I have a soft spot for both science fiction and political history, and especially the combination of the two. So it didn’t take long for me to get hooked by “The Man in the High Castle,” a new television series adapted loosely from the Philip K. Dick book of the same title. Both the book and series recount a disturbing alternative history in which the Axis wins World War II and Japan and Germany occupy the west and east coast of the former United States. In the television version, the two countries have settled into an uneasy relationship, with Germany frequently using its technological advantage – most notably the atomic bomb – to influence Japan into grudging compliance.

The international intrigue is the backdrop to the human story. Life is filled with watchful minders and bureaucratized – even antiseptic – violence. But with few exceptions, the response of ordinary subjects is ambivalence or acceptance, not despair or indignation. And while some leaders in the “Greater Reich” or “Japanese Pacific States” strain to suppress nagging doubts about their project, they are generally unquestioning and focused ideologues. At first I concluded that series creators had failed to give characters much complexity and moral depth. But over time I started to see that lack of complexity as compelling. The feel of the series gets what Hannah Arendt called the “banality of evil” just about right.

What strikes me most, however, is how quickly everyone in this new world seems to have lost memory of the past. “The Man in the High Castle” is set in 1962, only a decade-and-a-half after the capitulation of the Allies. One might expect we’d get an occasional inspiring speech from an old-timer about better days in the past. Yet even those who fought in the war can no longer articulate its purpose. For their part, the smattering of younger people who comprise the burgeoning resistance appear to be driven by alienation or frustration or fear of threat; no one speaks explicitly of values of freedom, equality, or the common good. Founding ideals of the nation have been swiftly consumed by Nazi ideology. The American past is reduced to a brisk trade in Americana.

I shudder to imagine whether such rapid and radical change is possible in our real world. But I’ll confess that, in my less optimistic moments, I worry that a quick-set civic amnesia is happening in its own way right now. Nearly everywhere we see evidence of decline in social trust and tolerance, alarmingly low levels of political knowledge, and eroding civic engagement. We easily forget those virtues and values that are crucial to democratic citizenship.

But it is also in those glum realizations that many of us Calvin teacher-scholars see good reason to carry on. After all, a key part of our calling is to help students and the broader public remember our highest political aspirations. And for those of us privileged to do this work at a place like Calvin, we know that those aspirations come with a hope rooted in the redemptive work of Christ. That’s a hope that’s hard to forget.

- Kevin den Dulk

Leviathan Under New Leadership

This fall, Billy Fredericks took over as President of the Leviathan Political Science Club. The club works closely with the department in an effort to foster growth in the social aspect of the Political Science Department and establish long term friendships with other individuals pursuing similar careers and interests.

If you are a current or future Calvin student and would like to join the Leviathan Political Science club, please contact Billy Fredericks at wjf2@students.calvin.edu. Good luck Billy and thank you for all your hard work.
Department Welcomes New Professor: Micah Watson

This year, the Calvin College Political Science Department welcomes Professor Micah Watson. As our only current professor with a political theory as his or her primary field, I asked him what drew him to this sub-discipline. “What I find most engaging is talking with friends about the controversial issues,” he explains. “When they go well, those conversations end up revealing different takes on what life is supposed to look like, how we get along, what sort of community we can have, etc. I think those are fascinating questions, and they’re always with us.”

Professor Watson was originally drawn to Calvin as a result of attending conferences sponsored by the Henry Institute. It is through this experience that he gained insight into who Calvin and our political department is. “Calvin’s Reformed identity was also attractive to me, in part because learning and engaging the entire world (every inch) is part of the identity and not something that has to be established or argued for, as it is in some other streams of the Christian faith.”

When it comes to the classroom, Professor Watson claims partiality to the Socratic method. “This involves a lot of questions from the professor and some flexibility with how the discussion goes,” he explains. “As the professor I am supposed to have a baseline understanding of our topic as the ‘expert,’ but given we often are discussing things like justice and morality and their manifestation (or lack thereof) in society, I expect to hear from, and learn from, my students.” Enlisting this approach, and doing it well, requires three things, he shares. “First, a good teacher needs to have a masterful grasp of the ins and outs of the topic, and an understanding of why it matters. Second, a good teacher needs to have some understanding of the students, the audience. And third, a good teacher must be willing and able to find creative ways to bring the subject matter he or she has mastered into the lives of the students he or she is building relationships with.” After having him in class, Professor Watson hopes that his students learn to balance a Christian approach to politics that is discerning without being cynical. He hopes that students come away with “sharpened tools for understanding the world,” but also a hope that comes from knowing God is at work in this world.

Alumni Update: Alicia Smit

Alicia Smit graduated from Calvin College in 2015 with a double-major in Political Science and Philosophy. She is now in Washington D.C. pursuing a Master’s of Arts in Security Studies at Georgetown University. Her professional degree program teaches students how to become effective practitioners in the field of international security by equipping them to bridge the gap between theory and practice. “In the program, we gain knowledge on the theories people use to better understand the way the world works, and we compare them to cases to see how well theories fit with the reality,” Alicia explains. “Policymakers in Washington have praised Georgetown’s program because the students Georgetown graduates possess theoretical and historical knowledge, know how to use this knowledge appropriately and have the skills to do so effectively.”

When asked how she got involved in such a program, Alicia credits Professor Becca McBride, who as a graduate of Georgetown School of Foreign Services herself, encouraged Alicia to seek out graduate programs like the one she is in. “I saw that this type of professional program fit with my skills and career aspirations,” she says, “so I applied and was ecstatic when I was accepted.”

When asked what experiences helped prepared her for her graduate studies, she cites the writing assignments in specific political science classes as being especially helpful. “In this program, we do a lot of analyzing causes of events, tracing the logic, and arguing our theory,” she explains. “Additionally, it must be done in a clear and concise manner. The papers I wrote for Professor McBride and Professor Westra were great practice for my classes at Georgetown.” Outside of academic pursuits, Alicia cites her experience on Student Senate and as a student representative on governance committees as great preparation for her life as a grad student. “Through those activities, I developed management, interpersonal, organizational, and communication skills that are crucial for working in my field,” she says. “I experienced and contributed to Calvin politics, which has helped me better understand how organizations function.”

Alicia most enjoyed the relationships she developed while being a Calvin College Political Science major. “I would not be here without the guidance I received from professors and without opportunities I had thanks to them,” she explains. “They all opened so many doors for me, and it’s all because they truly care about their students, desire to get to know them well, and want to see them succeed.” The Political Science Department is excited to see where Alicia’s future takes her!
Calvin's international student body comes from literally all corners of the world. International students from disparate cultures and backgrounds often find commonality and community with each other, despite their vast differences. Through a new program organized by Calvin alumnus Daniel Kim, Calvin's international students are contributing their cultural knowledge and language skills to a critical problem in West Michigan: reuniting refugees with lost family members. Daniel Kim, a 2014 grad with an International Relations degree, has been interested in all things global since a young age. He recalls a specific moment as a young boy when his passion for international issues was ignited: "As a kid, I watched the first official concert performed by Americans in North Korea. As the New York Philharmonic, led by conductor Lorin Maazel, played, I was stunned to hear them playing Korea's national anthem. The music was more than just instruments, it was a melody of world peace, love, and hope for unification of two Koreas. For me, this concert shed a light on the power of diplomacy and humanitarian action." While studying at Calvin, three of Daniel's internships, working with refugees at Lutheran Social Services and Civilian Fellowship for International Exchange, and working with global social workers at World Renew, deepened his understanding of challenges facing refugees. After graduating from Calvin, Daniel landed an International Services Associate and Instructor position with the American Red Cross, an ideal opportunity for him to make a real impact on the lives of refugees in West Michigan. When refugees flee their countries, seeking safety from violence and threats, they frequently lose contact with loved ones in the chaos of their escape. They are shifted from refugee camp to camp, country to country, before they're finally resettled in a long-term home. They rely on organizations like the American Red Cross to help them reconnect with lost loved ones. A critical piece of making those reconnections happen is the ability to communicate in specific languages. To increase the local Red Cross' success rate, Daniel dreamed up the idea of harnessing the power of Calvin's international student body. He created the Global Language Bank program, in which student volunteers or interns use their language skills to search out lost loved ones as well as enhance refugees' lives in other ways. Currently, the program is composed of twelve international students from Calvin, conducting humanitarian work such as translating and interpreting for refugees, writing cultural journals, creating educational videos, and more. The interns collectively speak more than 15 languages and are available seven days a week. The Global Language Bank provides in-person and over-the-phone interpretation as well as written translations. One of the interns, J.T. Lee, said of his experience working with the Global Language Bank, "This internship is a unique opportunity to use different cultures and languages to serve people around the world. The Global Language Bank symbolizes the beauty of diversity and the power of collaboration." The Calvin students' willingness to contribute their time and talents has not gone unrecognized by the American Red Cross. The program is seen as a model, and the organization is pursuing ways to implement similar programs nationwide. And as for Daniel Kim, he has been awarded the Red Cross' "Member of the Month" for the State of Michigan in honor of his vision for and implementation of this program.

**Students Gain Research Insight through Statewide Conference**

This October, the annual Michigan Political Science Association conference came to Grand Rapids. Hosted at Aquinas College, this conference invites political scientists from all over the state to present their research. Professor Pelz teaches Political Science Research Methods, POLS 251, and decided to take advantage of this conference and expose his students to the limitless of topics to be explored in Political Science and the environment in which research around those topics is shared and debated. One of Professor Pelz’s students, Nick Aukerman, discovered just that. "I thoroughly enjoyed my experience at the MIPSA conference. The panels that I attended were lively and filled with energetic debate. Multiple perspectives converged to illustrate a particular issue, while simultaneously adding varying alternative ‘remedies’ to said problem(s).”

Nick appreciated not only the presentation of a variety ideas and their debate, but also learning more about the process of research itself, which is just what Professor Pelz had hoped. “I hope that students can place their research for 251 into the broader context,” he shared, “and realize that what they’re doing is not different than what scholars are doing today. I hope they see that research is collaborative and sharing your work is a necessary step in the process.”

Another POLS 251 student, Angela Kostelyk, realized this important aspect of research while attending. “Research doesn’t happen in isolation,” she explained. “Even when a large portion of the work is done alone, you still need other people to bounce your ideas off of—to show you what you may have missed or give suggestions to what you can improve.” Both students shared that the experience was valuable and something they’d recommend to other students in the future, stating that it was important to see what political science research looks like outside of a classroom context.

The students of the Political Science Research Methods class also presented their own research to the public at an event on campus at the end of the semester.
This fall, students are preparing to participate in the Paul B. Henry Semester in Washington D.C. program. They are joining a multitude of students who went before them and had great success. Two current political science students, Matthias Struble and Kjh-Lajhni Sanford, shared some of their thoughts about their upcoming semesters in Washington D.C.

Both Matthias and Kjh-Lajhni expressed nervousness about transitioning to life in a new, and very large, city. “I have never lived in a large, professional city, so I am a little anxious as to how smoothly I can transition between Michigan and Washington,” Matthias explains. Kjh-Lajhni agrees, noting that public transportation is a point of apprehension for her. Both can take comfort, however, in the fact that for many past D.C. Semester students, living in our nation’s capital was one of their favorite parts of the experience. Susanna Lynch, who participated in the program in 2010, said that exploring D.C. with her classmates was one of her semester’s greatest privileges. She shares, “How many people can say their metro stop was Union Station, saw cross-country skiers along Capitol Hill during ‘Snowmageddon’, and visited the U.S. Botanic Garden on their weekend walks?”

When apprehension caused her to question participating, Kjh-Lajhni received encouragement from past participant Jona Eigege. She was told that her time spent there would aid in her learning in a way that nothing else could. Similar to Kjh-Lajhni, Scott Tipton, a participant in the 2013 Semester, received reassurance to apply for the semester. “I draw from my D.C. Semester experiences every day,” he says, “and I am very thankful to those who encouraged me to participate. On a personal level, I grew tremendously during the D.C. program.”

Matthias is especially excited for the opportunities that this semester will bring for his future career. “I would really like to be involved in policy making someday,” he explains, “and I think the Calvin D.C. program is a great springboard for me to get involved with some key organizations in the policy-making arena.” He can take heart in knowing the role the D.C. Semester played in many of his predecessors’ careers. Scott Tipton shares the following: “My internship was a perfect fit, and contributed immensely to my professional growth and interests. Coupled with rigorous academic coursework, my experiences in Washington provided a strong foundation as I transitioned out of college and into my current position.” Ryan Hunt, a participant in the first Henry Semester in 2000, shares Scott’s sentiments. “I consider my Washington semester to be pivotal in leading me where I am today,” he says. “I learned that my Calvin education prepared me just as well or better for the working world as people with advanced degrees from big name schools.”

We’re so excited for this spring’s Paul Henry Semester in Washington D.C. We wish Kjh-Lajhni, Matthias, and all the other participants the best of luck.

Alumni Travel Opportunity: Prague, Vienna & Budapest

Corwin Smidt, a Henry Institute Fellow and former political science professor, will be leading an alumni trip through the beautiful capital cities of central Europe: Prague, Vienna, and Budapest. The early bird registration deadline is February 1st. Visit https://www.calvin.edu/offices-services/alumni-association/travel for details.

Department Picks

Calvary

Calvary stars Brendan Gleeson as a modern-day Irish priest named Father James. During confession, one of his parishioners tells him that he’s going to kill him in one week’s time, not because Father James is a bad priest, but because he’s a good one. The murderer-to-be’s identity is kept from the audience, but we learn in excruciating detail about how this person was abused at the hands of another Catholic priest. The film follows Father James over the next week as he celebrates the Eucharist, meets with prisoners, reconciles with his daughter (he was a widower before the priesthood), and generally tries to minister to his flock. It a disturbing story, filled with beauty, forgiveness, loss and grotesque evil. It is not a popcorn movie, nor Sunday School safe, but if you are interested in themes of faith and evil and grace then I would recommend it to you.

- Professor Micah Watson

The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq

By Michael R. Gordon and Gen. Bernard E. Trainor


- Professor Joel Westra