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The Poetry of International Ethics

WILLIAM A. DOUGLAS
About the Author

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He taught International Relations in Korea from 1960-1962 at Sung Kyun Kwan, Seoul National, and Korea universities and in 1963 at Yonsei University as a Fulbright Lecturer. In 1980, he was a Fulbright Lecturer at Sung Kyun Kwan University. From 2009-2011, he was the Fei Yi-ming Visiting Professor of Politics at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center.

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He is fluent in Spanish and reads German.
Foreword

I had the honor of taking Professor Douglas’ class in 2014. Based on his vast educational and field experience around the world, combined with his many diverse interests, I think he can rightly be characterized as a true 20th and 21st Century Renaissance Man. I think I can speak for all of my classmates when I say that every week we were truly amazed and impressed that he could provide a lecture on some aspect of ethics in international affairs—from terrorism to torture to Just War to nuclear proliferation—and then conclude each lecture with a poem that was a relevant summary of the material covered. At Georgetown, and specifically in the Liberal Studies and Security Studies programs, an interdisciplinary approach to education is necessary and highly valued. However, I think few would expect there could be such an effective fusion of poetry and international affairs that Professor Douglas has provided to his students for many years.

I was surprised to learn that his poetry had not been published. We are grateful that the editorial staff of the Georgetown Security Studies Review decided to publish his works so that more students and faculty could benefit from his wisdom.

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Realism vs. Idealism

That one could find poetry in international ethics would have struck me as implausible before I began teaching a course on this topic at the Paul Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). SAIS is one of my alma maters, and it was a strange experience to be teaching at SAIS the same course that I had taken there - from Paul Nitze himself - thirty-six years before!

In one of the readings I assigned early in the course, Charles Kegley contrasted Wilsonian idealism with what Kegley termed "nihilistic realism". Noticing that the two terms rhymed, I penned a short verse:

Let us take Wilsonian idealism,
As compared with "nihilistic realism".
If the ideal is the enemy of the good,
And nihilists don't act the way they should,
Then let's opt for something in-between,
And settle for the Grecian "golden mean".

But values, unlike atoms, can't be split.
So, this "something in-between" just isn't it.
So let our goals be chosen by morality,
And our means be grounded in reality.

When I read the poem in class, the students, not knowing how to respond, did the SAIS-like thing - they didn't. They remained poker-faced, or, as an Asian would put it, they "kept dignity". I took this lack of response to mean that this would be the end of matters poetic in the course - little did I know that I had taken an irretrievable step down the slippery slope to poetic licentiousness. At the end of the class, the students asked: "Will we get a poem next week too?" It was a challenge that could not go un-met.
Relatively Absolute, or Absolutely Relative?

Moving on to a more general philosophical issue, we then considered whether there are any absolute political principles that are universally applicable, in all ages and across all cultures, or whether what is moral is a relative thing. This issue obviously lent itself to poesy:

Are there truths self-evident, that anyone can see?
That show, in any culture, just what the rules should be?
Or, are all values relative, as in those silly jokes
That end up with the punch-line: "Different strokes for different folks"?

For instance, is democracy a value universal?
Or is today's "Third Wave" about to suffer a reversal?
Is separating church from state an action always best?
Or is it a device that's suited only to the West?
Is "equal rights for all" a rule that's given us by God?
In traditional societies, it's viewed by some as odd.
Has capitalism won the day? Is history at an end?
Or will the neo-Liberals give way to some new trend?
To those who look for absolutes, in values, laws, or ends,
As to whether they exist, I always say: "Well, that depends."
American Aspirations and American Reality: Gap City

Our next topic was: "Basic American Values that Relate to Foreign Policy." Identifying independence, democracy, social equality, etc., as deeply-held values that presumably should be reflected in U.S. foreign policy inevitably leads to the reflection that some of these values remain very imperfectly realized even in our domestic affairs. That reflection led to the semester's second poem:

Oh shining city on a hill
With the strength to work your will
On other peoples of the earth
Who were not gringos at their birth
Oh shining city on a hill:
Your many faults are with us still.

With some more equal than the rest,
You preach that equal rights are best.
Attracted by the suburbs' lure
Your middle class has left the poor
Marooned within the center city
Without jobs, nor hope, nor pity.

By the people should our land be ruled,
But civic ardor now has cooled.
Students of elections note
That only half our people vote.

In any human institution
Our hopes go through some diminution.
In practice we will never reach
The values that we always preach.
At least, in striving for the best
We may do better, through our quest.
What Might Make Right?

We then turned to a discussion of how to reconcile conflicting values in international affairs, trying to create a "hierarchy of moralities" as Professor Nitze used to put it. Our inquiry, of course, took poetic form:

We're told that telling lies is very bad.
And, hurting someone's feelings makes them sad.
When one's spouse buys an ugly hat or tie,
What should one do - be rude, or simply lie?

The Bible says: "thou shalt not kill!"
But, to save your child, you surely will.
And, many say not only that you would
But argue, in addition, that you should.

To each nation, sovereignty is dear.
So in their affairs we should not interfere.
But would it be an awful moral offense
To interfere in our own self-defense?

The U.N. bans the threat or use of force.
But, morally speaking, what should be our course
If threaten, and then use, our force we must
To prevent what all agree would be unjust.

When principles of justice oft' conflict,
And moral rules each other contradict,
Depending which priorities apply,
Some will live, and others surely die.

Moral reasoning, then is not an academic game.
When statesmen choose, things don't remain the same.
We citizens should surely have a voice
In how our leaders make each fateful choice.
Just War — Or Just Murder?

The classic guidelines to making these moral choices are found in just war theory. We wondered, however, whether this theory, first devised some centuries ago, could still be pertinent to decisions in the nuclear age. Our wondering produced this poem:

If it is evil to kill, which in wartime we must,
Then how can we ever declare a war "just"?
But defending our homeland against brutal attack
May require lots of bloodshed, with no holding back.
So a defensive war, says the U.N.'s own Charter
Is morally OK, just so you're not the starter.
But what if you know an invasion is planned?
Is a pre-emptive strike unconditionally banned?
And, if a neighboring people suffers slaughter most violent,
Should you battle to save them, or sit home and stay silent?

These troublesome issues, throughout all the ages,
Have puzzled even the wisest of sages.
The questions today are really not new-
They're about what man did, and today we still do.
So there's really no reason today to be leery
Of applying traditional just-warfare theory.
No thinker today need feel any shyness
About using the wisdom of Thomas Aquinas,
We can't know for certain when a war may be just -
We just ponder and pray - and then do what we must.
What Course for Using Force?

Both just war theory and our own hierarchy of moralities suggested that using force is sometimes justified by higher moral principles - but when, under what circumstances? In our readings we reviewed various rules, including ones derived from the U.N. Charter, our course readings, and my own lecture. We pondered poetically the choice of rules:

Ethicists will raise a rumpus
If we don't use a strong moral compass
To indicate the proper course
When pondering the use of force.

But - which moral compass shall we use?
There's more than one from which to choose.
"Use force to shield the weak from harm"?
Will that rule now work like a charm?
Or, in '45 were folks much smarter
To write into the U.N. Charter:
"No force except in self-defense
Against attack" - does that make sense?

Douglas has a rule-of-thumb
That may be smart, or may be dumb:
"Proportionality," says he,
"'Tween ends and means - that is the key."
A threat to our security
While small and distant, cannot be
The grounds for an atrocity
That sullies our moral purity.

So, many theories could be used -
It's easy to end up confused,
And have recourse to naked force
And suffer, later, from remorse.
Realists, however, keep one simple rule in view:
"Do it unto others, lest they do it unto you."
A Cyber Haiku

Modern technology has presented us with a sticky issue: the U.N. Charter approves of the use of force in self-defense against an “attack,” but does an offensive use of cyberwarfare constitute an “attack”? On this topic no full-scale poem emerged – only a brief haiku:

Cyberwar’s ethics,
Like morning fog, are hazy.
All war is crazy.
Keeping Faith

After the September 11th attacks on the U.S., the topic of terrorism was added to our course, and we discussed whether terrorist tactics can ever be morally justified. At a memorial service that the SAIS student government held on the first anniversary of the attacks, I read a poem pondering the nature of terrorism:

We humans are given freedom of will,
Which we can use for good, or for ill.
When, with free will, we also have power,
We can build – or destroy – a tall, shining tower.

The architect uses his freedom of will
To study and learn, acquiring the skill
To design a structure both useful and grand,
And sturdy enough, for decades to stand.

The terrorist is a demented fanatic,
Obsessed with the urge to something dramatic
To wreak his revenge on the whole of society
That he believes is imbued with impiety.

As Jose Marti said “those who love, build,”
While those who destroy, with hatred are filled.
The Twin Towers reflect the twin faces of man,
Who for good, or for evil, can work and can plan.

To honor the fallen, what can we do
To keep faith with those whose days were too few?
For what goal should we struggle, for what should we strive,
To keep them, in memory, forever alive?

One thing we can do, in commemoration,
Is show people the way to adopt toleration,
So, in place of fanatics who think their truth pure,
There’ll be people quite certain they cannot be sure

To combat fanatics, we must ask, of course,
From whence comes their rage – what is its source?
Why are they filled with this fierce indignation
That means they don’t have the desired toleration?
One cause, we see, is complete loss of hope. When one’s future is bleak, one way people cope is to channel their hopelessness and their frustration into a feeling of high indignation.

If, then, the swamp of despair we can drain, And substitute hope for their rage and their pain, Then, perhaps, we will “all get along”, Resisting extremism’s false siren song.

Development, though, creates a new fear: That the price of a job and successful career Is the loss of one’s culture, one’s roots in the past – The fear that change will go too far, too fast.

So, we must also help people to see That a modern technician today can still be Loyal to he values that throughout the ages Have been taught to his people by their priests and their sages.

If hope we engender, and fear we assuage, There’ll be fewer fanatics, seething with rage, And we’ll say to the spirits of those whom we mourn: We’ve all tried to help a new age to be born.
Efforts to counter terrorism raise as many moral conundrums as does the use of terror. In this connection, we first analyzed the issues of military preemption and preventive war, which our poem for that class tried to summarize:

Are we guilty, beyond all redemption,
If we engage in forceful preemption?
Will we suffer from global contempt
If we do decide to preempt?

The side which decides to strike first –
Whose bombs will be the first to burst,
Can choose both the place and the time –
Does that make a first strike a crime?

If we cannot construct a defense,
Before hostile actions commence,
If alliances offer no aid,
Then preemption cannot be delayed.

We cannot deter an attack,
When we have no target at which to strike back.
We’ve got to be fast and proactive,
Or we’ll all end up radioactive!

If our enemies have the means and intent
To launch an attack that we cannot prevent,
Then imminence means that we may be too late,
If we don’t hit him first,
To avoid a cruel fate.

But – if all nations seek to preempt every threat,
Then what kind of world will all of us get?
A planet of conflict, destruction, and war –
To avoid which is what we’re preempting for!

Thus, knee-jerk preemption cannot be the rule –
Preemption must be a selective tool.
So, prudence and judgment, as always, are key,
And will decide whether we’ll be or not be!
Condone a Drone?

Having addressed the topic of preemptive attacks in general, we then turned to the specific issue of targeted assassinations, including the use of drones for such attacks:

With droning sounds from overhead,
   Each terrorist is filled with dread.
   Will he still more violence foment?
   Or will this be his final moment?

The terrorists’ deaths we shall not mourn –
   Their evil deeds have earned our scorn.
   But – targeted killing raises doubt:
   Are their rules our actions flout?

In time of peace, assassinations
   May violate the Law of Nations.
   And even in the War On Terror
   To deem them “moral” might be an error.

To claim we act in self-defense
   Entails a risk that is immense:
   The definition is so elastic
   It provides excuses for acts too drastic!

The drones’ attacks can be precise –
   If few innocents die, that would be nice.
   But, we won’t get the desired effect
   If our intelligence is incorrect!

Targeted killing spurs many a quarrel
   Over what is legal, and what is moral.
   As drones become more widely used,
   Ethicists get more confused!
Tortuous Reasoning

Counter-terrorism always raises the issue of torture. While international law clearly forbids its use, might there be exceptional situations in which it could be justified? Our poem for the topic highlighted the agonizing choices involved:

Can the use of torture ever be just?
This is an issue that must be discussed.
At first, it seems clear that the answer is “NO!”
‘Cause international law tells us that’s so.
But then one remembers the common perception
That most every rule has at least one exception.

Might there be an occasion with enough moral gain
To justify leaving one screaming with pain?
Said Jeremy Bentham, a philosopher seasoned,
Using “utility”, by which method he reasoned,
“Which is worse: that one guilty man suffer,
Or, is letting an innocent die a choice tougher?”

And, as so often in ethics we see,
The choice may hinge on a matter of degree.
In the ”ticking bomb” case, not just one innocent soul,
But the death of a city may be the terrorists’ goal.
The presumption should be against torture’s use,
With exceptions kept rare, to prevent its abuse.
Dirty Tricks and Moral Cleanliness

Continuing to consider acts that are normally sinful, but perhaps sometimes justified, we next discussed the arcane art of covert action. We were too prosaic for prose, so we did not produce a spy novel, as did John LeCarre, but our cares did produce a poem:

When nations deal in covert action,  
Can they meet with satisfaction  
The code of conduct they should follow?  
Or is that code completely hollow?

The dirtiness of tricks, we see,  
Can be a matter of degree.  
Plotting violent coups is worse  
Than merely filling someone's purse.

In order to identify  
What we cannot justify  
Proportionality's the key  
To judgment of morality.

We must have the maturity  
To judge threats to security.  
Not every danger merits doing  
Acts that we will end up rueing.

But we cannot always just be nice -  
If covert action will suffice  
To end a threat to our nation  
That is causing consternation  
Then if our spook force intervenes  
We need not send in the Marines.
USA — Top Cop?

Given the high visibility in the news after the end of the Cold War of humanitarian emergencies in situations such as in Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, Darfur, Libya, and Syria, we did some moral reasoning as to when a nation is obligated to intervene abroad to relieve suffering. The pertinent poem was:

In this world, most everywhere
Are famine, slaughter, and despair.
  If we are a humane nation
  Have we not an obligation
Throughout the world, to use our might
To intervene and put things right?

  If this is America's hour
  As sole-remaining superpower
  Should we be the world's police
  'Till every ethnic war shall cease?

  But, omnipotent we're not.
  We can't calm every trouble spot.
  What priorities should we use
When we're forced to pick and choose
  Among those horrible situations
  That now afflict so many nations?

  And where do our interests lie?
  Would you send your son to die
  Just to help some other guy
On whom you've never laid an eye?

  Should we simply stand aside,
  Short of outright genocide?
  Or, with suffering ubiquitous
Would it be, for us, iniquitous
  Not to act, and see lives lost
When we could help at modest cost?
If you're sure what we should do
You haven't thought the problem through.
   When opposing values clash
   It would be extremely rash
To think you'll get the satisfaction
Of knowing what's the proper action.
Genocide — Why Stand Aside?

The ultimate "humanitarian emergency" is, of course, genocide, so we discussed such egregious cases as Rwanda and Cambodia, and our reflections produced a verse:

"Never again!", the world replied,
Responding thus to genocide,
Reacting to the Holocaust
In which three million lives were lost.

But, despite what we averred,
Genocides have now recurred,
And each new atrocity
Increases in velocity.

In Rwanda's genocide
Half a million people died -
When the slaughter reached its peak,
One hundred thousand every week!

Cambodia's slaughter gives us pause,
For in this case, we see the cause
Was not primordial ethnic hate -
Zealotry sealed the victims' fate.

In Bosnia, history played a role
In driving up the bloody toll.
Each side there thought that by fighting,
Some ancient injury they were righting.

Genocide, in its many forms,
Violates all human norms.
If "Never again!" remains our goal,
We must look within the human soul.
Take the Nearest Exit?

In thinking about humanitarian intervention, even more perplexing than the question of "when to go in" is the problem of "how to get out," and how the "exit problem" should be factored into moral reasoning. An issue this perversive, of course, required resort to verse:

Although begun with good intentions,  
Humanitarian interventions  
Are seldom just an easy romp -  
We may end up in a swamp!

It's a matter of contention  
Whether every intervention  
Must have a ready explanation  
Of how to manage extrication.

Nations in the past were willing  
To send their troops to stop the killing.  
But hatreds that had caused the trouble  
Were still there, to boil and bubble.  
So when the foreign troops withdrew  
The killing started up anew.

So, leaders now are very wary  
Of claims a mess is "temporary".  
"If we go in," they're prone to worry,  
"Can we exit in a hurry?"

If the situation's desperate  
We could provide a short-term respite.  
Then, leaving no long-term solution,  
Perform a Pilate-like ablution.

Is this worth the risk and cost?  
Will gains out-weigh what may be lost?  
Or is such short-term rescue futile,  
When facing forces strong and brutal?
Or, are we, as "Top Nation", fated
   To, perforce, be obligated,
   Given our capability,
   To help build up long-term stability
   By sending in a major force,
   And then stand firm and stay the course?

   So, the exit problem is perplexing.
   Its ambiguities are vexing.
   How much must we try to do?
   And how long must we see it through?
Embargoes' Moral Cargos

Before launching a humanitarian intervention, nations often seek to use economic sanctions to compel repressive regimes to cease human-rights violations. However, the contentious matter arises of whether it is moral to inflict economic harm on the peoples suffering repression in order to force their rulers to reform. This is an emotional issue in many countries, and emotions spur the Muse, so we mused:

In *jus en bello* we can see:
Discrimination is the key;
'Tween combatants and civilians
Lest casualties be in the millions.

With economic sanctions then,
Discrimination once again
Should be the basis for distinction,
Lest the people face extinction.

But, alas, that can't be done,
Economies perform as one -
We can't embargo just the ruler;
We face a choice that is much crueler.

With workers facing unemployment
The rulers may have full enjoyment
Of their privileged position,
Despite the people's poor condition.

To shape a policy less crude,
We could exempt imports of food.
But with exports banned,
That's not the way -
For they can't buy unless they pay.

We see the cruel complexity
Of ethics and morality.
Simple answers don't exist,
Despite what simple minds insist.
Eco-Ethics

Another issue that has risen to prominence in the field of international ethics concerns the obligations that nations have to the natural environment, and so we discussed issues of "stewardship", and of generational ethics. All of this produced another poem:

Here's a thought we ought to ponder:
If the planet's wealth we squander,
That would be most antithetical
To being fully eco-ethical.

Can those of us alive today,
Living in our wasteful way,
Utilize the world's resources
Responding just to market forces?
Or, for future generations
Should we limit our predations?
Is some form of rationing required,
To leave to those whom we have sired,
Sufficient stocks of oil and tress,
So they too can live at ease?

In the kingdom of the animals
Is man the rightful king?
To exercise dominion
Over every living thing?
Or do all creatures, great and small,
Have equal rights to share
The fruits of earth's resources
In the water, land, and air?

People in the LDCs
Facing hunger and disease,
Want to see their nations grow -
But cleaner growth is also slow!
With capital in short supply
They'll stay poor until they die.
Sustainable growth would seem to be
For them, a total luxury.
So, does a rich, developed nation
   Have today an obligation
   To subsidize the added price
   So LDCs grow green and nice?

We've got to think these issues through -
   It's hard to know just what to do,
   Or know if what we do is just -
That's why these things must be discussed.
Does Charity End At Home?

This pondering regarding the responsibilities of the developed countries to help poor nations grow greener led us to a more general consideration of the obligations of the industrialized democracies to the emerging nations. We summarized our discussions as follows:

If charity begins at home,
Around the world we should not roam,
   Helping other nations grow
   When our own poor are hurting so.

If we heed the LDCs
   And try to answer all their pleas
We'll spread our efforts way too thin,
   With nothing left for those within.

But with pictures on the foreign news,
Of people who are forced to choose
'Tween food or fuel each winter day -
   Well, who can simply turn away?

If this is America's hour,
   and obligation goes with power,
Be it jobs at home, or foreign growth,
   We must do our share on both.
Copyrights and Workers’ Rights

International economic obligations to countries lead to concern about such obligations to the workers around the world who produce the goods and services. Having spent 34 years working with the inter-American labor movement, I had strong opinions on this issue, which the poem for the topic reflected:

Around the world, it’s much debated
If workers’ rights are “trade-related”.
Businessmen insist they’re not –
They fear a calculated plot,
Moving in the wrong direction,
Of using right to gain - protection!

Copyrights are well-protected –
It seems free trade is not affected!
The use of sanctions is deemed healthy,
To protect those powerful and wealthy.

The workers’ movement fiercely fights
For violations of their rights
To be an “unfair trading practice” –
An issue prickly as a cactus.

Meanwhile, workers toil all day
At dangerous jobs, for meager pay.
The women often are embarrassed
When by their bosses they are harassed.

Children making costly rugs,
Living without love or hugs,
Are left without effective voice.
All work, no school – they have no choice!

So, we should support the cause
Of putting in a social clause
In every new free-trading pact,
To keep our self-respect intact.
Nukes Away!

No course on international ethics could be complete without wrestling with the moral dilemmas of nuclear deterrence, and wrestle we did, using as one of our readings the pastoral letter on this subject issued in 1983 by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Can one write a poem about the morality of nuclear deterrence? Well, one tried:

If I deter your deterrent,
And you deter mine,
With both of us bankrupt,
It sure would be fine
If we junked both deterrents
And used the money instead
To replenish the ozone,
Lest we all end up dead.

Even minimal deterrence is a status so sad,
With the fate of the planet depending on MAD,
That until the great powers dismantle each nuke,
Each Catholic bishop feels ready to puke.

The nuclear threat we cannot eviscerate
While nuclear missiles and bombs still proliferate -
On regional rivalries the nukes will still feed,
Unless the great powers will all take the lead.

The great powers promised in the NPT treaty
That for nuclear might they would not be so greedy.
"If not us, then who?" they asked themselves then.
Today they should ask: "If not now, then when?"
Tyrannical Trade-Offs

As nations emerge from repressive dictatorship or bloody war, they face the issues of whether, when, and how to punish those who committed atrocities, because how the perpetrators of past deeds are treated can affect the chances for attaining such supposed universal values as justice, peace, and democracy. We pondered these cruel choices:

"If you want peace, then work for justice" -
  Is this always true?
  Or are there cases when one faces
  A choice between the two?

  If a ruler, waging war,
  Kills civilians by the score,
  And keeps on killing many more -
  Are these crimes we can ignore?

  Or, even as we fight him,
  Should we legally indict him,
  Thus embittering relations,
  Imperiling peace negotiations?

  To move from cruel autocracy,
  To fragile new democracy,
  To preserve our nation's unity,
  Must the tyrants get impunity?

  If the tyrants have confessed,
  So truth will not remain suppressed,
  Should Truth Commissions set them free,
  So they won't block democracy?

  How much justice must we cede,
  To gain the other things we need?
  Must torturers go un-convicted,
  Despite the pain they have inflicted?

  If you're the victim, would you feel
  Society should make that deal?
  We must listen to all voices,
  As we make these fateful choices.
When Must We Become Resigned to Resigning?

Given the complexities of the moral issues with which diplomats must wrestle, inevitably there come moments when a member of a nation’s foreign service faces a crisis of conscience and must consider resigning in protest against a policy. Our poem reflected the many aspects involved in making such an agonizing decision:

What is the signal, what is the sign,
To tell us when we’ve got to resign,
To show us our nation’s committing some sin
Which we can’t, in good conscience, participate in?

Is it whenever a program we see
With which we, personally, cannot agree?
If so, we would all, of our jobs, be bereft,
And the government soon would have nobody left!

So, where is the line, beyond which we know
That duty requires us that whistle to blow,
And go public, causing our peers to recoil
And say to the “team”: we have proven disloyal.

Is it just when we’re tasked with an illegal act,
When our refusal by national law would be backed,
As soldiers receiving illegal commands
Can refuse them and not incur sharp reprimands?

On this, I think, there is no quarrel:
Some acts, though legal, are immoral.
Such sinful deeds we should eschew –
Those legal acts one just can’t do.

What rough guideline, then, can provide
Some guidance when we must decide
When to simply “do and die”
And when, ourselves, to “wonder why”?

When our nation would be shamed,
And when we, personally, would be blamed
Because we gave no warning sign,
Then, I think, we must resign.
Those who quit will all have fears
They’ve ruined their careers.
But, if they’ve done what they think right,
At least they’ve kept their honor bright.
In Britain, they receive respect –
A custom that we should perfect,
To show that it is something fine,
In moral protest, to resign.
As our course neared its end, we engaged in a bit of futurology, pondering the question: "Is the Nation-State an Anachronism?" We looked at the challenges that war, environmental degradation, and economic globalization present to the nation-state. Some of our pondering, naturally, was in poetic form:

The age since eighteen-forty-eight  
Has been that of the nation-state.
Many nations, large and small:
No common power over all.

A situation made for war,
And wars we've gotten,
By the score.
'Till Longfellow bowed his head:
"There is no peace on earth,” he said.

Today we still see war's cruel folly -
Ask any Iraqi or Somali.
Muslims, Serbs, and Croats fighting,
Each thinks some ancient wrong they're righting.

Meanwhile, arcing overhead,
The thinning ozone gives us dread
Each day more Co2 we're forming.
Aggravating global warming.
Emissions from our plants and foundries
Flow across all nations' boundaries.

And in the economic sphere,
Globalization now is here.
Trading blocs are in formation
That dwarf the might of any nation.
In pursuit of what is rational
Production has gone multinational.

What then now will be the fate
Of our old friend, the nation-state?
Don't we need a New World Order
Surpassing each out-moded border?
Is it finally now the time
For World Federalism's paradigm?
But given human power-lust
To whom would we our fate entrust?
It's no use just imagining
Some beneficent philosopher-king.

At this stage, it would be nice
To find some interim device.
Avoiding perfection's fatal lure,
And just control the symptoms,
While we await a cure.
What Is National Is Not Rational

Naturally, one cannot ponder the phenomenon of the nation-state without considering nationalism, which is clearly still a powerful force in the world, but being an emotion, is unquantifiable - clearly a topic more suited to poetry than to regression analysis:

There is no hint of rationalism
In feelings based on nationalism.
We don't know why we feel the way we do.
   A Yankee's spirits soar
   And a U.S. crowd will roar,
When they hoist our flag of red and white and blue!

   I cannot be content if I
   Cannot myself identify
   With my country, and its flag and song.
   My nation is the best -
   Much better than the rest;
   My slogan is" My country, right or wrong!"

   At each Olympic game
   I feel I, myself, win fame,
When my country's team wins silver, bronze, or gold.
   And if we win a war,
   Then one's spirits really soar,
Even if one didn't fight, 'cause one's too old!

   Now, nationalism's good
   When it works the way it should,
   And unites us all behind some proper cause.
   But, all too oft' of late,
   We see it joined with hate -
   The results make even patriots all pause.

   Inclusive nationalism builds states up,
   As in Italy and France.
Exclusive nationalism tears them down - unity has no chance.
   What Jose Marti once said,
   We see today fulfilled:
"Those who hate, destroy, and those who love, all build."
Security Purity?

Still seeking some interim method of dealing with international anarchy, we considered the obligations of nations within a system of collective security. It turned out that the basic principle of joining to oppose aggression has some complicated aspects:

Can security be made collective?
Or is the paradigm defective?
Will all nations heed the call
That attacking one is attacking all?
Or will the realist obsession
Lead some to profit from aggression?

And even if ways can be found
To assure all nations rally round,
*How much* must every nation do
To see collective action through?
How much money must it spend?
How many lives will have to end?
How great a burden must we bear
To say to all: "We did our share"?

*How far* must collective action go
To deal with the aggressive foe?
Just repel his armed attack?
Or must we push his forces back
Until we reach the goal supreme
Of toppling his accursed regime?

Thus, uncertainties appear -
What to do is far from clear.
"All for one, and one for all"
Sounded like a clarion call.
But putting doctrine into action
Doesn't give much satisfaction.
The statesman has no place to hide -
For he's the one who must decide.
Awful Allies

Even when an all-inclusive collective security alliance system is not feasible, some countries jointly fearing an expansionist nation can form a less-comprehensive defensive alliance. However, to assemble a “coalition of the willing” powerful enough to prevail may require joining with some evil regimes. Can responsible, democratic nations morally do this? Perhaps a poem can shed some light on the intricacies of this moral dilemma:

In power politics, it’s a jungle.  
If your policy you bungle,  
By thinking you can pick and choose  
Among allies, then you’ll lose –  
You’ve got to ally with them all,  
Or to your enemy you will fall.

That’s what realists all say.  
Idealists want another way:  
Be choosy? They say that you should:  
Allying only with the good,  
And put your military bases  
All in democratic places.

The local tyrant may have agreed  
To give you an air base that you need  
Or provide you with some “humint” sources  
Only if you aid his forces.  
With local democrats in prison,  
You’ve lost your democratic vision!

When you have an ally awful  
Who does things that are not lawful,  
Should you denounce his evil deeds?  
That may not fill your country’s needs -  
If his reaction is defiance,  
You may weaken your alliance.

But, if you choose to remain silent,  
So he won’t become defiant,  
Your commitment to democracy  
May be viewed as just hypocrisy.  
Your reputation may go sour,  
Costing you all of your soft power!
Lest you be so disadvantaged,
This dilemma must be managed.
“Disassociation” is one way –
From the ruler of the day.
You are allied with the state,
Not the tyrant that you hate.

You *deal* with him because he’s there.
You don’t *support* him or his heir.
You may choose not to criticize
But you need not him idealize
It’s enough to simply not offend -
He’s your ally, not your friend!
Our final topic involved speculating as to what that eventual cure for the present international anarchy might be. What force might serve in the future world order as a "common power over all"? We considered various candidates, as indicated in the resultant poem:

"A common power over all" -  
For that Thomas Hobbes did call,  
Lest, in a state of nature, life  
Be filled with conflict, blood, and strife.

The world in anarchy remains -  
Each state its sovereignty retains.  
When those states cannot agree,  
There is no high authority,  
Monopolizing use of force -  
So, the conflict runs its course.

Today, some states have nuclear arms -  
A fact that each of us alarms.  
The next war may well be the last,  
With life, a thing just of the past.

To prevent a lifeless earth,  
It is time now to give birth  
To some global institution  
To do conflict resolution.

Perhaps we need in every region  
Some kind of U.N. "Foreign Legion",  
To intervene and impose peace,  
As Verona's proud police  
Did snuff out hatred's burning fuse,  
'Tween Capulets and Montagues.

Or, perhaps, a concert's what we need -  
The major powers then could lead  
An effort to impose world peace,  
So wars and ethnic cleansing cease.
With great-power co-dominion
Implementing world opinion,
We could build a new world order -
No army crossing any border.

Ethnic feuds we'll arbitrate,
And trade wars we will mediate.
All nations in their sovereign boxes -
With the hen-house ruled by foxes.

Thus ended the semester, our course on International Ethics, and my career as a poet. In future courses it would be nice to shun this rhyme-creating vice. Being forced each week to write a verse is a problem much, much worse, than potentially to be a poet, and mercifully not to know it.
Where The Pen Meets The Sword: The Role Of Poetry In The Study Of International Affairs

ASHLEY RHOADES

Teaching in a field of the risk averse, Professor William A. Douglas stunned students when he dared to risk a verse. The practice of using poetry in his international ethics classes began in 1991, when a pair of rhyming monikers that appeared in an article in the Georgetown Journal of International Affairs inspired Douglas to pen a poem on the subject. In an interview with the Georgetown Security Studies Review, Douglas told the story of how poetry came to play a vital role in his courses. “Way back when I started teaching this course for the first time in the Georgetown Liberal Studies Program, we had a reading from the Journal of International Affairs from one of their regular contributors, and he was upset with the Realist school of foreign policy for their take on moral philosophy,” he said. “He thought that some people in this school had gone way too far, that they had gone off the deep end in saying that there are no moral issues in international relations: you just do whatever you get away with. He characterized this departure from Wilsonian Idealism as ‘Nihilistic Realism,’ and I was struck by how the two phrases rhymed. So I wrote my first little poem about Realism vs. Idealism.”

Upon reading this inaugural poem to students in his class at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Douglas was met with “stony silence.” Thinking that this response marked the end of his excursion into international ethics poetry, Douglas was taken aback when the following week his students asked for another poem. “I was pleasantly surprised,” he said, “when at the end of class the next week they asked, ‘Well, are we going to have a poem?’ I obliged, and the rest is history.”

And so it was that week after week, course after course, Douglas built up an extensive collection of poems that grapple with the application of ethics in everything from Just War Theory to targeted drone strikes. While these poems may seem out of place in a graduate course on international ethics and security, Douglas believes that they are valuable in that they allow students to conceptualize the issues at hand from a different perspective. Indeed, the process of writing these poems has influenced the way Douglas himself thinks about the topics he teaches. “Once I got started writing a poem on every topic on the syllabus, I wanted each poem to highlight the moral dilemmas involved in the given subject, and that made me focus more precisely than my lecture notes had done,” he explained. “You can wander around in lectures, but the medium of poetry prompted me to organize my thoughts about those dilemmas a bit more precisely by boiling them down into a short poem.”

At 80 years old, Douglas is brimming with fascinating life experiences that have shaped the way he thinks about international affairs and ethics and, in turn, the way he crafts his poems. He credits his experiences abroad with having a particularly strong influence on his poetry, saying, “My wife and I often said that the formative experience of our life was the three years we
lived in Korea because it was such a different culture. We lived in Korea from 1960-1963 when it was one of the poorest countries in the world. There were no stores or stalls on the streets, the streets were not paved, a monsoon had made big ruts in the street that the water rushed down, and yet it was a great experience. Our outlook on international affairs and my outlook when teaching about them were very much influenced first by the experience in Korea, and then by the three years we spent in Peru. Peru was not as different from American culture and society as Korea had been. Korea was a really exceptional experience. In those days it was very traditional, but it’s totally changed now. These overseas experiences formed my whole way of thinking about international affairs, not from taking courses about it so much as living it."

As the field of international security and ethics continues to expand, Douglas finds himself adding poems on new topics every so often to keep his collection updated and relevant. “Every year or at least every two years, I have to add some new topics to the syllabus because new stuff keeps happening. And then, of course, I have to write a new poem,” he said. However, Douglas has found that some topics lend themselves better to poetry than others. For instance, Douglas struggled to write a poem on the ever-changing dilemmas in the realm of cybersecurity. “The only new topic on which I have not yet been able to write a poem is cyber warfare. All I have is a little haiku because it just doesn’t sing as a subject,” he said. “Also, this is a brand new topic and a very perplexing one, not only to me, but also to those in the field who study and write about it. It’s a puzzle that we haven’t gotten our mind around yet.”

When selecting topics to add to the roster, Douglas incorporates issues that the students are interested in, and discussions from his past classes often direct his future writings. The reception his poems are met with today is a far cry from the silence his first poem received, with students since expressing their allegiance to and fondness of the poetry. In the evaluation Douglas distributes to his students halfway through his course, he asks students whether they think the poems should continue, or if they feel that poetry is out of place in a selective graduate program. “And they all say ‘Keep the poems!,’ so that settles that,” Douglas said. In fact, students have so embraced the poetry that they have even integrated it into their papers, sometimes citing excerpts from his poems. “If there’s something in a poem that’s applicable to the topic on which they’re writing their paper, every once in a while they quote me to myself… which I like, of course,” Douglas joked. “But the good aspect of the poetry,” he continued, “is that it helps you parse out and focus on the most important issues, and the fact that it’s in rhyme somehow brings out the emotional aspect instead of just being a flat statement of certain positions.”

To that end, all of Douglas’s poems rhyme, for he believes that rhyme and meter are quintessential to a poem’s impact. As such, Douglas was surprised to learn that he is actually in the minority of poets who still employ rhyme. Describing how he made this discovery, Douglas said, “A couple of years ago, I stumbled upon an Annapolis Poet’s Club that meets every Friday night down at Barnes & Nobles coffee shop. One night I went down there and took a couple of my poems with me. The idea was that people would read the poems they’d been working on and get feedback from the rest of the group. So I read one of my poems, and it was followed by this dumbfounded silence. Finally, the president of the club said, ‘Well, Bill, poems these days don’t rhyme.’” Douglas’s retort? “Well, it worked for Longfellow.”
Clearly, there is both rhyme and reason to Douglas’s decision to read his poems aloud during each class rather than simply distributing them in print. “To be most effective, poems have to be recited,” he stated. “After all, they have meter, rhythm, and—in my case—rhyme. In Russia, for instance, poetry recitals are a big deal and still very much a part of their culture. Just reading the poem to yourself is not thought to really be getting it; you have to hear it being read aloud. That’s why I don’t think much of blank verse: it’s missing that whole emotional dimension that the rhyming and meter put into the topic.”

Given his quick wit and penchant for penned verse, it is unsurprising that this series of international ethics poems was not Douglas’s first foray into the literary arts. In fact, he has been writing rhymed verse since he was a teenager, though his subjects then did not delve into international ethics. “I’ve been writing a musical comedy for the last 63 years,” he shared. “I started writing songs with rhyming lyrics in my head when I was a senior in high school, and by the time I reached middle-age, I had enough songs that I started thinking about putting them together and writing a musical comedy; I just didn’t know what it would be about. And then about 45 years ago, my wife and I moved to Annapolis, Maryland, and I thought that some of my songs could fit into a musical comedy set there. So I began imagining how I could put the songs I’d written together so that there could be some continuity, and it occurred to me that one of the most interesting things about Annapolis is the rivalry between St. John’s College and the US Naval Academy. They are literally right across the street from each other, and have a serious rivalry.” How serious? “Well, every once in a while, I will see an interview in the local paper where someone will ask a female midshipman from the Naval Academy what she thinks about the men at St. John’s, and she’ll say, ‘They’re fine from the neck up!’” Douglas has completed his musical comedy about this rivalry between USNA and St. John’s, and it is on the roster of plays being considered for production next year by the King William’s players, the student theater group at St. John’s College.

In addition to the musical comedy and his anthology of international ethics poems, Douglas has also written a set of poems on international development for the SAIS Student Journal, as well as an array of personal poems for friends and family throughout the years. He draws inspiration from Robert Frost, Robert Service, and Ogden Nash for his personal poetry, which he illustrated in an amusing anecdote about a poetry contest he entered in Vermont. “I was cross country skiing with my son in Northern Vermont, and we stopped at a little town. The scene was like something out of a Robert Frost poem, complete with snow and a potbellied stove. I picked up a local paper and saw an advertisement for a statewide poetry contest to see who could write the best poem in the style of Robert Service. I thought to myself, ‘Now there’s a challenge.’ The deadline was two days away, so I got busy writing my poem. My poem was about getting lost while cross country skiing and encountering a moose, who ended up leading me back to the ski lodge. I was pretty pleased with the poem, but when I asked one of my students in the Georgetown program—who was from Vermont—whether he thought I could win, he said, ‘Of course not, Professor, someone from Vermont is going to win!’ And he was right. But it was still a great experience.”

Looking to the future, Douglas points to environmental issues as the next frontier for his course, and, by extension, his poetry. At the moment, he only has one week on the environment in his course, but he is considering adding a second week due to a widespread renewed interest in
the climate change debate on geo-engineering. “I think the topic of geo-engineering is becoming so much under discussion and is so important that I may give two weeks to the environment—one week on what’s happening and a speculative second week in which we discuss whether we should test out some of the potential solutions to these environmental problems we keep talking about,” he said.

This shift to looking at natural disasters and forces as threats to international security would mesh well with Douglas’s goal of using his poetry to galvanize students into thinking about ethics and security in a new light. He suggests that many “unarmed problems,” like climate change, are even more pressing than the more “traditional” threats like nuclear proliferation, and that students and future leaders should therefore retool their approaches to ensuring security. For instance, Douglas points out that an epidemic anywhere is a threat to everyone because of globalization. “We’re spending 20 billion dollars every year maintaining our strategic triad of nuclear delivery systems, with the goal of deterring everyone else’s. But we’re not doing a cost-benefit analysis as to which things will provide the most security per dollar spent,” Douglas stated. “During the Ebola epidemic, things got so bad because the public health systems in the affected countries is so primitive that they couldn’t deal with it, so the virus got loose and arrived in the United States, and there was a big panic that it would spread here. Suppose we’d taken 10 million of our 20 billion dollars of nuclear spending and tried to beef up the public health system in those countries. That would have contributed more to overall security than one more missile,” he suggests. “One less fighter plane could have improved the public health system in Sierra Leone enough to stop an epidemic.”

So, as we in the Security Studies Program continue in our quest to protect a world plagued by uncertainty and insecurity, let us draw inspiration from one man’s pursuit of poetic justice, and remember—a rhyme a day just might keep disaster at bay.

Ashley Rhoades graduated from Stanford University in 2012 with a B.A. Honors in Political Science (with concentrations in International Relations and American Politics), and a minor in Art History. Ashley spent two terms of her undergraduate career studying at Oxford University, where she cultivated her interest and background in International Security issues. After working as a Litigation Paralegal in Washington, D.C. for a year and a half, Ashley returned to graduate school to pursue her M.A. in Security Studies at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service. In addition to her academics, Ashley works as a Media Associate for Best Delegate, a New York Times-featured start-up that specializes in Model United Nations education, media, and consulting. She is an avid fan of the literary and creative arts, and greatly enjoys writing for the Georgetown Security Studies Review.