

Feature Article

The feature article is written by a CSIS young professional describing a unique personal experience that altered their self-perception.



“Transforming” for the Elections

by
Travis Elliot

At dawn on February 18, 2008, I anxiously awoke from my hotel bed in the port city of Karachi, Pakistan, to begin a day that would be forever etched into my memory. On that day, I, along with 37 other members of Democracy International’s delegation, served as election observers for the 2008 national and provincial elections in Pakistan—elections that were both highly anticipated and preceded by months of violence and political and social chaos.

I had no past experience with election monitoring nor was I an “expert” on Pakistan for that matter. I was a true novice, a greenhorn. But it is in exactly these situations (sans direct experience and relevant bona fides) that the ability to be what leadership scholar James MacGregor Burns calls “transformational” becomes an indispensable attribute. One must identify the demands of a given situation and creatively adapt oneself to respond.

By mere happenstance, an Aristotelian modality that I have found to be the source of life’s most interesting journeys, (*cont. p.2*)

AILA International Fellows Return: China, Inc. and India.com, Asia Rising

During the week of April 28, 2008, AILA hosted its second term for this year’s international fellows. The group explored the rise of Asia by focusing on the status of current affairs and regional issues. The sessions throughout the week highlighted the regional heavyweights: China and India.



For more information about the fellows, [click here](#).

Right: Harinder S. Kohli, founding director and chief executive, Emerging Markets Forum, discusses India’s future in the next 20 years



Left: The 2007–2008 fellows pose for a picture with [Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski](#), former national security adviser and CSIS trustee after an engaging question-and-answer session

Right: [Ambassador Teresita Schaffer](#), director, South Asia Program, discusses the duality of the relationship between India and China



“Dr. Brzezinski understands that moments of crisis are opportunities to break free from choking orthodoxies.”

—James Vigil, 2007–2008 AILA International Fellow

(cont. from p.1)

I received a telephone call from Democracy International (DI) asking me to join their delegation just five days before departure. I was speechless at first. My mind began flashing with news images of the violent attacks that had recently plagued the country, not least the assassination of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto that occurred only a month before. Yet, my intellectual curiosity and intrigue took hold. This was the very sort of thing I had imagined doing ever since I was a graduate student. I gave DI the most confident “yes” I could muster.

As a researcher, my first instinct was to cull together all the information I could find on Pakistan and the forthcoming elections. Although I had followed the events closely in the *Financial Times* and various nightly news broadcasts, I knew I needed much more substantive analysis, much more authority. My exploratory research began immediately, but I had no time to become an expert. In the fast-paced, multidimensional working environment at CSIS, one of the first skills you develop is what I like to call “blitzkrieg research.” Simply put, use all of the sources at your disposal to delineate authority from conjecture.

With my background research packet in hand, I departed Washington, D.C., on February 13 and landed in the late morning in Islamabad two days later. Once we arrived at our hotel, located just outside of the city-center and at the base of the Margalla Hills, we began our security briefing. We had political and election administration briefings the following day, which included meeting with representatives of the major political parties and the Election Commission of Pakistan. They gave us their predictions of the elections and in some cases told us “what to look out for” as election observers.

(cont. p.3)

Interviewing History: Continuing Success

General Brent Scowcroft (USAF, ret.)



Left: Brent Scowcroft, Eric Ridge, Anca DiGiacomo, Catherine Mason, Derek Mix



Above: General Scowcroft addresses Derek Mix and Catherine Mason

On January 22, 2008, [Anca DiGiacomo](#), roundtables manager, Membership Groups; [Catherine Mason](#), research assistant, Global Strategy Institute; [Derek Mix](#), fellow, Europe Program; and [Eric Ridge](#), research assistant, International Security Program, interviewed [General Brent Scowcroft](#) (USAF, ret.) as part of the “[Interviewing History: Conversations with America’s Leaders](#)” dinner series.

“As our team conducted background interviews and poured through readings in preparation for our Interviewing History dinner, we were often bombarded with the notion that for America, General Scowcroft was simply the right person in the right position at the right time. His decisive leadership—most notably in advising President George H.W. Bush to avoid taking actions that would embarrass the Soviet Union as that country began to crumble—was the ultimate reflection of Scowcroft’s personality, judgment, and character.”

—Eric Ridge, member, Team Scowcroft

Former U.S. Attorney General and Governor, Dick Thornburgh

On May 6, 2008, Travis Elliott, research associate, Hills Program on Governance; [Matt Frank](#), research associate, Energy and National Security Program; [Amanda Kozlowski](#), assistant editor, the *Washington Quarterly*; and Rebecca Perlmutter, former program coordinator, Membership Groups, gathered to interview former Pennsylvania governor Dick Thornburgh about his experiences during the Three Mile Island crisis.



From left: Matt Frank, Dick Thornburgh, Rebecca Perlmutter, Amanda Kozlowski, Travis Elliot

Despite the lack of an effective evacuation plan and complete knowledge of the situation, Thornburgh successfully managed and resolved the crisis. At the dinner, he emphasized the importance of communication and surrounding himself with people who provided a realistic view of the situation, rather than telling him what he wanted to hear.

“Interviewing Governor Thornburgh has given me a profound respect for the leaders who successfully navigate crises with integrity and prudence. His insights will shape how I approach critical decisions throughout my career.”

—Amanda Kozlowski, member, Team Thornburgh

(cont. from p.2)

That evening, I was informed that I would travel to Karachi with three other delegates to observe the elections on the following day.

You could feel electricity in the air on election day. My observation colleagues and I embarked early, as the polls opened at 8:00 a.m. and would close at 5:00 p.m. We canvassed the precincts in teams of two, darting in and out of the urban city streets of the affluent and poor alike. Once inside the polling stations we were greeted with curious, inquisitive stares, but not hostility. I found that an election observer should be as inconspicuous as possible, all the while taking scrupulous notes, because it's the details that matter. Are there serial numbers on the ballots? Are the required polling station officials present? Are the ballot boxes sealed? As we went from station to station throughout the day, observing became an almost methodical process.

By the time the polls had closed, I suddenly came to realize that I was no longer the inexperienced novice, but rather someone who had adapted to a situation filled with incredible uncertainty and doubt. To some it may sound commonplace, but my transformation occurred by allowing myself to enter into a situation where I had no substantive background or experience—a difficult task for a “think tanker” to do.

Conversely, I am left to only wonder what impact my presence as an election observer had on the men, women, and children I met in the enclaves of southern Pakistan. Similar to my own situation (albeit from an entirely different perspective), many of the polling officers and officials whom I interacted with had no past experience or knowledge of election observers, especially an American from a middle-class agrarian town in Pennsylvania. They also had to transform to the demands of the situation. (cont. p.4)

The AILA Summer 2008 Curriculum

- **Focus your career**
 - Career development advice from young professionals and senior scholars
- **Fine-tune your skills**
 - Instruction on important professional skills including policy presentations, political organizing, and argumentation
- **Further your worldview**
 - Policy seminars from CSIS experts on a wide variety of pressing international affairs issues



Reflections of an AILA Intern

by *Rebekah Bakewicz, intern, AILA*

As I worry about my indeterminate employment future, I cannot help but look back on my first day as an intern at AILA. Opening the glass doors, I passed under the CSIS logo of the imposing high-rise building on the famed K Street. My AILA adventure had begun.



In addition to assisting with research and planning numerous events, I would coordinate the logistics of a debate clinic for my CSIS intern peers. I would be working with a seasoned military officer and former West Point debate coach named Col. Bill Taylor. A man who has mentored Generals Wesley Clark, Colin Powell, and David Petraeus—and now me? As if that was not imposing enough, a national champion debater named Jessica Yeats would also be helping out. Throughout this experience, both Col. Taylor and Yeats imparted not only wisdom about argumentation and debate but also enhanced my perception of foreign policy issues. Being a part of the debate clinic—behind the scenes and as a participant—was an experience that developed my event coordination and communication skills to a level which I would not have thought possible in such a short time.

Five months later, my future is still uncertain. I know that I will soon have to say goodbye to my AILA family and leave my CSIS home to begin my full-time career. However, I will go forth with a new self-confidence and a variety of valuable lessons and experiences. My time at AILA has truly focused my career, fine-tuned my skills, and furthered my worldview.

(cont. from p.3)

Days later while sitting on the tarmac at Islamabad International Airport I attempted to recount the extraordinary experience I had just had. It all seemed so surreal, as it still does now. But if I could identify one salient lesson from this experience it would be this: situations will inevitably arise in our professional lives for which we could never be fully prepared or fully confident to undertake. Yet, it is in these situations that your ability to transform yourself, and to overcome perceived limitations will determine not only your success, but your professional growth as well. For me, it took an election mission to Pakistan for Burns's wisdom to take hold, but it did, and I am an election observer because of it in the end.

Travis is a research associate with the Hills Program on Governance.

Curriculum Highlights



Above: Dr. Michael Dobbs, former adviser to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, discusses the impact of individual leaders on history



Above: [Andrew Kuchins](#), director, Russia and Eurasia Program, sheds light on the complex political considerations behind the Russian presidential election



Above: [Linda Jamison](#), dean, Abshire-Inamori Leadership Academy, analyzes the Super Tuesday presidential map



Above: [Craig Cohen](#), associate vice president for research and programs, discusses the CSIS Commission on Smart Power

Quotes from the Curriculum



“[Iraq is a] 3-D chessboard where the pieces, not the American players, are in control. This is not a reason not to be involved, but a reason to be a lot more realistic. As members of a think tank, it is our job to prepare the public for the real options ahead.”

—[Dr. Anthony Cordesman](#), *Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy*, after returning from recent trips to Iraq and Afghanistan, March 7, 2008

“You’ve got to have goals, you’ve got to build trust, and you’ve got to have ways and means of getting there.”

“Noble goals need strategies to get there.”

—[Dr. David Abshire](#), founder, Abshire-Inamori Leadership Academy, and president, Center for the Study of the Presidency, discusses the lessons from his recent book *A Call to Greatness: Challenging Our Next President* at an event on March 19, 2008.

