Pol486

What Went Wrong?

A Post Mortem of Political Disasters, Catastrophic Policy Failures, and Epic Marches of Folly.

Wednesday 12:00-14:00
OI3321

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Office Hours:
Wednesday 15:00-16:00

Above: American helicopters and South Vietnamese troops near the Cambodian border, 1965. (Horst Faas)

This is a seminar about disasters that human beings inflict on themselves. It explores the unfortunate chronicle of deaths foretold.

Why do individuals, groups, and societies make repeated, and in hindsight, often easily predictable, damaging mistakes? Why do they persist in courses of action they should have known –or in fact knew –were likely to produce disastrous results? Why is it that smart, well-trained, conscientious people continue to be the source of catastrophes they could have seen coming? From botched economic reforms to ruinous urban planning, from failed wars to slow-moving environmental calamities, history is replete with examples of man-made disasters. It seems that all the accumulation of knowledge, scientific and technological progress, and the evolution of societal and political norms is not sufficient to eliminate these damaging marches of folly.

The seminar will try to tackle these questions through the examination of the record of various avoidable disasters across different levels of analysis, from the local to the international. Through these cases we will explore prominent social science explanations that seek to account for such recurring failures. We will therefore be able to pose questions not only about disaster, but also about the study of disaster. How does the puzzle of self-inflicted, apparently avoidable catastrophe appear when seen through the lens of the different political and social-science explanations? What can each one contribute to understanding and perhaps ameliorating the tendency of societal projects to go so badly wrong?

Course Readings

This is an intensive seminar which involves a significant amount of reading. Useful discussion is impossible in the absence of such preparation. Should you choose to enroll in this course, please be prepared to do the work. If you fail to keep up with this basic responsibility you are affecting the overall value of the seminar.

Each week's readings introduce several examples of disasters or policy failures as well as one or more theoretical frames that may offer an explanation for these unfortunate events. Over the course of the seminar we will cover a broad swath of empirical cases in an attempt to explore the applicability and generalizability of our theoretical discussion to different types of scenarios and environments. Similarly, the theories we explore also cover a broad spectrum: from micro accounts that focus on individual decision makers to structural, societal and organizational explanations.

Almost all of the readings are available electronically through the library's online resources or freely on the internet. Most of the books are available as E-books through the library. Less academic books are readily available at most public libraries. In some cases, the syllabus includes hyperlinks that can direct you to the required reading. If needed, I will post some of the more difficult to find sources on the course's Quercos page, but other than that, it is your responsibility to find the sources. Looking for sources is part of the researcher's job, and may direct you to related articles should you have the time and interest.

The readings for this seminar include academic articles and books, but also news articles, magazine reviews and accidents reports. Some of the readings can be technical (as in the case of accident reports) but our interest is less in the mechanics of a specific accident. Instead, the class focuses on commonalities that cut across the case studies. Keep this aim in mind when doing the readings. In some cases, you are asked to watch a movie or a youtube clip as part of your weekly reading assignment. Movies are easily accessible through the library or through online streaming services.

Lastly, I maintain the right to make minor changes to the attached reading list throughout the term, especially if any new articles appear or related controversies flare up. Any such changes are not likely to affect the overall weekly workload.

Background: World Trade Center, September 11, 2001.

Widespread damage in the wake of Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico, 2017.

Course Requirements

The seminar meets for two hours each week. Attendance is, obviously, a per-requisite for active participation. Poor attendance record may lead to a final participation grade of zero. Generally, no accommodation will be offered for missed attendance.

Participation

This is a seminar –not a lecture course! Most of the learning is done through collective discussion and analysis. Active participation is therefore crucial for the success of the seminar. Accordingly, participation accounts for a significant portion of your final grade. Crucially, familiarity with the readings is an essential per-requisite for productive participation.

Research Proposal and Paper

As part of this research seminar, students are expected to develop an independent research project. In order to facilitate this process, each student is expected to attend my office hours at least once before reading week to discuss ideas for a research project. Following these meetings each student will submit a 1-2 pages of research proposal. Students are expected to post the proposals on Quercus and to provide comments and constructive feedback to fellow students. This proposal will then be developed into a 15-20pp research paper to be submitted at the end of the year.

Academic Integrity

All written assignments must follow academic citation rules. All words and ideas of works of other individuals should be properly acknowledged. For further clarification and information please consult the University of Toronto's policy on plagiarism. Failure to understand what constitutes plagiarism will not be accepted as an excuse.

In order to promote an atmosphere of academic integrity, this course will uphold the following policy:

Students must attach a signed copy of an Academic Integrity Checklist to their essay. The Checklist form is available on Quercus. Please note that I will not accept your work without this form. Accordingly, we will apply late penalties to your paper (as detailed below) until the Checklist is submitted.

Grade Breakup

Research proposal	15%
Discussant week	15%
Pet case	5%
Participation	30%
Research paper	35%

Discussant Week

Each week, a student will serve as class discussant. The discussant will start the class with a short presentation (5-10 minutes) synthesizing the readings and setting the stage for our discussion. The presentation should not summarize the readings but rather find core themes, debates or questions that cut across the assigned readings. In addition, each discussant will submit a short (2-3 page) document offering critical engagement with one or more of that week's readings.

Pet Case

Throughout the seminar, students will make short (5 minute) presentations of 'pet cases': examples of past disasters, accidents, investigations, theories, or any other topic related to the seminar's theme. The pet case presentations will add breadth to the number of case studies and topics that we can cover through our weekly readings.

Quercus

Important course information will be distributed electronically through Quercus. Research proposals should be uploaded to Quercus as well. Students can use the Quercus interface in order to add constructive criticism of each other's work. Online activity will count as course participation. Feel free to use the electronic forums and message boards for any course related topics. Please respect basic netiquette conventions when posting messages. To log-in, visit: q.utoronto.ca

Important Dates

January 9
Discussant list sign-up

February 20
Reading week

February 22
Research Proposals are due

April 3
Papers are due

Deep Sea Horizon oil spill, the Gulf of Mexico, 2010

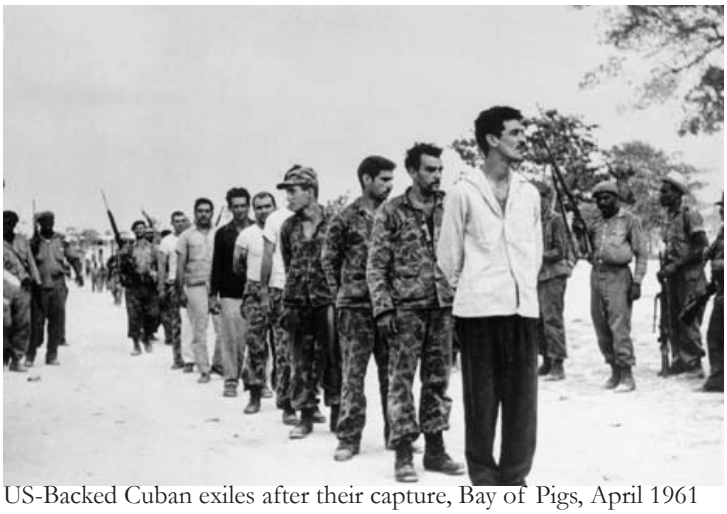
Rules and Regulations

If you are unable to submit papers at the appointed time, you must request permission for an extension or a makeup exam. In almost all cases, requests for extensions and deferrals should be submitted ahead of time. All requests for extensions or deferrals should be submitted in writing. In general, extensions will not be granted unless it is a case of unavoidable and unforeseeable extenuating circumstances. In most cases, supporting documentation is required before any extension is granted. Appropriate documentation must be submitted within one week of the late assignment. Please note: Assignments in other courses are NOT grounds for an extension.

Late submission penalty is 4% per each late day or fraction of a day, weekends included. Papers are to be handed at the beginning of our last meeting. Discussant commentary should be handed at the beginning of that class. Thereafter, the cut off time for the determination of a late day is 5pm. Late-assignments should be submitted to the office of the Political Science Department (on the 3rd floor of Sidney Smith Hall). Students should make sure that late submissions are signed and dated by departmental staff. Only hard copies are acceptable, e-mailed or faxed assignments will not be accepted unless you have obtained prior approval.

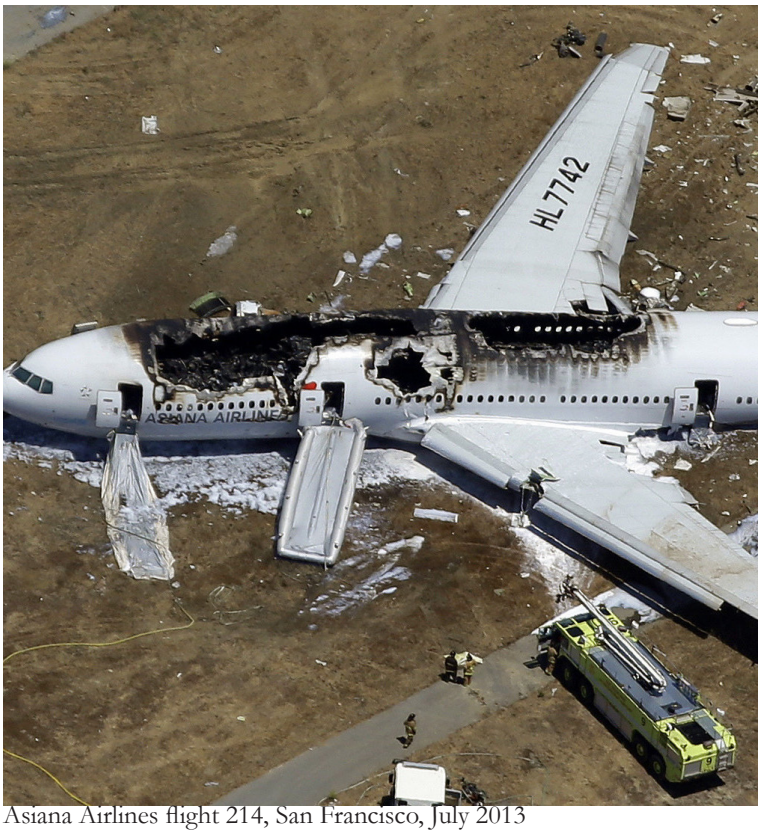
All papers should be printed, double spaced (and preferably double sided), 12 font, with proper margins, page numbers and securely stapled. Papers that go beyond the stated page limit for the assignment, or papers that do not conform to the directions above, may be penalized.

Background: Kuwait oil fields fire, Gulf War, 1991 (Sebastio Salgado)


US-Backed Cuban exiles after their capture, Bay of Pigs, April 1961

Week III: Marches of Folly (Jan. 23)

Tuchman, Barbara. 1985. *March of folly: from Troy to Vietnam.* New York: Ballantine Books. Chs. 1, 5.
Carter, Phillip. 2017. McMaster Knows How National Security Policy Can Go Wrong. Will That Help Him? *The Washington Post.* Feb. 24
Shimko, Keith. 1994. Metaphors and Foreign Policy Decision Making. 1994. *Political Psychology,* 15/4: 655-671.
Levy, Jack S. 1994. Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield. *International Organization*. 48/2: 279-312.



Asiana Airlines flight 214, San Francisco, July 2013

Week I: Introduction (Jan. 9)

Week II: Conceptual Models of Decision-Making (Jan. 16)

Hall, Joseph L. 2016. Columbia and Challenger: Organizational failure at NASA. *Space Policy*, 37/3:127-133
NASA's Columbia Accident Investigation Board's Report. 2003. Part II, pp. 99-202
Allison, Graham T. 2004. "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis." *American Political Science Review,* 63/3: 689-718.
Vandenbroucke, Lucien S. 1984. Anatomy of a Failure: The Decision to Land at the Bay of Pigs. *Political Science Quarterly,* 99/3: 471-491.

Week IV: Disorganized Organizations? (Jan. 30)

Wee, Heesun. 2013. Korean Culture May Offer Clues in Asiana Crash. *NBC News*, July 9.
Freeman, Sholnn. 2009. Panel on Fatal Crash Looks at Pilots' Pay, Commute. *The Washington Post*, May 14.
Barstow, David, David Rohde and Stephanie Saul. 2010. Deepwater Horizon's Final Hours. *The New York Times*, December 26: A1.
Zegart, Amy B. 2007. *Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI, and the Origins of 9/11*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Ch. 1-2
David, Paul A.1985. Clio and the Economics of QUERTY. *The American Economic Review,* 75/2: 332-337
Pierson, Paul. 2000. Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics. *American Political Science Review,* 94/2: 251-267

Week V: Our Imperfect Minds (Feb. 6)

Kolbert, Elizabeth. 2017. Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds, *The New Yorker,* February 27
Ghaemi, Nassir. 2011. Depression in Command: In Times of Crisis, Mentally Ill Leaders Can See What Others Don't. *The Wall Street Journal*, July 30.
Own, David and Jonathan Davidson. 2009. Hubris Syndrome: An Acquired Personality Disorder? *Brain: A Journal of Neurology,* 132/5: 1396-1406.
Bar Joseph, Uri and Arie W. Kruglanski. 2003. Intelligence Failure and Need for Cognitive Closure: On the Psychology of the Yom Kippur Surprise. *Political Psychology,* 24/1: 75-99
McDermott, Rose. 1992. Prospect Theory in International Relations: The Iranian Hostage Rescue Mission. *Political Psychology*, 13/2: 237-263
Esser, James K. 1998. Alive and Well after 25 Years: A Review of Groupthink Research. *Organizational Behavior and Human Research Processes*, 73(2-3) 116-141

Week VI : Seeing Like a State (Feb. 13)

Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Read pp 1-6 and chapters 6-7 (rural collectivization in the USSR and Tanzania)
Bates, Robert H. 1983. Patterns of Market Intervention in Agrarian Africa. *Food Policy*, 8/4: 297-304
Snyder, Timothy. 2017. The Deliberate Starvation of Millions in Ukraine. *The Washington Post*, November 3
Sen, Amartya. 1981. Ingredient of Famine Analysis: Availability and Entitlements. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 96/3: 433-464

Reading week (Feb. 20)

Research proposals due (Feb. 22)

The Potato Famine Memorial, Dublin, Ireland.

Week VII: Are All Disasters Created Equal? (Feb. 27)

Kim, Jim Yong, and Paul Farmer. 2014. What's Missing in the Ebola Fight in West Africa. *The Washington Post,* August 31

Gupta, J. P. 2002. The Bhopal Gas Tragedy: Could It Have Happened in a Developed Country? *Journal of Loss Prevention in the Process Industries,* 15/1: 1-4

Manik, Julfikar Ali and Jim Yardley. 2013. Building Collapse in Bangladesh Leaves Scores Dead. *The New York Times,* April 24

McEvoy, Arthur F. 1995. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911: Social Change, Industrial Accidents, and the Evolution of Common Sense Causality. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 20/2: 621-651

Atkins, David and Ernest M. Moy. 2005. Left Behind: The Legacy of Hurricane Katrina. *British Medical Journal*, 331/7522: 916-918

Davey, Monica, and Mitch Smith. 2016. What Went Wrong in Flint? *The New York Times*, March 3

Walker, Peter. 1999. Natural Disasters Are Man-Made. *New Perspectives Quarterly,* 16/5: 15-16

Week VIII: Boiling Frogs (Mar. 6)

Hardin, Garrett. 1968. The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science,* 162/3859: 1243-1248.

Meadows, Donella H. et al. 1972. *The Limits to growth: a report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind.* pp. 25-87

Hansn, Zeynep K. and Gary D. Libecap. 2004. Small Farms, Externalities, and the Dust Bowl of the 1930's. *Journal of Political Economy*, 112/3: 665-694.

Figueroa, Hector. 2017. Washington Set Puerto Rico Up for Disaster. *The New York Times,* Sept. 28

Bazerman, Max H. 2006. Climate Change as a Predictable Surprise. *Climatic Change*, 77/1-2: 179-193.

Schulz, Kathryn. 2015. The Really Big One. *The New Yorker*, July 20.

A dust storm over a Midwestern farm during the Dust Bowl, 1931-1939

Week IX: Public policy and Economic Reform (Mar. 13)

Goldsbie, Jonathan. 2015. Train wreck: Why Toronto doesn't get the transit it deserves. *Toronto Now.* August 27
Blyth, Mark. 2013. The Austerity Delusion: Why a Bad Idea Won Over the West. *Foreign Affairs,* 92/3: 41-56
Nelson, Stephen C. and Peter Katzenstein. 2014. Uncertainty, Risk, and the Financial Crisis of 2008. *International Organization*, 68/2: 361-392
Rodrik, Dani. 1996. Understanding Economic Policy Reform. *Journal of Economic Literature,*34/1: 9-11, 31-39
Movie: The Big Short (2015)

The Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, 2011

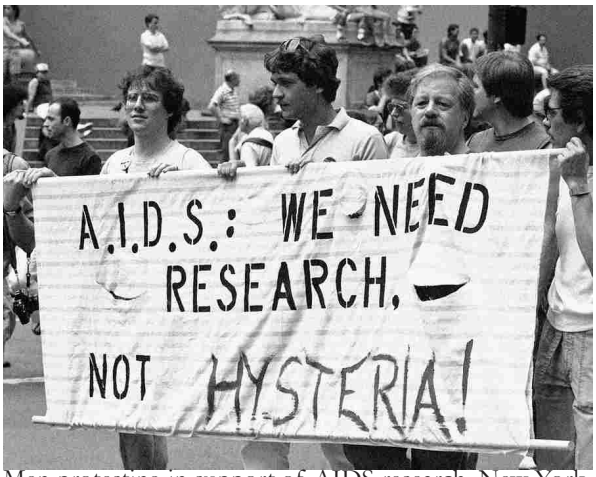
Week XI: Can Experts Save the Day? (Mar. 27)

Kolowich, Steve. 2016. The Water Next Time: Professor Who Helped Expose Crisis in Flint Says Public Science Is Broken. *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* February 2
Nichols, Tom. 2017. How America Lost Its Trust in Expertise (and Why That's a Giant Problem). *Foreign Affairs,* March/April
Tetlock, Philip. 2005. *Expert Political Judgment: How Good is It? How Can We Know?* Princeton: Princeton University Press. Ch. 1, 3
Drezner, Daniel. 2017. *The Ideas Industry.* New York: Oxford University Press. Part I

A San Antonio house facing foreclosure, 2009.

Week X: Life Finds a Way (Mar. 20)

Annas, GJ and S Elias. 1999. Thalidomide and the Titanic: Reconstructing the Technology Tragedies of the Twentieth Century. *American Journal of Public Health,* 89/1: 98-101
Sagan, Scott D. 1994. Organized for Accidents. *Security Studies,* 3/3: 509-520
Schlosser, Eric. 2016. World War Three, by Mistake. *The New Yorker*, December 23
Masaharu Fujiyoshi. 2014. Prologue to Catastrophe. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,* 70/2: 36-41
Gabriel, Yiannis. 1998. The Hubris of Management. *Administration Theory & Praxis*, 20/3: 257-273
Clips: *Jurassic Park* (1993) I, II & III
Movie: *Dr. Strangelove Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love The Bomb*

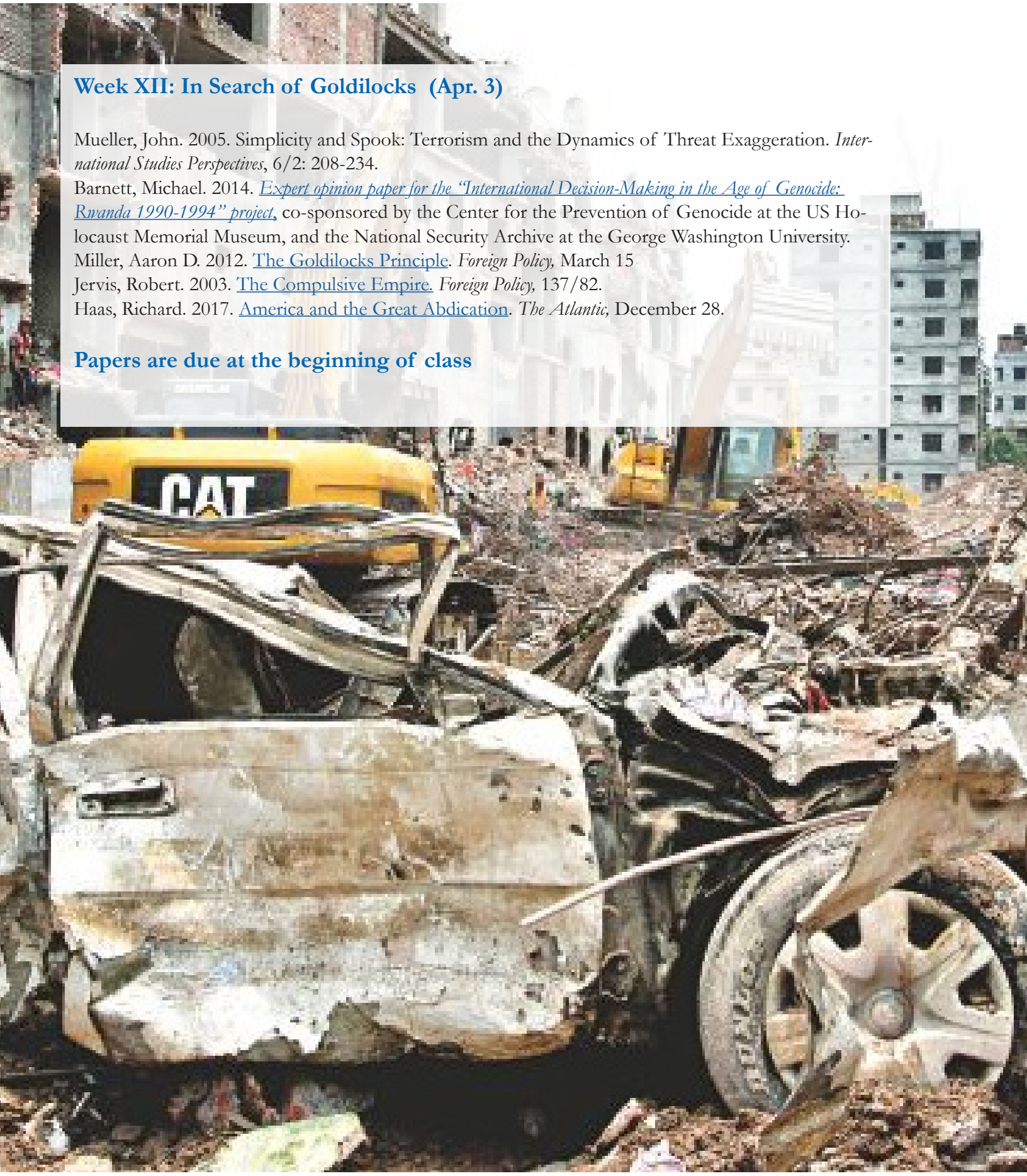


Men protesting in support of AIDS research. New York, 1983.

Week XII: In Search of Goldilocks (Apr. 3)

Mueller, John. 2005. Simplicity and Spook: Terrorism and the Dynamics of Threat Exaggeration. *International Studies Perspectives*, 6/2: 208-234.
Barnett, Michael. 2014. *Expert opinion paper for the "International Decision-Making in the Age of Genocide: Rwanda 1990-1994" project*, co-sponsored by the Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the National Security Archive at the George Washington University.
Miller, Aaron D. 2012. The Goldilocks Principle. *Foreign Policy,* March 15
Jervis, Robert. 2003. The Compulsive Empire. *Foreign Policy,* 137/82.
Haas, Richard. 2017. America and the Great Abdication. *The Atlantic,* December 28.

Papers are due at the beginning of class



The Rana Plaza building collapse, Dhaka, Bangladesh, May 2013.