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Surprise in World Politics

by Glenn P. Hastedt, James Madison University

As everyone who has taught a course on international politics can readily attest, there are few events which evoke as strong a reaction from students as does a major surprise. Surprise leaves a deep imprint upon the student, generating two simultaneous reactions which push the student in opposite directions. On the one hand, the student is impressed by the range of what can be accomplished by a skillfully undertaken course of action. At least for the moment, world politics no longer appears to him or her as an arena beset by problems totally without solutions. The strongly held desire of most students to believe that insight and vision can solve problems is reaffirmed.

Surprise also produced a second reaction. Depending upon whether the event is perceived favorably or not, student reaction ranges from moral outrage, to puzzlement, to disbelief or exhilaration. If the event is perceived negatively, the reaction is one of why could it have not been prevented? Could it happen to us? If the event is perceived positively, the question becomes why did it take so long? Could we do it too? These "how could it happen" questions inevitably lead to the "could it happen again" question. With these questions, the student is once again forced to confront the irrationalities of world politics, and the extent to which policy makers are not in control of events.

Surprise also provides the instructor of international relations courses with a simultaneous opportunity and challenge. The heightened interest that surprise produces among students offers the instructor a receptive audience, one willing to listen and looking for answers. It also challenges the instructor to provide students with the necessary conceptual tools to understand surprise in world politics. This is not an easy task. For while surprise — or at least its potential — is a common theme in international relations writings, few specialize in the subject. The result is that many instructors find themselves discussing a phenomenon in which they have had no formal training.

The purpose of this essay is to try and meet the needs of both the student and the instructor in coming to grips with surprise in world politics. The conceptual material will be presented in the form of a course outline or module on surprise. A brief bibliography will follow each section of the discussion containing sources which are useful as either lecture background material or as reading assignments.

Case Studies

A prerequisite for understanding the dynamics of surprise in world politics is to be aware of cases where surprise has been attempted. Pearl Harbor. The Cuban Missile Crisis. Iran. Operation BARBAROSSA. The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. The Six Day War. Sputnik. Nixon's trip to China. Sadat's trip to Jerusalem. The lack of a historical perspective on the part of most students virtually necessitates that any discussion of surprise begin with the presentation of case study material.

The premature imposition of a theoretical perspective(s) on the topic runs the risk of bewildering the student with terminology and models. It threatens to choke off student interest in the topic, transforming it from a phenomenon which aroused interest into yet another topic political scientists seem to speculate about endlessly without providing any concrete answers. The student comes to the course looking for information and that is what must be provided. The selection of case studies and the manner of their presentation, however, is important. For while the student seeks "facts," case studies must do more than just provide an historical narrative. They must lay the foundation on which the

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Teaching Through Informal Debate

by William C. Spracher
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In the Summer 1982 issue of *NEWS,* W. Rick Johnson in an article entitled "Some Strategies for Teaching Students Critical Thinking" delved into a subject which has often bedeviled those of us who have ever taught political science to undergraduates. Like Johnson, I found that the basic exam/term paper format is inadequate and needs to be expanded upon to excite the average student about politics and get him thinking critically and independently.

Between 1979 and 1982, I taught five semesters of a core course in politics and government to second-year cadets at the United States Military Academy (USMA), four of which were for regular course students and one at a more advanced level. The other semester I taught an elective in comparative political systems and an evening colloquium series on intelligence and public policy. At that institution I found I needed to search for an even more effective tool to spark student interest due to a couple of institutional constraints not faced by instructors at civilian colleges. First of all, only recently has West Point begun to institute a major's program. Historically, all cadets graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree unspecified as to a major's area, and the curriculum has always tended to lean more heavily in the direction of mathematics, physical sciences, and engineering than toward the humanities and social sciences. The government course is required for all cadets, whether concentrating in the social sciences or not. Consequently, an instructor is faced with a mix of students, a few genuinely interested in, and excited about, politics but the majority wondering why future lieutenants need to learn about such subjects.

This syndrome relates to the second constraint, which is basically a societal mindset that produces an opinion widely held by a large seg-

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