



Meese meets with students at 10 Stone Avenue.

Visitors days

By William Bole

A year-old seminar draws undergraduates to wide-angle economics

On a warm, sunny afternoon in September, Colonel Michael J. Meese strode into 10 Stone Avenue, headquarters of Boston College's Institute for the Liberal Arts, after a four-hour drive from West Point, New York, where he teaches economics at the United States Military Academy. Meese fixed himself a cup of coffee and was shown to his office, a sparsely furnished room set aside for guests. He draped his dress blue Army blazer over one side of the desk, opened his laptop, and greeted his first appointment, economics doctoral student John O'Trakoun.

O'Trakoun, tall and slender and wearing a gray T-shirt and blue jeans, was there to discuss his dissertation topic with Meese, who has served as a senior military economic advisor during four deployments in Iraq and two in Afghanistan. "I'm interested in economics and conflict, and how economic uncertainty drives con-

flict," said the student, whose parents fled hostilities in Laos in the mid-1970s (and recalibrated their surname after settling in Poughkeepsie, New York).

Meese suggested ways of quantifying this dynamic as he perused a 16-page outline of O'Trakoun's dissertation, tentatively titled "Prices, Uncertainty, and Intrastate Conflict." The colonel leaned back in his chair and smiled when he arrived at pages with data charts. "For an economics dissertation, it's not required that your approach match reality," he said with a wry chuckle. "But it's a happy coincidence when it does, and your research seems to do that."

Meese was on campus September 26 and 27 to participate in an economic policy seminar supported by Boston College's Institute for the Liberal Arts (ILA), which aims to nurture conversations across disciplinary lines. The cross-fertilizing topic of his two days was the economics of

national security. After nearly half an hour with O'Trakoun and another meeting to discuss data sources with two undergraduates assisting an economist with research on World War II, he donned his blazer and black beret and walked across Beacon Street to Higgins Hall. There he presented a talk, "Conflict and Post-Conflict Economics: The Case of Afghanistan," to the undergraduate students of the International Economic Policy and Political Economy Seminar (EC 295).

Launched in September 2010, the seminar brings prominent scholars and policymakers to Chestnut Hill for presentations and discussion. Meese was the first visitor of this academic year. Eight others, including George A. Akerlof, a Nobel laureate in economics from the University of California, Berkeley, have been lined up for the fall. Jorge Braga de Macedo, a Portuguese economist who served as his strapped country's finance minister from 1991 to 1993, was set to speak to the class on September 12, but had to bow out and reschedule after Portugal's Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho asked him for a report on the rapidly escalating European debt crisis.

Twenty-one undergraduates—with majors in political science, international studies, and other subjects, including economics—enrolled in the one-credit course for the fall semester. The seminar is also offered in the spring. The talks, usually delivered on Monday afternoons, are open to all students and faculty (graduate students and professors often double the number in attendance). Informal conversations between guests and students, both one-on-one and in small groups—sometimes over lunch or dinner—are also arranged through the seminar.

Fabio Ghironi is the Boston College associate professor of economics who conceived of and coordinates EC 295. A specialist in monetary economics (he teaches a course called World Economy: Gold Standard to Globalization), Ghironi started thinking a couple of years ago about how most economics seminars emphasize "technique," with a strong reliance on statistical tools and mathematical models. What was needed, he says, was a course featuring presenters who would "leave the fancy footwork out . . . and talk

about the substance” of international economic policy issues. Around that time, the Institute for the Liberal Arts began supporting programs in which guest speakers—writers, musicians, philosophers, social scientists—stay on for a period of days to work closely with students and faculty from varied departments and disciplines. “That created an opening for the kind of seminar I had in mind,” said the Italian-born Ghironi, who is also a visiting scholar at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

MEESE LECTURED TO NEARLY 50 students, with several professors on hand. He started off by noting that as he was departing Afghanistan this past summer, General John Allen asked if he’d like to sign on for yet another deployment. The colonel drew laughs by relating his apocryphal response to the commander of U.S. forces: He couldn’t stay because he had to speak to Fabio’s students on September 26. The lesson, he added: “Never go to Afghanistan unless you have a good exit strategy.”

Standing at a lectern, Meese clicked on a PowerPoint slide with a chart indicating diminishing levels of “enemy action” in different parts of Afghanistan. His point was that security is a pillar of economic development, partly because it lowers the price of delivering goods and services. “And this goes right back to your dissertation,” Meese said, motioning toward the second row where John O’Trakoun sat, scribbling notes on a yellow legal pad. Meese allowed that the military has found little use for pure free-market ideology in confronting Afghanistan’s economic challenges. Abolishing price controls, for example, would likely contribute to political unrest, he said.

Following the hour-and-a-half seminar, Meese returned to the ILA offices with two doctoral students, two professors, and an undergraduate for further discussion (students in the seminar are required to join at least one of these small sessions). Seated around the table in a small conference room, the group considered questions such as why the United States doesn’t just convert its military spending to economic assistance in Afghanistan—a point raised by Mikhail Dmitriev, a fourth-

year doctoral student in economics from Russia. “That’s a great idea,” Meese replied in a supportive tone—“and it would be impossible to do politically. There’s literally no support for that in Congress.”

The colonel’s next stop was Tartufo in Newton Centre, where a reconfigured group of five students and professors joined him and his wife, Ramona, for dinner. Estelle Baik ’12, a Slavic studies major, was part of the mix. Born in Los Angeles, she spent 13 years of her childhood in Russia with her Korean-born parents and is an Air Force ROTC cadet. Baik said she enrolled in the seminar because she is writing a senior thesis on Far East Russian economics. One of the topics she commented on during dinner was the impact of political corruption on economies. “My parents still often talk about the corruption that was all around us in Russia,” said Baik, who also garnered plenty of advice from Meese about mili-

tary assignments and opportunities for graduate study.

The following day before returning to West Point, Meese met at 8:30 A.M. with six ROTC cadets and the University’s ROTC company commander, Major Brandon Russell, in a Maloney Hall faculty lounge. Among other subjects, this group took up broad matters of politics (Meese presented poll findings to suggest that military people are more moderate in their views than the general population) and moral philosophy (“What does it mean to be a professional?” Meese asked).

Ghironi says a principal aim of EC 295 is to nurture policy conversations that might not otherwise take place, involving people who might not otherwise be having them. The professor admits to being largely unversed in the economics of national security. Now, he says, he and others on campus are beginning to ask questions like “What are the tools for controlling price dynamics in a conflict situation?” ■

Data file: The Class of 2015

2014: Mean SAT score (on a scale of 2400), an all-time high

1,147/966: Women/men

616: AHANA (African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American) students, 29.2 percent of the class

325: Legacy students, 15.4 percent of the class

119: International students, from 24 countries

47: Percent of class from the three states sending the highest number of students—Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey

43: States represented, plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands

33.4: Percent of Carroll School of Management freshmen who are female

15.8: Percentage of Lynch School of Education freshmen who are male

3: Commuting students

1: Number of freshmen from each of the following: Alaska, Idaho, Nevada, Wyoming

0: Students from the following states: Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Utah, West Virginia

32,974: Number of applications submitted, a new record