A letter from the new Director of CISS, James Der Derian, Michael Hintze Chair of International Security Studies

3 April, 2013

First impressions last. One year ago, en route to interview for this job, my seat companion took note of my reading material, the latest issue of Foreign Policy. It sported a bold cover: ‘Obama’s Secret Wars’ in block letters atop the image of an armed Predator drone. Asked for my take on the topic, I launched into a critique born of two decades studying generals and leaders who place a misbegotten faith in technological fixes for intractable political problems, the recalcitrant issues of sovereignty and international law, the likelihood of some bad blowback, and what happens when, inevitably, others mimic the US and acquire their own killer drones. I might even have evoked Robocop. My companion listened politely until I ran out of steam. To break the slightly awkward silence that followed, I asked him what he did for a living. He responded with a slight smile: ‘I am President Obama’s ambassadorial appointee to Australia’.

It was a long flight and once I had removed my foot from my mouth the conversation touched on all matters of diplomacy, international security, and the injustices of Australia’s quarantine policy (not even an ambassador’s dog enjoys diplomatic immunity). Ambassador Bleich’s final advice before landing stuck: if they offer you the position, take it; there might be a lot of hype around the ‘Asian pivot’ but history – and the future – is being made here.

Other serendipitous moments followed, all leading to the same conclusion. Sitting among the selection committee at the post-interview pan-Asian dinner, looking past them through the window at the iconic Sydney Opera House across the harbour, I wondered if it got any better than this. It did. After dinner I drifted over to the Museum of Contemporary Art, where I discovered a rare screening of Christian Marclay’s ‘The Clock’. Comprised of several thousand excerpts of time as presented in modern cinema, ‘The Clock’ is seamlessly edited into linked narratives and presented synchronously to correspond, minute by minute, hour by hour, to the viewer’s time. I intended to stay only a few minutes; I stumbled out of the Museum theatre at the 1.30 am tick of the 24-hour video.

Better got beatific the next evening, when the planned dinner with Colin Wight turned into a musical event after we were comped tickets for the Nick Lowe concert at the Sydney Opera House. Lowe’s encore ended with the great pop anthem, ‘(What’s So Funny ’Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding’ – which just happened to be the theme song of our next documentary film, ‘The Art of Peace’.

All this might seem peripheral to a Director’s Letter, which traditionally thanks those who wisely appointed the right candidate, acknowledges the existing foundations upon which great accomplishments shall be built, then finishes with the flourish of an uplifting vision that will transform current challenges into new opportunities.

Traditions serve a purpose – to a point. I am indeed grateful to the search committee, but mainly for being unlike any I have experienced previously. From the top down, the group walked as well as talked the best values and practices of continental philosophy, critical theory, and the human sciences. Scholars of a similar humanistic bent do exist in US universities but they are usually marginalized or at best, tolerated in the social sciences – and they are certainly not running the universities. And I was especially pleased to discover such talented, congenial, and energetic colleagues – youth does have its advantages – who were working hard to fulfill departmental needs as well as to serve the policy mission of the Centre.
But I did not make this transcontinental, transpacific leap to conduct business as usual; hence the unlikely lessons of in-flight ambassadors, experimental video art, and aging rock stars. The ambassador’s admonition sticks: power is being reconfigured, reconceptualised, and reoriented in a distinctly Eastwardly and Southernly design and direction. Moreover, much of that transformation is being negotiated (in all senses of the word) in and through Australia. This shift reflects hard economic numbers: since the financial crisis of 2008, US GDP has grown by 2.4%, China’s by 52.5%; Europe’s share of world GDP has fallen from 26% in 1980 to 19%; and in annual defense expenditure the Pentagon faces sequester cuts while China enjoys a double-digit increase. Natural resource, environmental, population and health issues are all converging and CISS, Sydney, and Australia are right at the intersection. Hardly a coincidence then that the 2014 G20 finance ministers’ as well as summit leaders’ meeting will be held in Australia (Sydney and Brisbane, respectively).

Marclay’s technique of montage has important lessons for security studies in the 21st century. By taking something old and transforming it in real time into something entirely new, he borrows but goes beyond traditional forms of representation. He illuminates the ascendancy of images over words, time over space, virtuality over reality. Security studies similarly needs to adapt, topically, methodologically, operationally, if it is to keep up with rapid, global, media-effected changes. The transformative political and social events at the turn of the century – the end of the Cold War, 9/11 attack, and post-colonial transformations in the Middle East, Africa and Asia – all testify to a global media revolution driven by digitised information, proliferating platforms, networked convergence, and the timeless need to connect. As new actors emerge and gain advantage through access to networked technology; as social media, cable and broadcast news amplify local incidents into global crises; as the complexity, volatility, and uncertainty of the infosphere produce new levels of precariousness in the biosphere; as geopolitics is displaced by chronopolitics, we need to get up to speed.

Conceived as a centre to study non-traditional security issues, CISS is primed to lead the way in transnational, transdisciplinary, and transmedia approaches. To be sure, there will be speed-bumps, even a few naysayers. Hence the role model of old rockers like Nick Lowe who stay ahead of the curve (if not forever young). When Lowe went from punk to country there were those who called out for the old songs (guilty as charged). When Dylan first went electric there were more than a few catcalls from the crowd. My goal is not to change for change’s sake, but to provide the kind of leadership that adapts the best of the classical arts of war and peace to the demands of a new security environment. A young core faculty and new associates from the University will seed this change, followed by an invitation to pre- and post-doctoral fellows, sabbatical visitors, and practitioners seeking to up their game and join a collaborative effort to make a difference in a field of study that begs to be different. The operative word here is collaborative: CISS intends to write songs that will become better known – as has been said of Nick Lowe – than the songwriter.

The intellectual rationale for this change seems obvious but let me spell them out. The most compelling reason lies outside of the Centre: the world continues to change and with it so too should our understanding and study of what constitutes the referent objects of security. Today’s complex security issues clearly exceed discrete levels of analysis, bounded disciplines of study, and fixed notions of power. National security interests, formulated and instantiated through diplomatic, strategic and political practices, cannot be separated from questions of national identity; they all are deeply entwined with particular and different senses of safety or danger that they evoke. International security issues are constituted through a rational calculation as well as emotional consideration of what and whom counts as opportunity or threat, friend or foe, population at risk or risky population.

Security issues, now more than ever, require a combination of traditional and innovative approaches. It is not just what but how these security issues are studied that makes CISS
distinctive. From its inception the Centre has supported pluralist, non-traditional, approaches. Exceeding comprehension and management by single actors, disciplines, or beliefs, CISS intends to lead the way in multi-disciplinary, multi-perspectival as well as multi-media approaches in security studies.

CISS is making significant changes to make this happen. We are in the process of restructuring our research areas to reflect a global shift in power but also to match our research capacity and to signal our intention to become first-responders for a wide range of fast-changing global events. In concrete terms this entails a reorganization of numerous research nodes into four streamlined programs: geosecurity, biosecurity, infosecurity, and global security. Specifics on these programs as well as a new initiative on quantum events can be found on our redesigned website.

The next step will be to convene an international conference on the risks, threats, vulnerabilities and opportunities presented by the reconfiguration of power from West to East, North to South. International security experts as well as scientists, writers, artists, filmmakers, and others will be invited to consider new instruments, concepts, and theories for an expanded field of study. The findings of this conference will be the basis for the long-term strategy of CISS as well as for a documentary on the phase-shifting nature of war and diplomacy.

The circle closes on this letter (which I intend to make a regular feature of our revamped website) as I fly over the Pacific, now in the opposite direction for my first return to the US since taking up the position of Director of CISS. With my new Sydney colleagues I am heading to the annual International Studies Association meeting, and, befitting our infosecurity initiative, to screen our new documentary ‘Project Z: Final Global Event’, which will be featured at the USF 11th Annual Human Rights Film Festival. If you’re in the neighborhood of San Francisco this week or Sydney any time, come see what we’re up to and consider joining our effort to make a difference in the world of security studies.