On Monday, March 2, 2015, William Hitchcock from the University of Virginia (UVA) gave a lecture entitled "Why the First World War Still Matters: Reflections on the Centennial, 1914-2014" as part of the Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series.

After a brief introduction from Einaudi Center Director and Vice Provost for International Affairs Fred Logevall, Dr. Hitchcock organized his lecture with three underlying themes: the origins of WWI, the difficulties of building a stable peace after WWI, and the impact of WWI on soldiers. In each section, Dr. Hitchcock drew connections between WWI and the most recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Dr. Hitchcock and framed the discussion on the origins of WWI in five concentric circles. The four outer circles were the shifting balance of power in Europe at the time, the level of threat perception and what each state saw as the principal threat to its security, domestic politics in each state, and the weight of the military within each state’s government. The outbreak of the war was the center circle. He elaborated on how the first World War engulfed the entire world, with reasons varying from structural and economic factors like the shifting balance of power to domestic politics and threat perception.

In doing so, Hitchcock tied the events preceding WWI to the events preceding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the origins of peace and its subsequent “legitimacy” in both contexts. In his words, “throw in nuclear weapons, and you have 2015.”

Finally, Dr. Hitchcock discussed the human conditions surrounding WWI, Iraq, and Afghanistan. He addressed the differences in scale, then and now, but he also noted the similarities in the experiences that soldiers (then and now) shared, ranging from extreme physical discomfort to shell shock or what is now known as PTSD.

Dr. Hitchcock concluded his lecture with a quote: “Our public discourse is heavy with the language of war, and the tragedy of it is that those voices will always be able to find some young
people to answer the call. As in WWI, so in our own time, it will be the young who have to pay the terrible price of war.”

The Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series features prominent leaders in international affairs who can address topical issues from a variety of perspectives. The Speaker Series is part of the Foreign Policy Initiative at Cornell University led by the Einaudi Center to maximize the intellectual impact of Cornell's outstanding resources in this area.