

## Teaching Statement

William “Ajax” Peris, PhD

My first experience in professional teaching was in 1996 as a flight instructor for the US Air Force. My classroom was a cockpit, and the lessons were almost entirely focused on practical skills: takeoffs and landings, checklist procedures, aircraft systems management, and so on. This experience grounded my later teaching philosophy in practicality. Whether I’m teaching theories of political science, historical events, or the checks and balances system, I find the way in which the topic and material are practical and relevant to my students’ lives today. If it doesn’t matter to them, they have no reason to learn it. If I can express how it’s important to them, then they will *want* to learn it.

Teaching political science and national security topics at the undergraduate level for a decade at UCLA and Pepperdine University, I came to realize that most of my students, especially those who grew up in the US, already know a little about the workings of government and politics in the United States. While that knowledge can be a great jumping-off point for instruction, it often requires a bit of un-learning, as they only *think* they understand government and politics. I always enjoy the moment of revelation as I challenge their assumptions about functions of government and see in their eyes the glimmer of understanding as they connect what they think they know with the way things *really* work.

I enjoy using data as a way of piquing my students’ interest. There is nearly always a contemporary survey or metric that relates to a given lesson and shows them an unexpected relationship. I find this inspires in-class discussion and engages the students in the topic of the day. For an interdisciplinary course I taught with three other full professors on America in the 1960s, for example, I taught 250 freshmen how to process, interpret, and analyze data from the American National Election Study. As a result, they were surprised to learn that many young Americans supported the war in Vietnam in 1968, or that a majority of African Americans were happy with the pace of Civil Rights progress during the same period.

In aviation, we often differentiate between procedure and technique. Procedures are not open for discussion; some things simply have to be done a particular way. Techniques, on the other hand, are for those tasks that can be accomplished in a variety of ways, depending on what works best for the pilot and the situation. As a flight instructor, I tried to have three different techniques ready to teach for any given task. If the student struggled with one, I could offer a different method. In the classroom, I take a similar approach: If a student struggles with an idea, I strive to be prepared to offer an alternative way of looking at it. Different students will need different techniques, and some will need more than others.

Experience has taught me that students learn best when they are engaged in the process of learning in an interactive environment. In all my classrooms, whether 10 students or 250, I make a point to interact with students during the lesson. I ask questions designed less to elicit an answer and more to find out what they think. Often, I will take an opposing point of view to challenge them to consider *why* they think as they do.

## Teaching Statement

William "Ajax" Peris, PhD

Much of American politics is rooted in laws, policies, institutions, and practices that date back to our colonial history and beyond. To understand modern politics and government, it is important to have a historical perspective. I've often told my students, "This isn't a history class. You don't have to memorize the dates." Instead, I ask them to remember the context and principles. Rather than spend their time with rote memorization, I want them to understand how it all fits together, how historical events influenced political moments, which, in turn, inspired later events.

When teaching American politics, particularly topics relating to civil rights, the conversation often turns to frank discussions about race, gender, religion, sexuality, and gender identity. I strive to maintain an environment in which these conversations can fully explore the political issues while treating all people with dignity and respect. I use my personal perspective as a member of the LGBTQ+ community to inform my understanding of other marginalized groups so that I can teach the arguments both for and against expansions of civil rights policies. I believe that this practical understanding of the issue is important, though I teach it from the idealistic point of view that America's diversity is our strength, and equality is an achievable goal.

It's important to me to know my students' level of understanding as they walk into the classroom. This helps me shape the lesson to build on what they know, correct what they have wrong, and present the information in a way that best gets them where I want them to be in terms of understanding the subject of the lesson. A valuable tool for me has been the on-line student discussion forum. As I prepare for a class, I review their conversations about the assigned reading or homework and get a picture of what was clear to them and what they perhaps misunderstood. I then tailor my approach to the lesson appropriately.

To assess student performance, I prefer to have a variety of types of graded assignments to capture different abilities and levels of understanding. Daily homework assignments are a simple way to engage students in application of course material. I like to use quizzes before a lesson to assess comprehension of the reading assignments, as well as to encourage students to make sure they do the reading before class. My comprehensive exams usually include recollection of basic facts, short explanations of concepts to demonstrate understanding, and longer essays in which students must apply several ideas from different lessons to a relevant political issue. Term paper assignments are a great way to see how students engage the material when they have more time to do independent research and craft an organized, thoughtful analytical argument. Many of my classes include an evaluation of student participation, both in-class and in the on-line forums, as I think the ability to express oneself, verbally and through writing, is critical to success in the modern workforce.

To date I have prepared and taught undergraduate courses covering basic American politics and government, congress and election strategy, the US national security infrastructure, partisan realignment, the politics of various civil rights movements, and the politics of America in the 1960s. In the future, I'd like to add to this list topics including research methods, political and economic inequality, and the influence of religion in American politics.