

Date: September 21, 2004
To: 17.428ers
From: Steve Van Evera
Re: Paper assignment for December 14, 2004

SECOND PAPER ASSIGNMENT

You have three options for this paper: (1) You can write a policy evaluative paper that evaluates a major American policy. (2) You can write a second case study. If you framed your first case-study paper to explain the case you explored, you should frame this case to test a general theory. If your first case tested a general theory, please frame this study to explain the case you explore. (3) You can suggest your own topic. E.g., proposals for research papers or research proposals are welcome. However, if you choose this option you must run your topic by me before you start.

I. POLICY EVALUATION PAPER OPTION

In 6-10 pages please (1) describe and evaluate the factual and theoretical beliefs that motivated a major American policy (e.g., a decision for war or peace, a broad foreign policy doctrine, or a lesser-included policy supporting a broader doctrine); and (2) describe and assess the consequences of that policy.¹

I recommend that you start your paper by framing the beliefs you evaluate, and explaining how you are inferring them. Also state your method of evaluating the beliefs you assess. If you are evaluating a theory, please tell us: is it confirmed (or falsified) by the results of the policy itself? By other evidence that has emerged since the policy was adopted? By evidence that policymakers had access to at the time? By data that you have organized here for the first time? Or what? If you are evaluating factual beliefs, likewise tell us how you are going about your evaluation.

If important beliefs still cannot be evaluated today, please say so, and say why. Comment as well on what evidence would finally resolve the matter. And if the consequences of the policy cannot be divined from the assigned readings, please say so, and describe the evidence you would need to provide a full assessment.

If you conclude that some beliefs seem false in retrospect, you might comment on whether the mistakes you describe were reasonable, given the data available at the time. Speculation on the causes of any misperceptions you describe is also welcome.

You may write on the same case that you covered in your last paper, but you are bound to learn more from exploring another case.

¹ These two tasks overlap: policies are motivated by expectations about their likely consequences, hence one cannot evaluate the validity of the assumptions that shape these expectations without describing the consequences that the policy produced.

II. CASE STUDY PAPER OPTION

Please write a 6-10 page paper that uses one of the cases covered in this course, or another case, as a case study.

(1) If your previous case-study paper explained the case you explored, please use this case to test general theories discussed in this course.

(2) If your previous paper tested general theories, in this paper please explain the case you explore. You can construct your explanation from theories covered in this course, or can use other ideas (including common-sense or "folk" theories) if the theories discussed in this class don't seem adequate or don't speak to important aspects of the case.

If you use your case as a lab to test general theories (Format #1), please **test at least two theories**, and comment on which performs better on your tests.

If you attempt to explain your case (Format #2), please **compare your favored explanation to its most plausible competitor**, and explain why you find the competing explanation less persuasive. This requires testing both your favored explanation and its competitor, with a special eye on critical tests (that is, those where the two explanations make opposite predictions about the same event, and which both therefore cannot pass).

Also, make sure you state clearly what aspect of the case you intend to explain. The motives of the governments or individuals involved? Background conditions that served as causes? The consequences of the case? Please be explicit.

Bear these considerations in mind as you proceed:

(1) If you are testing a general theory or explaining a case, your general format should follow that of a science experiment. First frame your theory or explanation, then look for observable phenomena predicted by the theory. You should take four specific steps:

a. Frame your theory or explanation.

For clarity I strongly recommend that you provide an arrow-diagram of each theory or explanation you discuss.

b. Infer predictions from the theory about how the case should unfold if the theory were valid (or if the theory explained the case), and how it should unfold if the theory were false (or could not explain the case).

Please frame these predictions explicitly and explain them fully.

c. Examine the case, looking for congruence or incongruence between prediction and evidence.

d. Interpret the results of this examination.

(2) Some predictions provide decisive negative tests: if the prediction fails the explanation fails, but if the prediction occurs the explanation is not proven. Some predictions offer decisive positive tests: if the prediction is fulfilled the explanation is proven, but if the prediction fails the explanation is not disproved--"smoking gun" positive tests. A few predictions are decisive both ways. Most are not decisive either way, but simply weigh in the total balance of circumstantial evidence. Your interpretive discussion should reflect these differences.

Case selection is up to you. All cases covered in this course are ok. And you may do a case not covered in the course if you wish.

Make sure your paper includes a **clear summary introduction**, of perhaps a paragraph. This paragraph should clearly state your question(s) and should summarize your answer.

Please double space your paper and use standard 1-inch margins. Observe the ten-page limit (2500-3000 words).

As always, you are encouraged to share thoughts among yourselves as you prepare this paper.