

NAFAC 2018 Overview

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From April 10-12, the Naval Academy Foreign Affairs Conference (NAFAC) 2018 brought something very unique to the Yard. Inspired by experts' views on autocracy and current freedoms in the world, Naval Academy Midshipmen, as well as undergraduate students from across the country and the globe, had the opportunity to discuss this year's theme: *Guarding Liberty in a World of Democratic Undoing*. They debated some of the most complex and difficult problems democracy is facing today.

The first day of NAFAC 2018 was complete with intellectual energy, insightful questions, and powerful dialogue, all centered on the day's theme: Modern Autocracy. The Academy was honored to host several distinguished speakers for the day's events. The opening address was given by Dr. Timothy Snyder of Yale University. A historian on Central and Eastern European dictatorships, Dr. Snyder is the author of *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the 20th Century*. Some of his lessons included how individuals should make their own decisions in "abnormal situations", how one conversation is never enough to change opinions, and how the growing use of patriotic expressions and the inattentive repetition of political catchphrases can be detrimental to society. These, he argued, are among the keys to fending off tyranny. The conference also heard from a notable panel consisting of Dr. Yascha Mounk, author of *The People vs. Democracy*; Ms. Elisa Massimino, president and CEO of *Human Rights First*; and Ambassador Ryan Crocker. Focusing on modern authoritarianism, they discussed the recent "Democratic Regression," as well as America's role in an era of developing Autocracy. The evening concluded with a Forrestal Lecture given by Admiral Kurt W. Tidd, USN, Commander of United States Southern Command. He discussed Latin America's role in our national security and defense strategies today. Admiral Tidd asserted that in order to defend democracy, the whole world needs to become more adaptable and more grounded in the humanities. His speech prompted several questions from midshipmen and civilian students alike, and he left the conference with an inspiring quote: "Ships are steered by stars, not their wake. So we must look ahead towards our shared future, not the past."

The second day of the conference contained more great speakers who challenged common understandings of democracy, freedom, and human rights. The opening panel consisted of Mr. Douglas Farah, President of IBI Consultants and Senior Visiting Fellow of National Defense University; Dr. Lilia Shevtsova, Senior Fellow at Brookings Institution and Associate Fellow at the Chatham House; and Dr. Ernest Tucker, Director of the United States Naval Academy Center for Regional Studies. Some highlights of the panel included what Dr. Shevtsova considers as the "Second Cold War" between Russia and the West, thoughts about an increasingly more authoritarian Latin America, and Turkey's transformation from a European Union membership candidate to an autocracy. A keynote address by Dr. Hal Brands, the Henry A Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, shocked attendees with facts on the trend of global politics today. Though the United States had uncontested dominance in world politics after the Cold War, which led to

an incredible rise in democracy, there has been a sudden stall in democracy—nearly 115 countries have declined in their overall freedom since 2000. This instilled in the delegates a sense of urgency, as was seen by the great number of follow-up questions.

What makes NAFAC especially unique as an undergraduate conference is the Round Table discussions. Throughout the first two days of the conference, delegates; including Academy and ROTC cadets/midshipmen, civilian undergraduate students, and students from 30 different countries; broke out into groups where they engaged in discussion about a predetermined topic. Some of these topics included “Modern Autocracy: Order vs. Liberty”, “Russia’s Subversion of Democracy”, “The Future of the European Project”, “Free Press and Media Under Assault”, and “Is Human Rights Promotion Worth it Anymore?” Led by their midshipmen moderators and senior advisors, delegates offered their own insight and research to advance their conversations to a complex level. The various social events throughout the conference also aided in facilitating conversation and mutual understanding of different cultures. From the first Round Table to the last, delegates were able to open with an issue, question historical and modern trends, challenge each other’s viewpoints, and ultimately pinpoint realities of today’s democratic undoing.

The final day of NAFAC was an exciting one. It began with a lecture from Mr. Michael Abramowitz, the president of the Freedom House. He spoke of the importance of accurate American news in an age of rising popularity of social media and quick release of information. He was followed by a panel consisting of Mr. Christian Caryl, editor for the Washington Post’s Global Opinion section; Dr. Torrey Taussig, Post-Doctoral Fellow of the Brookings Institution Center on the US and Europe; and Mr. Sean Faley, founder of Fast Ship Analytics. With the theme “Guarding Liberty”, the panelists discussed how new technological capabilities are rapidly advancing the spread of propaganda.

The conference culminated in a simulation, created by MIDN 1/C Maddie Farr and 3/C Samuel Winegar. The simulation modeled a democratic rule attempting to take power and create an autocratic state. Each Round Table group was assigned one of five different actors within the fictional nation of Pothos: the military/intelligence community, an oil company, the country-wide newspaper, the minority political party, and the country’s dominant social media platform. The delegates took the simulation seriously, and they used what they had learned during the conference to make decisions together. Ultimately, each of the three groups lost the fight against autocracy, showing that defending democracy in the face of an impending autocratic threat is no easy feat.