

Asking the Right Questions

SAIS Europe Commencement

May, 2014

If I were given to wearing a hat, this would be the point at which I would change it as I move from the role of master of ceremonies to the role of commencement speaker. Obviously it's a bit unusual for one person to fill both those roles and I'm tempted to present it as a virtuous effort on our part to save money and keep tuition down, but that would be a stretch. However, it does spare you a fulsome and drawn-out introduction. What you see is what you get.

The truth, of course, as most of you know, is that this isn't only a rite of passage for all of you, but a rite of passage for me as well. You're moving on; I'm moving over. You are finishing a year in Bologna; I am finishing 50 years of teaching, and I have to say it's been a terrific and satisfying way to spend my adult life, and especially so in this eight year run I've had as Director of the Bologna Center.

So how best to mark the occasion? The general guidelines for commencement speakers are to be wise, funny and brief. The fallback position is to choose any two—as long as one of them is brief. Well, at least sort of brief—which isn't all that easy in this case because I want to talk about SAIS—its role in your world, its role in the wider world, and how it goes about “doing its thing”.

Where to begin? I've spent a long time wandering through the world of higher education, starting with what I clearly remember as the exhilarating revelations that come with an undergraduate degree in liberal

arts, moving on to very traditional chemical engineering training, plunging ahead with graduate study that allowed me to be part of the creation of a totally new field—biomedical engineering—and then to a career of teaching, research, and, ultimately, university administration, that brought all of those strands together. And, of course, moved me inexorably toward the world of international studies. That last part would take some lengthy explaining, so we'll have to skip it today.

But there is a story to be told—or at least a commentary— some observations on what goes on in universities and what we hope goes on in SAIS, comments that I hope fit with the swan song that this is for me, and the mid-point it is for you, at least in terms of this particular school experience. I think, I postulate, if you want, that the work of scholarship, the work of learning, the work of preparing for a career—in other words, what we hope universities do—can be summed up in a phrase: that is, we strive to ask the right questions. And what I mean by that is what the rest of this talk is about.

Some of you may remember an anecdote I told earlier this year—or I think I did (I am put in mind of the comment that someone "...has reached an age where the things he remembers best never happened."). The anecdote was about one of our sons playing with friends on a hot summer day in Minnesota. One of the kids in the group was wearing mittens. An adult (read wise older person) passed by, noticed the kid, and asked, "What's the matter little boy? Are your hands cold?" To which one of the other kids responded, "His hands aren't cold; he's wearing mittens!" The lesson, of course: it matters how you frame questions because they almost always contain assumptions and presumptions of

common understanding of the facts. In our field, not only are the facts at issue, but so too the values—the meaning, the importance, the implications of terms like “progress”, “freedom”, “culture”; the appropriate goals of society and the rights of states, what we believe are the motivations of individuals. What are the things we seek to optimize? What are the reasonable costs to absorb in doing so?

It all plays into framing questions. In fact, one way of viewing academic disciplines is that they merely represent different ways of doing that. But there is only one reality, and in that respect, the disciplines are merely different lenses, different facets, different ways of querying the same set of facts, the same range of values; the same world. That’s why we place so much stress in SAIS on our multidisciplinary commitment.

There is more to the story. We like to think of scholarship as a search for answers. No easy task, but one of the important early lessons in research is that getting the answers is actually easier than framing the questions. For example, there is the question of scale, of ambition, if you want. If your question is “What is the meaning of life?” it is clearly of interest and importance, but don’t hold your breath about getting an answer in your lifetime. On the other hand, choosing a question that can be easily answered is hardly a better alternative if question and answer are trivial. In that sense, we strive—or we should strive—to frame questions of broad enough scope that their answers will be useful and significant, but not so broad that you’ll never get to the answer. That’s the sweet spot; that’s the goal.

There's another facet to the question-framing challenge. SAIS is, in an important respect, a professional school that aims to provide its students a practical preparation for careers in international affairs. But what does that mean with respect to what we teach, with respect to what questions we ask in our classes? What do our students, what do you need to know? It's a question that all schools of international affairs confront. A couple of years ago, a thoughtful commentator, Robert Gallucci, the President of the MacArthur Foundation, wrote an interesting piece on the subject, strongly supporting the multi-disciplinary approach we enthusiastically support, the important role of economics, and the need for a global perspective, which is also a key strength of SAIS. But he added a comment that struck me as needing a closer look. He said that if we wanted to learn what our students needed to know, we should ask the practitioners, the people now doing international affairs in government, the private sector, and the world of NGOs.

It reminded me of the history of the discipline I started out in: chemical engineering. Chemical engineering had arisen as a field to serve the chemical and petroleum industries. Its courses, the courses I took as an undergraduate, dealt with how to design oil pipelines, distillation columns, extrusion machines, huge chemical reaction kettles with paddle stirrers six feet high, oil refineries, and the like. We even had a laboratory on crushing and grinding. All of that because that's what the practitioners said you needed to know. And it was useful, and, by the way, it still has some interest. In fact, if you get the chance you ought to visit the Barilla factory in Parma and see the pasta extrusion machinery. Great stuff.

But it was a formula for stagnation. And then in the 1950's and 1960's, everything changed in engineering education. Instead of asking questions guided by the applications to which their knowledge was put at the time, engineers began to frame research, organize education, pose questions in terms of the fundamental disciplines and the larger conceptual frameworks that underlay the applications. Instead of oil pipelines, there was fluid mechanics; instead of distillation, there was heat and mass transfer; instead of reactor design, there was thermodynamics and catalysis. Out of these reconceptualizations came the new technologies that people hear about today: secondary and tertiary oil and gas recovery processes; new materials and the development of the field of nanotechnology; the production of biomass fuels; the development of computer chips and software strategies; synthetic substitutes for many natural materials in short supply.

And also, significantly, chemical engineers suddenly found that when they posed their questions in these new ways, they could provide important insights in fields other than the chemical and petroleum industries. They could deal with medical care, with the environment, with clean energy alternatives.

How, then, does that relate to the challenge of graduate education in international relations? Is there a similar danger that education aimed at dealing with problems as they are, or as we view them, today may be less than optimal in preparing students to deal with change, in fact, to promote change? Personally, I think so.

Next year the Bologna Center will celebrate its 60th anniversary. We opened our doors in 1955 in a world that was very different from the one in which we now live. It was only eight years after George Kennan's famous X article was published in Foreign Affairs, proposing the strategy of containment in a bipolar world. And, of course, that became the defining, the existential description of world affairs in the Cold War. It framed essentially every question we raised in connection with international affairs, every assumption, every presumption about our common goals. And it certainly affected what we taught. Let me share with you a sample of the courses offered in our first year:

- Soviet law
- Public Opinion and Propaganda
- Political Parties in Italy (also France, Germany, Austria)
- Labor organizations
- The Dynamics of U.S. Economic Policies in Europe
- Governmental Structures for the Conduct of Foreign Affairs

By the 1963-1964 academic year, we had added a compulsory seminar series on The Atlantic Community and European Integration, a course on Contemporary Eastern Europe: The Satellite States, and another on Monopoly Control in the U.S.

What comes through in these titles is the nature of the underlying questions: they were descriptive rather than analytical, narrowly focused rather than broad, clearly oriented to the ideas of the totally dominant role of nation states and the formal institutions of government, clearly

based on and even reinforcing the assumption of the bi-polar world that followed WWII. The accepted, if unwritten goals that underlay the questions we were asking then were pretty clear:

- Strengthen the trans-Atlantic relationship
- Combat (at least with words) communism
- Engage the youth of Europe and Italy
- Spread American values

What has changed since then? Well, essentially everything, of course starting with the disappearance of the Cold War. But so much more. For a while we thought we had moved to a uni-polar world, a world with one super-power. In the 90s, we talked about an “empire of the willing.” The limitations of those concepts quickly became obvious. We tried to conceive of a multi-polar world, but it quickly became apparent that that was too simplistic a framing concept, too state-centered. We saw the emergence of non-State actors and new kinds of ethnic conflict; the rise of Asia as a region of economic power; the development of information technology and a consequent shift of power from governments to non-government organizations (how quaint the term propaganda seems today), but also the economic instabilities which were one unintended consequence of the new IT tools that became available; we witnessed (and are still witnessing) the change in the nature of warfare that information technology has brought, with new vulnerabilities, the obsolescence of the traditional battlefield, the overlapping of civilian and military targets and, as a consequence, the need to impose restrictions on civil society in the interest of security; the emergence of new ethical questions concerning the altering of life forms through genetic

modification; and, of course, the linkages and coupled concerns of energy, environment, and natural resources.

Very little that we studied and taught in 1955, very few of the questions we asked, would have prepared us for these new challenges, for today's challenges. That's a humbling statement, but an important reminder that addressing today's problems does not necessarily prepare leaders to deal with tomorrow's problems. And therefore there is always a need, a continuing need, to identify robust organizing themes, question-framing approaches, analytical frameworks, that will identify which underlying elements in today's problems will always be relevant, although perhaps not in the same forms.

Of course, in the time since the Bologna Center opened its doors there have been many attempts by scholars to identify those kinds of rich organizing themes. Frank Fukuyama's 1992 monograph on The End of History and the Last Man and Samuel Huntington's 1993 essay, The Clash of Civilizations, are two particularly ambitious and rich examples. The first organized questions around the issue of competing political structural paradigms; the second around ethnic and national identities. They were rich not because they were right, but because they generated dialogue. They invited ways of explaining the present, but they also strove to place the present in the stream of history from past to future. They are two examples of what I think of as narratives, ways of telling stories that move beyond a description of the facts. They create a world view that then informs the questions they ask. They can be enlightening contexts, but they can also be distorting visions, forcing the answers as well as framing the questions. Because, as the saying goes, when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

The biological sciences from molecular biology to ecology are particularly rich with narratives, ranging from when life begins to what constitutes a “natural system” or organ or, for that matter, what is an organism. For example, the Gaia hypothesis, a rather extreme ecological model, suggests that the earth and everything that is part of it is actually only one big organism, a bit lumbering, but exquisitely interdependent. Interestingly, another popular view, put forward a couple of decades ago by Lewis Thomas, suggested that the only fundamental life form is a single cell and when we go out of the house, it is the joint enterprise of our millions of cells deciding to take us for a walk rather than the other way around. Of course, some narratives are a bit less extreme and, at the same time, are more likely to be exported from one field to another—and, in particular, toward our own field of international relations. In recent years, the shift in science from deterministic conceptions to probabilistic conceptions, from a belief in ultimately singular, if not simple, explanations of physical phenomena to a world characterized by complexity, by strong linkages among the multiple parts of a system, has promoted a systems perspective in the social sciences as well and an emphasis on framing questions in those terms. As E.B. White put it plaintively, “There’s no limit to how complicated things can get, on account of one thing always leading to another.”

How does all of this affect SAIS and how does it affect you? Well, for SAIS, or at least for those of us who teach at SAIS, there is the constant need to find better questions, more robust questions, questions to guide thinking about where the world is going as well as where it’s been, or where it is—and, importantly, what that implies about the analytical frameworks, the kinds of tools that hold most promise of helping us to shape the future. Out of those efforts are born new courses like Professor

Jones' Risk in International Political Economy, or Professor Gilbert's Intellectuals and Politics, or Professor Harper's debate course, or even my efforts in Science, Technology and International Affairs. Out of that drive come experiments like Professor Cohen's tour de force lecture series on Shakespeare and War.

There is a debate currently going on within SAIS on the role of the core courses and a number of you have been involved in that discussion. The conventional wisdom has been that the courses are intended to expose students to material that it is absolutely vital for all students of international affairs to know. Wisdom hasn't quite come to grips with the fact that we expect students to take two of those four courses, which seems to suggest that we would like to ensure that students leave SAIS knowing about half of what it is absolutely vital for them to know. But, putting that aside, the question has been reframed this year to focus on whether the core courses are intended to ensure that everyone entering graduate school in international affairs has some common knowledge base, or whether they are intended to introduce new ways of thinking and, in that respect, to provide a deeper foundation in certain aspects of international affairs that students can build on in their individual programs of study. Perhaps it's a question that will find an answer—or at least a consensus—next year when you're in Washington.

Or perhaps there won't be an answer. But you can implement your own take on that in the choices you make. The “take-home” lesson in these remarks is that the most practical education is the one that prepares you for tomorrow rather than today, and that comes from understanding the deep structures that govern the political, social, economic and cultural lives of people individually and collectively. Most of you have another

year to spend at SAIS. Let me urge you to make it a truly satisfying year by choosing the courses that ask the most fundamental questions. Let me urge you to make it a truly practical year, again by choosing the courses that appear to ask the most fundamental questions; the most open-ended questions. Because it's probably a good bet that your guess today about where you'll be five years from now will be wrong. So it's wise to make sure, as you take that trip, that you have in hand the equivalent of a raincoat and sunscreen and maybe some extra batteries—by which I mean, a sense of how to ask the right questions.

Two more bits of advice and I'm finished: goals are important, but experiences perhaps more so. We've enclosed with your program Constantine Cavafy's magnificent expansion on that theme, my gift to all of you. And in keeping with the occasion and my confidence that you will do us proud in the future, I offer a line from Robert Browning, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" Good luck to all of you.