

Of all the life-long memories made during my time at Furman, my experience at the 2002 APEC Summit ranks among the best. Through a partnership forged between Furman's Riley Institute and a Washington-based non-profit organization, I and two other students were offered an all-expenses-paid, and unparalleled, educational opportunity: To not only have nearly-unrestricted access to, but also to actively participate in, a major international trade conference.

First, a note on the location of the trade conference. APEC is structured so that the host of the conference rotates among the organization's member-economies. In 2002, the responsibilities of hosting devolved upon Mexico, which chose the resort town of Cabo San Lucas as the host-city. Los Cabos, as the entire area is generally known, is located on the tip of Baja California. Off its jagged shores the deep blue of the Pacific Ocean and the translucent waters of the Sea of Cortez unite. As far as tropical paradises go, Cabo San Lucas surely ranks among the most inviting.

Despite the tranquil atmosphere, APEC was certainly no vacation. In fact, a great deal of preparation and research went into the satisfaction of our responsibilities as student delegates. The most stressful obligation assigned to us students was the production of multiple live-broadcast internationally-televised interviews with some of the world's most preeminent business and

political leaders. Among those in attendance, for example, were an American ambassador, the First Lady of Mexico, whose hand I had the pleasure of kissing, and Secretary of State Colin Powell, whom I did not kiss. Being on live television is stressful enough, but crafting insightful questions to pose to global economic leaders in response to discussions occurring before your eyes was absolutely nerve wracking. Fear and nervousness, however, quickly succumbed to excitement and adrenaline, and our show went on.

The most educational experiences of the APEC trip often occurred outside the confines of our television studio, though. When sixty politically-disposed young people from vastly different cultures are thrust together in close quarters for an entire week, explosive and in-depth policy discussions are bound to ensue. At the time of APEC, the international political scene was highly charged with fears of both global terrorism and American unilateralism. Slightly over a year prior to APEC, the terrorist attacks on the United States proved the viability of non-state actors as participants in the global political neighborhood. Soon thereafter Afghanistan's Taliban regime fell to the swift response of America's military. By 2002, America had resolved to defend civilization via a massive "War on Terrorism," an

open-ended conflict whose principal targets were ostensibly Iraq, Iran, and North Korea – the Axis of Evil.

Many Americans accepted President Bush's declaration of war on this Axis of unlikely partners due to the hatred born on September 11, 2001. But at APEC, I learned first-hand that not just Americans were listening to the President when he placed Iraq, Iran, and North Korea in America's sights. The world was listening, and in particular a young man from the Sultanate of Brunei was listening. What he heard and what we Americans heard were dramatically different.

My Bruneian friend revealed that he and, frighteningly, many others like him interpreted the United States' rhetoric and our country's actions as directed toward the general persecution of Muslims. In his understanding, the U.S. had become a threat to the adherents of his religion because it had unfairly attributed the philosophy and intentions of terrorism and Osama bin Laden to Islam as a whole. Proof of this was revealed through the dismantling of Afghanistan, a country which has some significance to Muslims, and the subsequent militaristic rhetoric directed toward Iraq and Iran, countries whose connection to al-Qaeda and September 11 are little more than non-existent. To my Bruneian friend, the U.S. was using the terrorist attacks as a pretext for a larger war against Muslims. Regardless of

the truth of his beliefs, perception is often reality, and he genuinely believed his impression of the United States' motive to be accurate.

Though I am no defender of the Iraq war, I did my best to explain the actions of the United States and why Islam was not an object of our anger. Whether I was successful or not, I may never know. But the lesson I learned that day will be with me for the rest of my life: We must always choose our language carefully. By decrying Iran and Iraq, and now Syria and Sudan, all of which are predominantly Muslim countries, as agents of "evil," an unintended message can easily be received across oceans and throughout generations. In the present case, the cost of damage control for recklessly employing such morally and religiously charged language like "evil" may be more than our future can bear.

APEC 2002 was much more than just an all-expenses-paid vacation; it was an intellectually-challenging, conscience-awakening experience that will live in my memory for the balance of my life. The lessons learned during that week in mid-October have undeniably endowed me with more perceptive political senses and greater awareness of my status as a global citizen. It was genuinely the opportunity of a lifetime.

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