

Foreign Policy Mistakes

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Course Description

Why do intelligent, experienced, and well-intentioned leaders sometimes make significant foreign policy mistakes? For example, why did U.S. policymakers intervene in Vietnam, leaving three million dead? In hindsight, the Vietnam intervention seemed doomed, but multiple leaders persisted in prosecuting the war. Why do policymakers implement and continue foreign policy initiatives, even when in hindsight failure seems inevitable?

In this course, we will explore some well-known foreign policy mistakes to address these questions. We will take deep dives into the Vietnam War, the Soviet-Afghan War, and the 2003 Iraq War. We'll wrestle with why and how leaders made decisions by drawing on historical accounts and social science theory. Furthermore, we will consider the human costs of these decisions and weigh competing perspectives on their merits.

Perhaps you are interested in politics and foreign policy. Maybe you want to work in policy one day. Whether you are observing or contributing to the policy process, this course will help you understand the sources and consequences of major policy mistakes. It will also give you motivation and tools to participate in policy debates.

What I hope you will learn.

By the end of the course, you will...

- Reflect on the roots of several noteworthy foreign policy disasters, while recognizing the complexity and difficulty of policymaking.
- Identify common issues and problems behind foreign policy mistakes.
- Connect crucial aspects of cases covered from the course and related theoretical arguments.
- Assess foreign policy initiatives with an eye towards promoting the common good.

- Develop a range of questions you should ask policymakers and others in positions of power to learn more about policy initiatives.
- Draw on historical knowledge of three important international events while discussing policy initiatives.

Course Resources

Halberstam, David. *The Best and the Brightest* (Any Edition)

Mazaar, Michael J. 2020. *Leap of Faith: Hubris, Negligence and America's Greatest Foreign Policy Tragedy*

Assessments

Class Participation

Understanding complex and contingent events requires careful thought and a variety of perspectives. Therefore, class participation is essential for success in this course. I will assess your participation on three dimensions: discussion contributions, in-class activity work, and respect for peers. A more detailed participation rubric is available on the course Collab site.

Value: 20%

News Reflections

During the semester, you will offer three short (2 paragraph) reflections on current events at regular intervals. This will allow you to practice connecting historical cases and current events. You should use UVA library or personal sources to follow the news (I am happy to provide suggestions). Then you will post in a discussion forum on connections between current events and the course content. Because these reflections are meant to provoke thought, not careful analysis, you will be assessed on good faith effort in completion, including providing the source behind your reflection.

Value: 10%

Case Analysis Essays

In two 2,000 to 3,000 word essays, you will assess the two major cases, drawing on assigned readings, lecture materials and class discussion. These essays will allow you to demonstrate familiarity with important aspects of the cases and sharpen your analytic skills. They will also provide material to draw on for the learning portfolio and reflection exercise.

Value: 40%

Learning Portfolio

This assignment is the culmination of the course. In this project, you will identify key passages and ideas from books, lectures, news reflections, and course essays that particularly influenced your thinking about foreign policy, history and political science. Then, you will identify common threads or issues in the different cases and reflect on what you have learned in the course. There are three options for creating this learning portfolio explaining your takeaways from the class and how your thinking has evolved.

1. A 3,000 word essay.
2. A 5-7 minute presentation to the class.
3. A digital media or other creative project.

For the third option, I welcome your ideas, including group projects. See the course calendar for the timing of selecting your final project format.

Value: 30%

Grading Scheme

In addition to these general guidelines, I will provide detailed rubrics for each major assignment.

- **A** [90-100): Outstanding and original work; well argued, well organized, without significant error or omission.
- **B** [80-90): Very good work; reasonably argued, clearly organized, with only slight error or omission; clearly well above the average.
- **C** [70-80): Solid work; clear evidence of engagement and comprehension but with some organizational, factual, or interpretive errors or omissions.

- **D** [60-70): Passing but only marginally acceptable work with clear deficiencies of fact, organization, interpretation, or length; incomplete work. Immediate conference with me is suggested.
- **F** [0-60): Unacceptable work submitted with such significant deficiencies that no credit can be awarded. Immediate conference with me is strongly suggested!

Attendance Policy

Attending class in person is critical to your success and learning. We will go beyond the assigned readings with extensive discussion, lectures on related issues, and activities to help you think about the course content in different ways.

I also understand that things can come up that make class attendance infeasible. Therefore, you have two free absences for any reason. If you have more than 15 unexcused absences, then you will receive an F in the course.

Course Calendar

Theme	Date	Topics	Readings and Activities	Assignments
Course Introduction	Week 1		Introductions	Read Syllabus
	Week 2	Institutional Frameworks	Halberstam Ch 1-7 Lecture/Discussion	
The Vietnam War	Week 3	Cognitive Frameworks	Halberstam Ch 8-13 Lecture/Discussion	News Reflection 1 Due
	Week 4	Reputation	Halberstam Ch 14-18	
	Week 5	Resolve	Halberstam Ch 19-23 & Debate	

	Week 6	Domestic Politics and Political Economy	Halberstam Ch 24- Epilouge Submit Questions	
The Iraq War	Week 7	Deterrence and Coercion	Mazaar Ch 1-3 Lecture/Discussion	Case Essay #1 Due
	Week 8	Perception and Misperception	Mazaar Ch 4-6 Lecture/Discussion	
	Week 9	Bureaucratic Politics	Mazaar Ch 7-8	News Reflection 2 Due
	Week 10	Democratic Advantage?	Mazaar Ch 9-10 Submit Questions & Debate	Select Final Project Format
The Soviet-Afghan War	Week 11	Foreign Policy in Autocracies	Read Westad and Lecture/Discussion	Case Essay #2 Due
	Week 12	Leaders in IR	Submit Questions	News Reflection 3 Due
Conclusion and Reflection	Week 13		Wrap Up	
	Week 14			Learning Portfolio Due

Honor/Academic Integrity Policy

Working independently is a crucial skill, but so is collaboration. I will provide guidelines for collaboration with each assignment to ensure that you know when you can rely on your peers and other resources, and when you cannot.

Late Work Policy

Turning in work on time is important, as it helps me give you timely feedback, and ensures that work for this course does not pile up. Therefore, I will accept

assignments turned in late, but only for a one-week period following the date that they were due. During the one-week period, assignments will be penalized by the loss of five points per day for each day they are late. After the one-week period, missing assignments will receive a grade of 0.

Please note that I am happy to work with you if other factors make it hard for you to meet a deadline. If something comes up that affects your ability to meet a deadline, please let me know as soon as possible.

Learning Activities

In addition to the graded assignments, we will regularly engage in a few exercises to sharpen your knowledge of course content and prepare for graded work. Most of these will take place in class, but you may find it helpful to work on some of these, particularly the concept map, outside of class.

Concept Map

In one activity, you will build a map of each case throughout the reading. Starting with the outcome, you will use a series of other circles and arrows to link concepts from the case accounts and lectures to the ultimate decision(s) of interest. I will explain in detail how to draw a concept map in class early in the semester.

Question Generation

At the end of each unit, you will have the opportunity to submit questions on the case: areas of confusion from lectures, aspects of decision-making that are still unclear, open issues in your understanding of the cases. You can also highlight quotes from the readings that are unclear. I will email out a link with a Google form for questions 48 hours before the class in which we will discuss these questions.

Accessibility

If you require a learning accommodation, please let me know in the first two weeks of the semester. I am happy to work with you to facilitate your success in the course.

It is the policy of the University of Virginia to accommodate students with disabilities in accordance with federal and state laws. Any student with a disability who needs accommodation (e.g., in arrangements for seating,

extended time for examinations, or note taking, etc.), should contact the Student Disability Access Center (SDAC) and provide them with appropriate medical or psychological documentation of his/her condition. Once accommodations are approved, it is the student's responsibility to follow up with the instructor about logistics and implementation of accommodations.

If students have difficulty accessing any part of the course materials or activities for this class, they should contact the instructor immediately. Accommodations for test taking should be arranged at least 14 business days in advance of the date of the test(s). Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact the SDAC: 434-243-5180; Email: SDAC@Virginia.edu; Website: <http://www.virginia.edu/studenthealth/sdac/sdac.html>.

Communication

The best place to ask questions is in the classroom. Some questions may need to wait until after class, but I strongly encourage you to ask any question you might have about the course, related issues in the news, politics, or professional life. I also encourage you to visit my office hours to discuss these matters or any difficulties with the readings or homework. Although in person discussions are usually much better than email, I will also do my best to respond to emails quickly. You can expect me to reply to emails in 24--48 hours during the work week. I will not reply to emails on the weekend.