



Cornell University

John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines

Document Title: Civil Wars and their Transnational Connections

Author: Richard Bownas

Course: Government 100

Course Title: Power and Politics: Global Chaos or New World Order? The Future of War

Year: Spring 2005

Copyright Statement:

This material is copyrighted by the author and made available through the Cornell University eCommons Digital Repository under a Creative Commons Attribution, Non-Commercial License.

This document is part of the John S. Knight Writing in the Disciplines eCommons community.
<http://ecommons.library.cornell.edu>

Spring 2005 Assignment Sequence Prize

Instructor: Richard Bownas

Course Title: Government: The Future of War
"Civil Wars and Their Transnational Connections"

John S Knight Assignment Sequence Award: Richard Bownas

The Sequence in Relation to My Course: The Future of War

This sequence of four writing assignments comprised the central portion of my writing seminar. The common theme of this part of the course was 'civil war in a transnational context'. My aim was to show that civil wars have causes and consequences that transcend national boundaries and that old ways of looking at civil wars, as self contained phenomena growing out of 'ancient hatreds' and 'primordial identities' are faulty. The sequence comprises writing assignments two through five of my course. Assignment one had been a piece of expository writing, analyzing differences in three different scholars' opinions about the 'future of war'. Assignments six and seven (the final two) concerned international terrorism, and aimed to apply the lessons we learned about civil wars to Islamic transnational networks such as Al Qaeda.

In the following pages, I have included the instructions I gave to students for each assignment, including rationale, structure, advice on content, revision plans and grading grid. I have also included my own analysis of each assignment explaining what went well and what didn't and what preparatory exercises I gave students to help them with the assignment. I have also tried to assess what I would do differently in future.

The assignments, in outline were as follows:

1. A 'two sided' piece of writing on the topic 'markets and civil wars'.
2. A first person 'War crimes testimonial' based on our study of Rwanda.
3. Write up of a speech on democracy promotion – for or against.
4. A memo to the Secretary of State about intervention in Sudan.

Writing Assignment Two: 'Two Sided Writing'

You have probably all seen sets of two articles in the newspapers that address an issue, with one writer supporting it, and the other opposing it. For this assignment you will be doing the same thing – writing YES and NO pieces addressing the question of whether the expansion of markets around the world, aka 'globalization' will promote or deter war. The specific titles of the pieces are as follows:

YES: Open markets and the spread of capitalism around the world will, eventually, make the world a more stable and peaceful place, deterring war between states and within them.

NO: Open markets don't always promote peace, and in any case the powerful and wealthy control markets to suit their interests, which often means more conflict.

Rationale

The writing skills you will be developing in this assignment include the following:

- **Use of evidence** to support a thesis: you will have to think very carefully about what you draw out of the articles we've read for the yes and no pieces. Each piece is going to be 'one sided' and this will alert you to how evidence can be deployed to back up an academic argument, in ways that are sometimes misleading. By writing both sides of the argument you will have a clearer idea of how a truly 'balanced' piece could be written. For practice, try drawing on evidence from the *same* author or *same* case study to support *both* the yes and no pieces. Evidence should consist of citations or footnoted references to articles we have read or your own research.
- **Structure:** it is vital that each argument has a 'snappy' introduction, a thesis statement and topic paragraphs that stick to the subject matter intended. You will also need a conclusion that does more than just restate the argument. Remember these are short pieces that need to make a point within a short page limit.

Content

You will be drawing on a wide range of material we have covered, including articles / chapters by Nordstrom (Africa), Keen (Africa and Latin America), Kaldor (Bosnia), Guaqueta (Colombia), Petras and Morley (Colombia), Klare (oil and war), Muthien and Taylor (mercenaries and war) and Friedman (peace through globalization).

You can also draw on the documentary film we saw about Colombia (Coca Mama).

Practicalities / Revision schedule

Each piece should be around 3 pages in length, for a total of 6 pages. A first draft should be ready for peer review in class on Feb 23rd. The final draft will be due Feb 26th.

Things to Watch out for

Be careful to avoid making merely rhetorical arguments in either piece. Each side of the argument should be based on evidence, not just taking aim at an imaginary opponent (a 'straw man'). Also be careful to focus on the 'political' effects of markets – in terms of their relation to war. Don't get drawn into a debate about the theoretical arguments for and against 'free trade' in general terms.

Grading Grid

Needs Improvement	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent	
				Content: have you cited relevant articles and referred to at least 2 case studies for each piece?
				Introduction / thesis statement: is there a clear thesis statement that the following paragraphs address? Is the introduction 'snappy' and vivid – preferably with some metaphor or visual image to attract the reader's attention
				Conclusion: does it do more than just restate what you've already said?
				Style: direct, clear sentence structure, avoiding unnecessary passives, with clear, 'characters' in each sentence. Accuracy of grammar / spelling, etc.

Writing Assignment Three: War Crimes Testimonial

In this assignment you will be taking on the persona of an accused Hutu 'war criminal' who has admitted to taking part in the genocide against the Tutsi people in Rwanda and who has been asked to write a 'testimonial' for a war crimes tribunal, held a year or two after the events. You will be trying to explain yourself, drawing on the films and articles we have read about Rwanda. It is up to you whether you excuse yourself of blame or accept it. The scale of your character's involvement in the events is also up to you.

Rationale

The aim of this assignment is for you to 'translate' what you have learned about Rwanda in 'objective' terms into a direct first person account. The history and politics that enabled the genocide will appear in your writing, but in terms that an ordinary individual would have experienced at the time. For example, he / she will have been through an education system that taught about the 'racial' difference between Hutu and Tutsi or may have heard from his / her parents about the colonial role of the Tutsi in Belgian Rwanda. They will also have been exposed to radio propaganda before the genocide. What did they think of it at the time? In terms of writing this assignment will help you with the following:

- Translating complex historical processes into **clear, direct English**. This assignment should help you see that behind the sometimes turgid prose of academic writers there are real world events that affect real individuals. By 'translating' scholarly accounts into a first person language, including vivid descriptions of things your character saw and felt, you will gain insight into these events and become more conscious about the meaning of the evidence scholars use to support arguments.

Content

You can draw on the documentary film we saw about Rwanda ('A Republic gone mad'), on Mamdani's chapter on the genocide, on Neuffer's account of the genocide and the failure of the UN, on McNulty's article about the role of the media in the war and on the film we saw out of class hours: 'Hotel Rwanda' (although this may be less useful than the other sources). Think particularly about the following elements:

- The role of the RPF invasion from the north
- The pre-history of colonialism and the prejudices it gave rise to
- Economic pressures: land was scarce and the civil war created anxieties about land seizure
- Political organization of the genocide: the role of the church, the local state officials and the 'interahamwe' in your village.
- The media: especially the role of radio broadcasts prior to the genocide.

Practicalities / Revision schedule

A draft should be given to me on March 14th. The final piece should be handed in on March 18th. The piece should be no longer than 3 pages in length.

Grading Grid

Needs improvement	satisfactory	good	excellent	
				Content: did you manage to include enough relevant historical facts to give the piece weight and plausibility? Are they accurately reported (in terms of dates and sequence)?
				Psychological plausibility: is your character a plausible human being, who can explain their actions, without resort to implausible rhetoric?
				Style: are concepts and events described in a style that an ordinary, non academic individual would use? Have you successfully 'translated' academic ideas into a first person form?
				Accuracy: spelling, grammar.

Writing Assignment Four: Democracy Promotion: Speech for or against

This assignment is a 'write up' of our class debate on the pros and cons of democracy promotion as it relates to civil wars. One half of the class argued for and the other against the motion: "We believe that the foremost aim of American foreign policy should be to promote democracy abroad".

Rationale

The aim of this assignment is for you to think about how to write for an audience, with an imaginary audience to a speech as your target. When writing a speech you will need to focus on the following:

- **Clear progression of ideas:** even more than in an academic piece of writing you need to make it clear to your audience from the beginning what overall point you are trying to make. Each paragraph should flow into the next one, so you will have to think very carefully about **transition sentences** that guide an audience as to where you are going with your argument. **Reiteration of key points**, especially in your conclusion, is also essential.

Content

You can draw on pieces by Doyle (democratic peace), Sharansky ('free versus fear societies), Chua (backlash against democracy) and Snyder (democratization and civil war risks), as well as previous articles and case studies, for example highlighting the connection between democratization and the genocide in Rwanda. You should also draw on what you know of the recent debate about democratization in Iraq – does it seem to be promoting peace or not?

It is important that, depending which speech you choose to write up you address the arguments of the other side as well. A speech which only addresses the Doyle / Sharansky point of view in favor of democracy promotion or the Chua . Snyder doubts about it will not get the best grade. You should take the examples your opponent most wants to use and try and turn them around so they support your point of view instead.

Practicalities / Revision schedule

Draft for peer review – on March 28th. Final draft April 4th. The speech should be no longer than 3 ½ pages.

Grading Grid

needs improvement	satisfactory	good	excellent	
				Content: did you address the arguments of the scholars we have read? Did you include at least 2 more detailed case studies of democracy and its relation to civil war? Did you detail how the US has acted in the past, for good or ill on this issue?
				Cohesion: does the speech hold together, with clear transitions from paragraph to paragraph?
				Conclusion: do you manage to move from your analysis to clear policy suggestions for what the US should do in the future?
				Style: you need lots of strong, direct sentences here – with characters of sentences clearly ‘audible’ for your imaginary audience

Writing Assignment Five: Memo to the Secretary of State

This assignment is essentially a write-up of the group role play exercise we carried out in class, in which you had to make a decision about whether or not, and how to intervene in the Sudanese conflict / genocide currently taking place.

You now have to write a policy advice memo to Secretary Rice, explaining what the US should now do. You should include 3 possible policy options – 2 of which you will reject, one of which you will favor. Reasons for and against should be given for all three.

Rationale

The aim of this assignment is to get you to summarize complex arguments in clear prose, using simple, direct English. You will be working especially on the following:

- **Analytical summary:** this means you will be providing an analytical outline of the history of the Sudanese conflict – drawing out those aspects that are of direct relevance to possible US intervention. You may include relevant **citations** – woven into the fabric of your summary. You should be thinking about how to turn a complex story into a **clear narrative** with **actors** in each sentence and avoiding vague accounts (that may overdose on the passive) and that lack clear actors.

Content

You will be drawing on the role play discussion that took place in class, and of course, the 'in-box' of short articles and facts about the Sudan conflicts that I gave you last week. You should also draw on previous weeks' readings that provide parallel cases of US intervention / non intervention in civil wars around the world, for example, in Somalia (we saw a documentary film about this) and Rwanda (the non intervention).

Practicalities / Revision Schedule

A first draft is due April 8th. The final piece is due April 13th.

Things to watch out for

Make sure you don't get drawn into a lengthy discussion of Sudanese history. As this is a policy advice memo the Secretary of State will be expecting concision and an emphasis on policy options, not long digressions into history.

Grading Grid

needs improvement	satisfactory	good	excellent	
				Content: is there a strong analytical summary of the Sudan case and relevant citation about parallel cases?
				Cohesion: have you moved smoothly from this summary to your policy advice and structured the paragraphs clearly so that Sec Rice can see where arguments for and against are?
				Style: strong characters / actors are essential in each sentence, given that this is a practical policy advice memo
				Accuracy: good citation style, spelling, grammar.

Notes on the Assignments

Notes on Assignment Two

This assignment was accompanied by some examples of two sided opinion pieces from newspapers and textbooks. I chose one two sided piece: pro and anti free trade (in this case from a purely economic point of view) to distribute to students because it would help them both with style and content

This was the most challenging of the assignments in this sequence, intellectually speaking, because it drew on a large range of readings and some unfamiliar, complex ideas. In order to prepare students for the assignment we spent around 45 minutes in class drawing up a table on the blackboard of the ways markets can either promote or dampen conflicts – both civil and interstate. We then tried to draw some visual aids, in the form of diagrams charting the complex lines of causation that might link up, say financial globalization, with new incentives toward violence for drug lords and guerrilla groups in places like Colombia.

In retrospect it might have been better to introduce this material later in the course when students had gained confidence from studying a larger range of country case studies. Answers were stronger on structural aspects of writing than on content, suggesting that at this stage the task was inappropriately complex. I should also have spent longer talking about the purely economic aspects of globalization, as some students were confused about the implications of terms such as 'neo liberalism' and 'opening of financial markets'.

Notes on Assignment Three

This is an assignment I had used in my previous writing seminar "analyzing civil wars" and it was very successful then. I was equally pleased with the results this time around.

I felt it was important to take a break from more analytical essays and memos and to draw the students into achieving empathy with a character (however terrible his / her actions might have been). Most testimonials were vividly imaginative, integrating historical facts with personal experience in convincing narratives. Some students, in fact, went well over the assigned page limit in their enthusiasm for the task, creating highly plausible characters with subtle 'hints' in the text at the structural and cultural causes that had driven them to do what they did – for example they way their parents (Hutu) had related past history to them in their childhood and the subtle social differentiation they felt from Tutsi neighbors and friends prior to the conflict.

As preparation for this assignment I had invited into class a fellow graduate student in the Government Department who is working on war crimes tribunals in Rwanda. Her

description of the aims of the new 'peoples' courts and the photographs she brought in to class were very helpful in stimulating discussion and generating empathy.

One problem that arose in just a couple of the resulting assignments was a kind of culturally inappropriate humor / irony that undercut the aim of achieving empathy with the character involved. I think this is always going to be a risk, but I should have emphasized beforehand that cultural sensitivity was very important in this exercise.

As the end point of the assignment, I got some students to read out their assignments to the whole class.

Notes on Assignment Four

For this piece the students had already written extensive notes for one side or another of a class debate. Students were chosen – at random – in the debate to speak for a few minutes on one side or another, and then to address the points made by the other side. By the end of the class all the students had made some kind of contribution – some more formal than others. My course mentor – Prof Ron Herring had come into class to preside over this debate and talked for 25 minutes after the debate about the points raised by both sides – adding some points of his own that were extremely useful for the students.

The assignments were effective and mostly did a good job of combining facts with rhetorical devices. As feedback I asked two students to present their formal speeches (which were obviously more polished than those heard during the class debate) and the class voted on which they preferred on various stylistic grounds.

I used this assignment, and examples drawn from their essays to illustrate what I termed 'snappage' in introductions. A speech is a good way to get students to think about how to immediately draw in an audience with a vivid example or metaphor.

Notes on Assignment Five

This assignment was based directly on an in-class role play exercise that we had carried out before I gave them the assignment.

The role play took up 45 minutes of time in class and consisted of the following: The class was divided into 3 groups of 5/6 students in each. Someone was assigned the role of chairperson, and someone that of spokesperson. Two days previously I had given everyone a mock 'in-box', as if for a senior government official, explaining the background to the civil war in Sudan and outlining policy options available to the US. Most of the material was from the internet – including news articles and opinion pieces about Sudan.

In groups the students had to go through a detailed agenda outlining 7/8 policy options ranging from the unlikely (full scale invasion as in Iraq) to the plausible (do nothing).

After deciding on one option in their groups the spokesperson had to present their findings to the rest of the class and to me – as the imagined Secretary Rice!

At the write-up phase students did not have to follow their group's recommendations and were free to write about other policy proposals, not mentioned.

The exercise was a success, except that the 'in box' I had prepared could have been more carefully put together. It lacked enough historical background and analysis of the motives of the different parties in the war. This led to a rather 'abstract' set of answers, although the memo was very useful for getting students to think about language issues – especially the need for strong 'characters' in sentences.