



INTELLIGENCE AND THE TRANSITION FROM WAR TO PEACE CONFERENCE

Filling a blind spot

Cross-disciplinary studies at JMU lead one student to a career melding religious studies and counterterrorism efforts

BY JAN GILLIS ('07)

College changes you. Just ask James Prince ('14) who came to JMU imagining he would get a religion degree and then go on to graduate school for Biblical Studies.

When he took the JMU class Apocalypticism, Religious Terrorism and Peace with professor of religion Frances Flannery it prompted him in a new direction. Flannery teaches in the areas of Hebrew Bible, Judaism and religious terrorism. She is also director of the Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Terrorism and Peace. "Dr. Flannery deeply influenced my academic career. Her commitment to her students' education and her immense interest in foreign affairs and religious terrorism really ignited my passion for this field," Prince says.

He has since added a political science minor to complement his interdisciplinary religion major, enrolled in Arabic courses, and has immersed himself in the study of counterterrorism and international affairs.

A chance to make a difference

Prince's desire is to work in "some research capacity that will make the world a more peaceful place — having a chance to solve a critical problem in our global society."

He says, "Religion and national security intelligence may seem unrelated, but there's a real need to put them to work together. There is a big blind spot in intelligence, and in public policy in general, because most analysts have backgrounds in intelligence analysis, in political science or in international affairs. They typically don't have a background in specialized religious education that helps them view intelligence from the religious and cultural standpoint of any given area," he says. "Unfortunately, many terrorist organizations have religiously motivated goals. There's a great need to take into serious account religious motivations when analyzing intelligence and evaluating terrorist organizations' agendas."

Was there an intelligence weakness? Perhaps. We often do not have a good understanding of the current cultural, social and political environments of nations in which we operate. Personally, I believe it will never be possible for the intelligence community to handle this task by itself. The best hope is a better integration of our intelligence analysts, and even our collection methods, with universities and think tanks. [Within] the United States academic community... every culture and every language is understood along with the history, politics and diplomatic challenges of every nation. There is so much more expertise collectively in these institutions than the intelligence community could ever afford. ...Some of that has begun with programs that you have here at James Madison University. This conference can help lead the way to further cooperation.

JAN LODAL, principal deputy under secretary of defense for policy, Clinton administration

Prince was one of the JMU students who analyzed the declassified CIA documents. He produced a new analytical schema for understanding the origins of genocides, which he presented in poster-format at the conference. "My hope is that the declassification of these documents can shine a light into the current Syrian conflict and that the lessons learned can somehow help find a peaceful path forward."

Prince has put his cross-disciplinary training to work in another way, founding the Religion and Intelligence Club at JMU. "Our focus is not to debate about individual faiths, but rather to discuss how religion can play a significant role in the world theater when it comes to terrorists and their motivations. Oftentimes, radical religious theology can be the catalyst for terrorists to push the envelope and do the unthinkable."

What's his ultimate goal in combining his interests in religion and counterterrorism? "[Being] in the best position to hopefully make a positive impact for peace in this world." ■



James Prince ('14) discusses his research with Frances Flannery, JMU professor and director of the Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Terrorism and Peace.