaching Services."*

I regularly teach a lower-division general education course on the Holocaust. The course ends with a week on "Aftermath and Legacies" during which, to help students think about the question of legacies and think about the contemporary issue of humanitarian intervention, I devote one fifty-minute class to a simulation in which students assume the roles of presidential advisers who must decide whether to recommend dispatching U.S. troops to thwart a current case of genocide.

There are good reasons to avoid role-playing or simulations in Holocaust courses. The excellent guide for teaching about the Holocaust on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website notes that "even when great care is taken to prepare a class for such an activity, simulating experiences from the Holocaust remains pedagogically unsound." Students may be engaged, "but they often forget the purpose of the lesson and, even worse, they are left with the impression that they now know what it was like to suffer or even to participate during the Holocaust." In the end, the only result may be "trivialization of the subject matter."<sup>1</sup> However, I believe this simulation is sufficiently removed from the events of the Holocaust to allay such concerns. The exercise is set in the present and, most important, does not ask students to imagine themselves as victims or perpetrators, which is obviously the most problematic type of Holocaust simulation.

My course features a fairly standard chronological presentation of themes

such as early anti-Semitism, the rise of the Nazis, and the persecution and annihilation of the Jews, followed by a more in-depth thematic treatment of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. The unit on bystanders places particular emphasis on the United States. The class discusses anti-Semitism in the United States, the restrictive U.S. immigration and refugee policies, and what the United States did and did not do during World War II to rescue Jews. This discussion is followed by a section on the conclusion of the war, the final ordeals of the victims (such as the "death marches"), and the liberation of the concentration camps.

In the final week the class deals with "Aftermath and Legacies." We explore issues such as postwar justice, the founding of the state of Israel, human rights, and post-1945 genocide. In addition to the usual reading assignment from the textbook and documents reader, I assign a brief selection on the 1994 Rwandan genocide from Samantha Power's *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York, 2003), so that students know at least a little bit about one case of post-Holocaust genocide and how the United States reacted to it.

When the students arrive for the simulation class I instruct them to break up into their usual discussion groups (typically five or six groups of four to seven students each). They do this every week, so it is routine for them. I then give each student a copy of the following memo:

## TOP SECRET—EYES ONLY

TO: The Senior White House Staff  
FROM: The President  
DATE: 12 December 2008  
SUBJECT: Genocide in Congo  
The Director of Central Intelligence has informed me that, according to confirmed

intelligence reports, the ongoing civil war in Republic of Congo has devolved into a campaign of genocide. Reports indicate that the civilian death toll reaches into the tens of thousands, at the very least; thousands more are apparently being murdered every day.

The Chair, Joint Chiefs of Staff, has indicated that the Congolese National Army—which is perpetrating the vast majority of the crimes—is large, professional, and equipped to such an extent that only introduction of significant U.S. forces will be able to stop the killings swiftly. Such a course, she adds, will doubtless result in significant U.S. casualties.

I should add that the United States has NO significant commercial or strategic interests in Congo; that there is NO organized Congolese immigrant population in the United States that might apply pressure on us; and that, due to the complete news blackout and execution of several foreign correspondents, there is virtually NO knowledge of these events among the American public. This case would therefore seem to present us with what is primarily a moral issue. I would like your recommendation as to whether the United States should intervene militarily in Congo. Your BRIEF, ORGANIZED memorandum on this subject should:

First, clearly state your recommendation re: military intervention, either for or against

Second, list your supporting reasons, making substantial reference to relevant historical cases, both from the mid-

twentieth century and more recently

Third: If you recommend FOR intervention, I'd like you to explain what I should say to the loved ones of those men and women who may die in this operation. If, on the other hand, you recommend AGAINST intervention, then I'd like to know why our intervention against the genocidal Nazis was morally necessary during World War II, but our intervention against the genocidal Congolese is not morally necessary today.

The 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division has been placed on alert and is standing by at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I would like your memorandum within the hour.

#### TOP SECRET—EYES ONLY

(The case need not involve Congo, of course; it could focus on another case, or a hypothetical one.)

After overcoming the difficulty of imagining me as president, the students quickly do what they are used to doing: they select a rapporteur, in this case to produce the memo, and begin discussion. Discussion comprises 15 percent of a student's course grade; I make it clear at the outset that discussion entails not only attendance, but also *informed* participation, that is, participation based on having completed the reading (which the occasional pop quiz helps ensure). The rapporteur, a volunteer, gets bonus points for that day's discussion; and I announce at the outset that I will select what I think are the two most thorough and thoughtful memos (of the five or six total), and all the students in those two groups will also get bonus discussion points. I find that this mechanism provides sufficient incentive for all groups to work hard and not merely phone in their memos.

While they work, I circulate through the room, checking on the groups' progress, keeping them on task, answering any questions they may have, and making suggestions. Suggestions are often necessary. One group, for example, after quickly coming to a consensus that the United States should intervene, suggested in their draft letter to

the parents of the fallen that, well, their son or daughter had probably enlisted to secure money for college and knew that death in combat might be the trade-off. I gently suggested that this approach was rather callous and that the tone might not be right for such a letter. And, of course, there will always be a few students for whom there is no accounting: one student a few years back immediately began drawing a very detailed hand with middle finger raised and "Congo" written under it.

I have found that this assignment works rather well. Most students react favorably to it and engage the issues seriously. Moreover, they seem to enjoy the role-playing aspect of it and are thus more likely to participate. No doubt it helps that, by this point in the course, they have been meeting in the same discussion groups every week and are (usually) comfortable with each other. The assignment can be completed within fifty minutes, with time for a general class discussion in which we compare the groups' memos. Substantively, I find it useful because it requires students to do several things.

First, they must hash out the basic issue among themselves and come up with a single position. As they begin, I point out that they may, if necessary, take a vote in their group, or indicate in the memo that they were not unanimous, but part of the purpose of the simulation is to get them to try to persuade each other if they initially disagree. On numerous occasions, some groups have in fact been unable to achieve unanimity, yet they have produced good memos (indeed, sometimes their memos are better than those of groups that had come quickly to consensus). Incidentally, the groups' conclusions fall across the entire spectrum. A few groups eagerly embrace American global dominion. Some groups, while seeking to avoid repetition of what they see as past mistakes, advocate intervention and explain in the letter to the parents that the United States must serve as a moral force in the world and, if necessary, even risk the lives of its soldiers to that end. Other groups typically argue that the United States cannot and should not police the world and that intervention against the Nazis was justified because the Third Reich represented a profound national security threat to the United States, not only a

humanitarian threat to a foreign population. Other arguments are unabashedly isolationist. This range of responses suggests to me that the assignment is sufficiently "balanced" and does not steer students in any particular direction.

Second, the exercise prompts students to think about what they have learned in the course in a new context, apply it, and integrate it with very recent events. In a related sense, it also suggests to them, not so subtly, the value of historical knowledge. That understanding is always a nice bonus, given that the overwhelming majority of my students are not history majors.

Third, the simulation leads students, in effect, to "put their money where their mouths are." That is, students are horrified by the Holocaust and usually dismayed that the United States did so little, so late to help its victims. They readily subscribe to the slogan, "never again" (indeed, many see that as the main value of the course itself coming into it: we must learn about the Holocaust in order to prevent its recurrence). But now they are asked to consider what price they are willing to pay to transform the slogan, finally, into reality—thus my deliberate framing of the problem in such a way as to eliminate artificially other, non-moral considerations.

And fourth, with this assignment, students must grapple with this broader question: When is the use of military force justified? Educated citizens should engage with this issue, particularly at a time when the United States is involved in two wars and when, in my view, presidents enjoy great latitude when it comes to placing troops in harm's way. I find that this question is particularly meaningful for my students, especially since a number of them have served—or may yet serve—in Iraq or Afghanistan or have friends or loved ones who have done so.

This assignment may have significant flaws, and I am certain it could use further refinement. It entails, of course, a great deal of poetic license; it raises the sticky issue of the use, and potential distortion, of history for policymaking purposes; and it grossly oversimplifies what a "real world" humanitarian crisis looks like. I am open to suggestions. But I believe that this simulation, or one like it, could be used to

significant advantage in any foreign relations course.

*Philip Nash is Associate Professor of History at Penn State University, Shenango Campus. He gratefully acknowledges the support of a Curt C. and Else Silverman Seminar Follow-Up Grant from the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.*

Notes:

1. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust," <http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/guideline/>. See also Samuel Totten, *Holocaust Education: Issues and Approaches* (Boston, 2002), 114-25. For a dissenting view, see Simone Schweber, *Making Sense of the Holocaust: Lessons from Classroom Practice* (New York, 2004) 60-109.

## "Breaking Down the Walls: Increasing the Discourse in the American Policy Making Community"

Arizona State University, in conjunction with the LBJ and George H.W. Bush Schools and SHAFR, announce a conference, "Breaking Down the Walls: Increasing the Discourse in the American Policy Making Community," to be held at the **Phoenix Wyndham Hotel, March 31-April 2, 2010**. The conference will feature panels and roundtables that bring together academics from various disciplines including history, political science, communication, and law with people who are or have been active foreign policymakers in such groups as the U.S. military, Central Intelligence Agency, State Department, and non-governmental organizations. The goal is to create a good conversation on historical and contemporary topics with modern-day applications, from both theoretical and practical viewpoints.

Topics will include trafficking, anti-Americanism, energy policy and national security, the environmental impact of war, counterinsurgency, intelligence failures and successes, immigration, public diplomacy, Congress and foreign policy, and global terrorism. Participants include **Admiral Bobby Ray Inman, Ambassador John Maisto, Ambassador Barbara Barrett, Admiral Vern Clark, Colonel Gian Gentile, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobsen** as well as many others, along with a strong core of distinguished academics. Keynote speakers for the luncheons and dinners will include **Dr. George Herring** and **Admiral Jim Stavridis**, Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. Please join us for this great opportunity in the Valley of the Sun.

For more information, please see our website at: <http://bdtw2010.com/> or contact Kyle Longley at [kyle.longley@asu.edu](mailto:kyle.longley@asu.edu)