Eckerd College Students Respond to the 50-Year Sentence Imposed Upon Charles Taylor, Former President of Liberia, by the Special Court for Sierra Leone (May 30, 2012)

The Court Hearing had a significant impact on the Eckerd College students attending the session as part of “The Hague and International Law” class taught by political science professor Bill Felice. Here are some of their thoughts:

Chelsea Bliss (Junior): “As the curtain rose and Charles Taylor was sitting directly in front of me I felt conflicted. There he was; this person I had heard so many horror stories about. I was shocked though. He looked normal. It was hard for me to believe that this old man was this horrific killer, when he looked like someone’s sweet grandfather. He sat there happy, cheerful. He had no remorse. There was no sign on his face that he was about to hear his fate, the fate of what could be the rest of his life. He waved up to me smiling. I felt sick. The trial started. I felt connected with the past evidence as the judge reviewed and summed up the case. I cried as I heard the stories of the victims. I studied Taylor’s reaction. His cheerful attitude was gone, but nothing replaced it. He was transfixed, unemotional, and impossible to read. He refused to look into the camera directly. He just sat and listened. I didn’t know how to react to him. I was crying and he sat there unemotional.”

Chad Foreman (Senior): “What we witnessed was the culmination of a process that not only brought about the end of impunity for heads of state, but also the deliverance of justice to the many victims and their families in Sierra Leone. And, as the Sierra Leoneans often say in this case, there can be no peace without justice. It is my hope that we are one step closer to achieving that goal.”

Lee Staley (Junior): “Turn the clock back to the post World War II era of the Nuremberg Tribunals. The world has changed immensely, since the time of Nuremberg. But, the concept and practice of international justice remains powerful, successful, and necessary. The world reshapes itself with every passing moment, but the rule of law remains steadfast. My hope is that the actions of those who possess the malign will or ability to brutalize humanity in the way demonstrated in the case of C. Taylor will be dissuaded, and that future generations can look to this day as a watershed event in the provision of peace and liberty for people across the globe.”

Kaitlyn Lantz (Junior): “Taylor’s sentencing has strong potential to catalyze a new standard of justice. A precedent has been set for other nations to
follow and for corrupt officials to fear. The accountability established will deter leaders from aiding violent groups, and encourage responsible reign over one’s country. Amnesty is no longer sufficient or acceptable justice.”

**Alex Simpson** (Senior): “Having witnessed the sentencing of Charles Taylor, I feel a greater appreciation for the strength of international law and international justice. Charles Taylor is certainly not the last President to commit and support gross human rights atrocities, but he is the first Head of State to answer for heinous crimes on an international level [since WWII]. The precedent set by his conviction and sentencing is of priceless value to the future rule of law...allowing that justice be provided for those peoples whose hopes were betrayed.”

**Danielle Grant** (Senior): “This experience has opened my eyes and heart to the international justice system and its practicality. The precedent set through the conviction of Charles Taylor will strongly influence the world's view of international humanitarian law. It sends a powerful message to current and future heads of state, which will act as a deterrent for others considering committing human rights violations. The conviction has restored hope for the people of Sierra Leone and for myself as well.”

**Colton Thomas** (Junior): “To personally witness the first head of state convicted and sentenced since the Nuremberg trials after WWII was truly a life changing experience.”

**Tony Leyh** (Senior): “To see Taylor, solemnly and stoically, listening to an explicit, detailed recapitulation of the numerous human rights atrocities for which he was convicted symbolizes the increasing legitimacy and strength of the international legal system. Often times, international law is criticized for being weak and spineless due to its lack of enforcement mechanisms and lack of international consent. However, Charles Taylor’s sentencing of 50 years (which is essentially a life sentence considering his age) serves as an apt repudiation of those criticisms. The experience of Taylor’s sentencing demonstrates a momentous and pivotal moment of international law; but perhaps more importantly, it represents the manifestation of an international consciousness committed to justice. Personally, to witness this historic occasion fosters an appreciation for humanity at large because it seems that a global citizenry is finally being established that respects the intrinsic value of the human being.”