

## Writing As Power: an Interview with Callie Smith, winner of the 2008 U.S. Institute of Peace Essay Contest *by David Cook*

In 2008, Callie Smith of Chattanooga, Tennessee, placed first in the U.S. Institute of Peace's Essay Contest on the topic of *Natural Resources and Conflict*. Students were asked to submit a 1500 word essay, stating what they believe are the necessary elements for the development of fair, peaceful, or effective uses of natural resources after a conflict. Callie's essay was titled "Resolving Water Conflicts through the Establishment of Water Authorities" and focused on water issues in Central Asia. Nearly 1000 students from across the U.S. entered the contest, and winners were flown to Washington D.C. for a three-day ceremony.

Callie's award winning essay is available online at [www.usip.org/ed/npec/](http://www.usip.org/ed/npec/). It was written during her English class, taught by Ms. Katy Berotti, during Callie's junior year at Girls Preparatory School in Chattanooga. Callie is a member of the Young Republicans and was recently elected to the Honor Council. The school's mission statement professes that GPS designs its education "to promote active citizenship (so that) students will engage in learning that broadens their intellectual horizons and deepens their understanding of the political, social, cultural, environmental, spiritual, and economic issues affecting the world today."

### **What has this experience taught you?**

It has been really interesting. Previously I hadn't paid extensive attention to the world. I was more focused on local problems, but this experience opened me up to the globe and made me more aware of problems beyond my immediate community. Now I've established a greater empathy with those around the world who are locked in misfortune — I now see them as human beings, rather than statistics. Additionally, I've come to realize that I have the ability to voice my opinions and work to make a difference in the lives of people half-way across the world, even as a 17 year-old. Plus, before my research, I had not thought of water as a source of tension — it had always simply been just a liquid and a resource to me. But now I see that water can be such a turbulent matter.

### **Has all of this changed your relationship with water?**

Beforehand I took it for granted. I had and have perfect access to it. Of course, I had heard of people who didn't have access to water, but the problem didn't really register with me. Now I see how water has major political, economic, and social repercussions. It is not just a natural resource; invested in it are power struggles and the needs of many to keep themselves and their families alive. It's a very complex issue that's pertinent to the entire world. Even in my home state of Tennessee, we have recently been facing conflicts over water with Georgia. It's incredible how water can turn people's lives upside down all over the world and, in some cases, bring them to the brink of war. Right now, I think the best way to solve conflicts over water or other natural resources is to set up an unbiased central authority which can mediate between the opposing parties and ensure that there's an equal distribution of power and resources. I also think international aid and involvement is critical.

### **You define yourself as a conservative, but what you just described is not a conservative argument.**

I'm becoming a little more moderate (laughs), despite my very conservative upbringing. I believe we need to see beyond party lines at times and, in this situation, I believe that interference by a central agency is vital. I recognize it is a liberal viewpoint, but this situation cannot resolve itself because people are blinded by their own prejudices and needs; these types of conflicts cannot be resolved single-handedly. You need some sort of outside intervention and help.

### **Has this changed the way you see other issues?**

It has made me more aware how extensively government is necessary to society and its crucial role as an arbitrator between differing interests. I still don't believe that government involvement is needed in all circumstances, but sometimes a central authority is a key to peace. It also has made me realize that the littlest thing can have the biggest ramifications. You know, a couple drops of water could upset a whole region of the world.

### **How do you define peace?**

I see two ways to define it: idealistically or realistically. I think idealistic peace is the complete cessation of all violence and hostilities, replaced with harmonious global relationships which are characterized by mutual respect, communication, and goodwill. Oppression would give way to equality and a widespread democratic spirit. And, consequently, society would undergo constant, positive development. But this is not probable. Realistically, peace is the majority of people sharing a mindset to work towards the betterment of society, to work towards the decrease of violence and oppression, and realize that nothing is going to be perfect. In short, realistic peace is always trying to work towards an idealistic peace.

### **Are you against all violence?**

I still believe that in certain situations you have to fight fire with fire. I don't believe that terrorism and other atrocities will resolve themselves or be ended through mere discourse. However, I'm definitely opposed to senseless aggression and know that many situations can be resolved without warfare.

### **What's next for you?**

I like using writing to address issues, propose solutions, and contribute to the overall political discussion. I just think it's remarkable how we can use writing as power and a way to make our voices known. Next year [2009] I'll be heading off to college. Right now, I hope to study public policy and English, become more active in global society, and try to impact society positively. I'm excited!

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