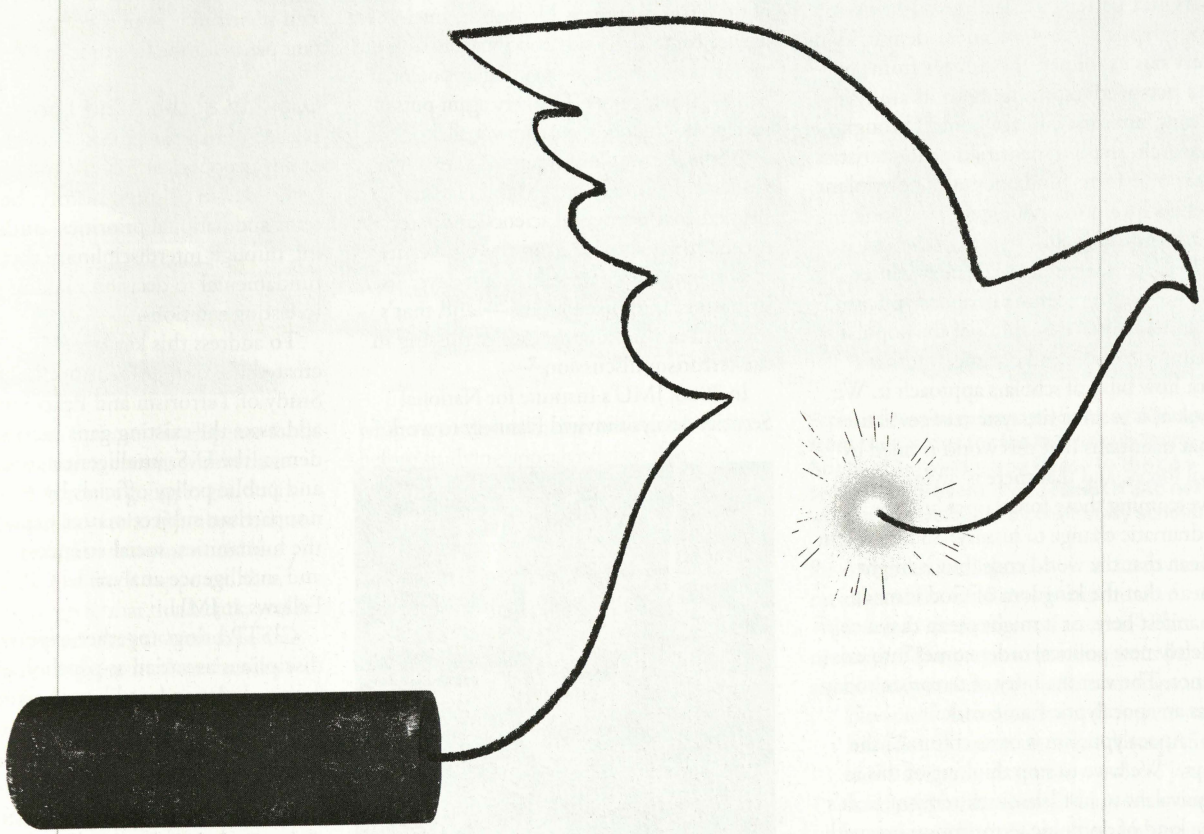

Rethinking international terrorism

How JMU is creating a new model for dialogue

BY MARTHA BELL GRAHAM

If differences of opinion have an upside, Frances Flannery knows what it is. She puts it succinctly: "The diversity of our opinions is our strength." Bringing together an unlikely group of experts from widely diverse points of view can lead to innovative solutions to big things.

Like world peace.

Flannery is building a foundation for peace with such paradoxical thinking through research, academic classes and her brainchild, the Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Terrorism and Peace.

The center, chartered at JMU in 2013, engages academia with the wider world to deepen the understanding of the root causes of terrorism and to promote an exchange of knowledge that informs sound long-term international policymaking.

ILLUSTRATION BY EDEL RODRIGUEZ

An entire system of revelation

Flannery, a professor of religion and the 2012–13 Carl Harter Distinguished Teacher Award winner for the College of Arts and Letters, is a leading authority on apocalyptic history. As an academic, Flannery has examined the subject from myriad perspectives, bringing to its study a strong interdisciplinary bent. Through her research, she has identified characteristics that transform fundamentally nonviolent beliefs into group violence. Her book, *Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism,* is scheduled for publication next winter.

"When people think of apocalypticism," Flannery says, "they think of the popular definition of the end of time, but that's not how biblical scholars approach it. We look at it as an entire system of revelation that maintains that this world is ruled by evil forces, and that there is divine help in overcoming those forces once and for all in a dramatic change to history. So that might mean that the world ends, but it might mean that the kingdom of God is made manifest here, or it might mean that a completely new political order comes into existence. The vast majority of terrorism today has an apocalyptic framework."

"Apocalypticism is cross cultural," she says. "We have to stop thinking of this as equivalent to just Islamic extremism. ... It's the kind of domestic terrorism we saw with Oklahoma City. It is the kind of group that I believe was misunderstood at Waco, Texas. It includes the FBI's No. 1 domestic terror group, the Earth Liberation Front. ... It cuts across Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and across ideological stances such as abortion clinic bombers, animal rights activists, climate change. It's a worldview that is not necessarily violent, but that can become violent under certain circumstances."

Through her class, Apocalypticism, Religious Terrorism and Peace, Flannery takes students back to the Greco-Roman period of Judaism and Christianity to help them understand the implications of modern day apocalypticism. "When we get to the point in the course when we finally connect the apocalyptic roots to contemporary terrorist groups, I will honestly say I think their minds are blown," she says.

As helpful as this approach is, Flannery says that apocalypticism is just one of many parts of the terrorism puzzle. Neither the intelligence community nor policymakers have the resources or know-how to bring all potential perspectives together. Flannery again puts it succinctly: "Nobody can know it all."

While she was an undergraduate at the College of William and Mary, Flannery studied environmental science and later earned her doctorate from the University of Iowa in religion, a subject she says, "is, by nature, interdisciplinary — and that's the kind of thinking that we're missing in the terrorism discussion."

In 2008, JMU's Institute for National Security Analysis invited Flannery to work on a manual to present to an agency and to invite intelligence analysis students into her classes. "From that moment on," she says, "it just took off. I kept hearing, 'We need you to come. We need to know what you know. We need more advice from academics — but not necessarily from the few public intellectuals that are out there from political science, international relations, the same people, and not necessarily from the beltway think tanks."

Frances Flannery invited several student researchers from her center to the "War to Peace" conference. The professor presented research about developing a new social memory of the Bosnian genocide.

As her research garnered wider exposure through conferences, interest grew. "Top analysts and intelligence educators were telling me, 'Please share your work with us. ... You've helped me put together some important pieces for the first time in 10 years.'"

Looking at the blind spots

Because terrorism's roots — or those of any geopolitical crisis — are deeply embedded in cultures, history, belief systems and national priorities, understanding through interdisciplinary thinking is fundamental to decision making that leads to lasting solutions.

To address this key need, Flannery created the Center for Interdisciplinary Study of Terrorism and Peace, which addresses the existing gaps between academia, the U.S. intelligence community, and public policy officials by providing nonpartisan subject matter experts from the humanities, social sciences, education and intelligence analysts as CISTP Faculty Fellows at JMU.

CISTP brings together experts from disciplines as varied as psychology, education, independent liberal arts studies, history, political science, justice studies, intelligence analysis, religious studies and counseling. "What we're really about is looking at the blind spots — questioning our assumptions."

She adds, "I keep pushing the fact that we have different insights from our disciplines to contribute, that we don't want to coalesce around just one new paradigm. What we want is to be able to continually provoke a fresh discussion, and we have the luxury of doing that."

Intelligence agencies typically "deal with short-term security crises, and they need a bullet point and ... an answer in three minutes," Flannery explains. "But when that drives the system year after year and the dominant analytic paradigm has been counterterrorism after 9/11, rather than looking at the systemic causes of terrorism, then we fall into a national cycle in which we're putting out a fire, but the way that we put it out might create more terrorists in the next generation."

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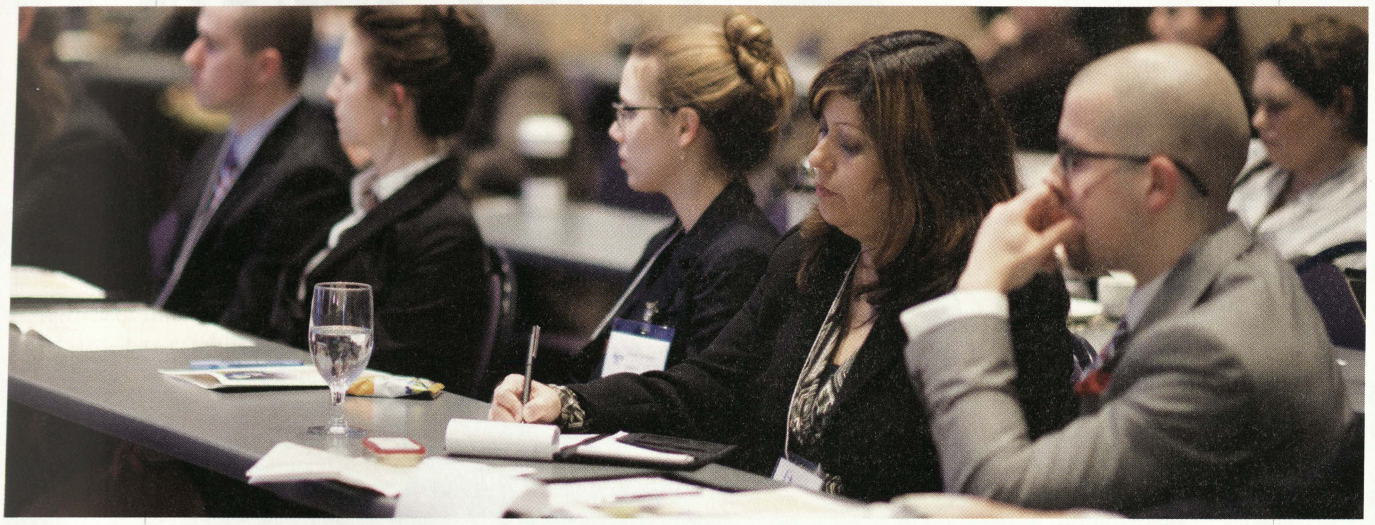

Frances Flannery brought several interns from the Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Terrorism and Peace to the conference to present their research and network with intelligence community scholars.

She also notes that most intelligence think tanks "have a clear consensus within them. You know what you're going to get. So it's kind of a closed loop echo chamber because if you have an action that you would like to make and you'd like it supported then you're going to go to that think tank; you're going to get the answer you were expecting and there is no truly optimal mechanism for expanding the conversation in creative ways."

The same is true of other terrorism centers. "There are centers for the study of terrorism at various universities around this country, funded by government agencies," she says. They are looking for consensus. Flannery, however, is looking for the opposite. We are "interested in truly having a lack of consensus." That's where CISTP will contribute, by bringing fresh thinking to the discussion. "The intelligence community has not, up until this point, recognized the valuable insights that can be gained for counterterrorism as well as problems of violence coming from the humanities," Flannery says. "The contributions of the social sciences is relatively recent. But the humanities, I think this is the cutting edge of how to change an analytic paradigm."

That's life in the I.C.

In addition to benefitting the intelligence community, such a rethinking across multiple academic "lines" benefits students. "The humanities piece, the religious studies piece in particular, has been so valuable to my students. When they went on to internships and jobs in the intelligence community, they wrote me — and continue to write me — and say: 'This was incredibly valuable. I took this up to my boss,' or 'This really was an important course.' I also have students who were religion majors who never realized before studying apocalypticism that they wanted to work in the I.C., and they have all kinds of skills to contribute."

Involving undergraduate students is also a foundational principle of Flannery's center. For the March conference, "Intelligence and the Transition from War to Peace," Flannery chose five student research interns from her classes, all religion majors or minors with aspirations to pursue intelligence work. Each drafted a paper based on the newly released Bosnian documents. "They were also being mentored to learn what it is to have this volume of information that they very quickly have to make an analytical argument about. They were under great pressure," she says. "That's life in the I.C., and that's what they want to do."

> It was dynamic. It was a brand new model for dialogue between the intelligence community and academia.

A brand new model for dialogue

In February, CISTP sponsored the first of what Flannery hopes will be many "faculty conversations" where expert members of academia and forward-thinking members of the intelligence community will exchange ideas. CISTP fellows gathered at JMU — advantageously close to Washington, D.C., the hub for American intelligence —with an invited member of the intelligence community.

"It was so innovative and creative," Flannery says. "The pragmatists amongst us balanced the optimists and idealists amongst us.

> No voices were shut down. Everyone was included. If you think about the expertise alone sitting at that table — where you have people like Shin-Ji Kang who works on refugees from North Korea being educated in South Korea; Anne Stewart and Lennie Echterling who work on trauma counseling for children and families in post-conflict scenarios and with landmine survivors and in post-disaster scenarios like Katrina and Sandy; or my specialty in apocalypticism; Tim Walton's 24 years in the CIA and Glenn Hastedt's understanding of intelligence failures; David Owusu-Ansah's perspective on Islam in Africa and Jennifer Connerley's expertise in evangelicalism and the intersection of religion and politics; and Ed Brantmeier on critical peace studies and schools as a cultural force. It was a brand new model for dialogue between the intelligence community and academia."

Flannery strongly believes CISTP works at JMU because of the university's collaborative nature. "That wouldn't have happened if I weren't at JMU because a lot of universities keep people in their in their departments."

Changing the dialogue that drives decisions that impact nations is a massive and inexact science — but it is also an opportunity for academia to impact the world as it struggles for lasting peace. M

CONFERENCE PHOTOGRAPH BY RACHEL LAM ('14)