Professor Coleman

English 301

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Portfolio Cover Letter

Dear Portfolio Reader,

After consideration of my development as a writer during the semester, I have decided to include my visual rhetoric paper, Toulmin argument paper, and research paper in my portfolio. The portfolio demonstrates my growth as a rhetorician from my first paper (visual rhetoric) to my final paper (research), showing how my level of organization and ability to support my claims has increased. Upon entering this class, my writing was broad in nature and lacked the specificity required of effective academic writing. I did not know how to support my claims with outside evidence; instead, I often relied on my own personal opinions and beliefs. I soon realized that such a writing style would not work effectively at the university level, and that I needed to structure my papers differently in order to bolster my claims. As you progress through my portfolio, I respectfully ask you to notice how my writing style has evolved from paper to paper (and from draft to draft). In the first drafts of my visual rhetoric paper, my claims are defined very broadly, and I again respectfully ask you to note the contrast between those claims and the specific nature of the claims found in my research paper’s final draft.

After this letter, you will find the first assignment that I have included is my visual rhetoric paper. For this essay, I analyzed the Democratic National Committee’s (DNC) website.
More specifically, I examined the website’s layout, use of color and textual schemes, and pictures of President Barack Obama. I chose to include this paper in my portfolio because I would like to provide a foundation from which my writing developed over the semester. One significant revision I made from my early drafts to my final draft occurred in how I structured the main claims of my paragraphs. For instance, in the third paragraph of my visual rhetoric paper’s second draft, I began by discussing the “colors red, white, and blue” and noting that these “are the colors of the United States’ flag” (Visual Rhetoric, pg. 2). However, the paragraph ended with me discussing President “Obama’s compassionate nature” (pg. 3). Thus, I had started a paragraph on one claim and ended it on an entirely separate claim, creating a discontinuity in my claims and making them difficult for the reader to follow. In contrast, the third paragraph of my paper’s final draft maintains continuity in its claims. The paragraph begins with me analyzing the “colors red, white, and blue” and concludes with me describing how a “repetitive use” of these colors occurs throughout the website (pgs. 2-3). The revision of my third paragraph is just one instance of how I worked on the organization of my paper through its four drafts. If I had more time to work on this paper, I would again look at the DNC’s website, which is updated daily, to see what changes have been made to it since I wrote my paper. I would then compare the two versions of the website and analyze how the DNC’s rhetorical strategy had changed or stayed the same. Furthermore, I would examine how details such as color scheme or the use of pictures had been altered during the time span.

The next essay I have included in my portfolio is my Toulmin argument paper, which shows my progression as a writer through my ability to support my claims. My main argument in the paper is that the Electoral College system needs to be abolished in the U.S. and replaced with a popular vote system, in which the candidate with the most votes becomes the president.
In the early drafts of my paper, I had many unsupported claims, meaning that I would state a fact but not attribute the fact to any source. For example, the introductory paragraph of my paper’s second draft contained many of these unsupported claims. One claim mentioned that a state’s electoral votes were determined by “its number of U.S. House members plus its two U.S. Senators,” while another claim stated that “a candidate must receive at least 270 electoral votes to be declared the winner” (Toulmin, pg. 1). While these facts were common knowledge to me as a political science major, I realized that they were not common knowledge to my audience. As a result, I needed to find a credible source from which I could cite these facts, in order to establish my credibility (ethos) with my audience. Thus, I consulted the online writings of Robert Longley, who works for The New York Times Company. Longley’s writings confirmed my earlier statements about the Electoral College, as did my further research, allowing me to cite him in my revised introductory paragraph. In this revised paragraph, I cited Longley, MSNBC’s Chris Matthews, and Illinois Senator Richard Durbin to confirm all my claims regarding the Electoral College (pgs. 1-2). The two aforementioned claims, previously unsupported, were now properly supported and cited, as were my further claims in the introductory paragraph about what happens if the election “goes to the U.S. House of Representatives” (pgs. 1-2). With additional time to work on this assignment, I would continue looking for ways to support my claims more effectively. As further supporting evidence, I could contact the offices of various congressmen, in an effort to ask them to share their feelings about the Electoral College.

Finally, I have included my research paper (written in the Rogerian argument format), which demonstrates my learning in regard to paragraph organization. My main claim in the research paper is that the United States is a global economic hegemon in decline, due to its large national debt and unskilled labor force. One instance of a change in paragraph organization
occurred in the paragraph where I discussed common ground surrounding my topic. In the early drafts of my paper, my section concerning common ground discussed how “both sides view the United States’ global economic stature as at a key crossroads point, due to the financial crisis and subsequent stock market crash of 2008” (Research, pg. 5). Upon revision of my paper, I found that this claim turned out to be a difference, rather than a similarity, between my views and the views of those disagree with me. The “crossroads” which I spoke of was viewed by me as signal of economic decline, while my dissidents viewed it as a sign of continued economic growth. Due to this disparity in view points, I needed to revise my section regarding common ground, and find another point in my argument upon which all sides agreed. In the final draft of my research paper, I revised this section to focus on the shared “belief that the U.S. government should do a better job in its funding of technological research and development” (pg. 6). A careful check of sources from all sides of the argument showed that this belief was indeed common ground, thereby allowing me to correct my earlier organizational mistake. If given more time to work on this essay, I would seek to develop my paper’s section regarding common ground even further because the Rogerian argument format focuses on finding compromise with one’s opponents, not declaring one side victorious over another. Through this additional development, I would be able to understand both sides of my topic in even greater detail, thereby allowing me to more effectively reach out to my dissenters.

As I continue my academic career, I know there are some areas as a writer in which I need to continue honing my skills. One of these areas deals with the organization of my papers, specifically, the nature in which I include both summary and argumentation. Currently, I still struggle with using too much summary in my papers, especially in the Rogerian argument format. As seen by Professor Coleman’s comments on the second draft of my research paper, I
tend to remove myself from the argument and let other people make my claims for me. Instead, I need to assert myself in the argument and make my own, supported claims throughout the course of the paper. If I simply rely on the arguments of others, my readers will be left wondering where I stand on a certain issue, causing me to lose credibility as a writer with my vague and unclear claims. In addition, I need to continue working on my ability to accurately cite my sources, especially in papers which involve a wide variety of them. As you go through my portfolio, you will notice that many of my citations have been altered from draft to draft, due to the fact that I did not use MLA citation correctly in many instances. These citation issues have been fixed with careful revision; however, I must remain vigilant in consistently providing accurate citations to my readers. Citations are very important because they help me establish my credibility (ethos) with the audience. Proper use of citations will help me establish my ethos because my audience will see that I have respect for the work of others. In turn, if I show respect for the work of others, my audience is more likely to respect my own work and ideas. On the other hand, if I fail to use proper citation, it will be much harder to establish my credibility. Thus, even if I use effective methods of argumentation in my writing, my claims will fall short of their marks due to the audience’s lack of faith in my credibility. Going forward, I feel confident that I can continue improving my writing skills, which will allow me to grow as a student of rhetoric. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and the enclosed essays.

Sincerely,
Is the United States a Global Economic Hegemon in Decline?

In September of 2008, global financial markets around the globe were sent into a state of economic freefall; within a few days, markets lost thousands of points in total share volume (Williams, “A Financial Crisis in America”). These total share volumes, which are the number of shares bought and sold in a specific period of time, act as measures of the market’s overall strength/weakness (“A Financial Crisis in America”). Thus, the higher the total share volume, the stronger the market, and vice versa. The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which is measured at the New York Stock Exchange on Wall Street, went from a total volume of approximately 10,000 shares to a volume of around 6,500 shares within a matter of days, a drop unheard of since the Great Depression (“A Financial Crisis in America”). With this sudden global financial meltdown, economies all around the world felt its stinging impact. The United States, as the world’s largest economy with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of around $14 trillion, took a dramatic hit as millions of Americans lost their jobs, savings, and homes within a few short months (“A Financial Crisis in America”). According to a November 2010 report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor & Statistics, the United States’ debt has now reached approximately $13.7 trillion, and the national unemployment rate has soared to 9.8% (U.S. Department of Labor). With the U.S. in such a financial crisis, many leading economic analysts have wondered whether the United States is headed for a prolonged and irreversible drop in its global economic
dominance. For instance, a few days after the financial meltdown, NBC News Wall Street analyst Maria Bartiromo wondered aloud: “An important question is...has the United States lost its global economic standing? Have we lost our power around the world?” (“A Financial Crisis in America”). According to Washington State University Political Science professor Dr. Michael Infranico, “The U.S. is currently at an economic crossroads...it will either retain its position as a global economic giant, or it is power will diminish and other nations such as China, Brazil, and India will surpass a slowing American economy” (lecture). How will the American economy fare in an increasingly globalized world? Can the United States retain its position as the world’s largest economy? While the answers to these and other related questions are at times difficult to forecast, they are answers which will affect the trajectory of American economic might in the 21st century.

Critics who reject my belief in American economic decline point to globalization as a reason why the U.S. will continue its economic dominance around the world. Globalization can be thought of as the increasingly competitive world economic market, in which many nations vie for economic superiority (Friedman, www.Friedman.com). In addition, globalization has created a world in which regional communities and their economies have become globally connected through new technology, trade, and transportation (www.Friedman.com). Thomas Friedman, a columnist for The New York Times and author of the best-selling novels The World is Flat and Hot, Flat, and Crowded (which both focus on globalization), supports the idea that globalization bodes well for continued American global economic hegemony (www.Friedman.com). Friedman casts economic globalization as the driving force of the 21st century, calling it the “defining feature of world affairs” from this point onward (Joffe, par.3). Friedman sees the United States, with its top-notch system of job preparation and education, as uniquely prepared
for a globalized market, causing him to state: “[If] you had to design a country best suited to
compete in such a world, it would be today’s America” (par. 3). I agree with Friedman that
globalization will be an important part of the 21st century, however, I respectfully disagree, as
will be discussed later, with his claim that the U.S. serves as a blueprint for success in the future.
While Friedman acknowledges my belief that nations such as China and India may challenge the
United States for economic superiority in a globalized economy, he ultimately believes that the
U.S., spurred by the best workers in the world, will maintain its position as the world’s
predominant economic hegemon (www.Friedman.com). As I will also note later, Friedman and I
disagree over his claim that the U.S. has the best workers in the world.

Others who also refute my view that the United States is in global economic decline point
to the fact that the United States has a long history of rebounding from periods in which its
decline was predicted. A supporter of this idea that U.S. history will repeat itself is Josef Joffe,
who is a Senior Fellow at Stanford University’s Freeman Spogli Institute for International
Studies, as well as an Abramowitz Fellow in International Relations at Stanford’s Hoover
Institution (Joffe, introduction). Joffe notes that approximately every ten years, the United States
seems to face a crisis of some kind, which causes many people to predict that the nation stands
on the precipice of global economic decline (par. 1). Instances such as the “missile gap”
between the Soviet Union and the U.S. in the 1960s, the “malaise” speech of President Jimmy
Carter in the 1970s, and the economic rise of Japan in the 1980s caused a panic in many
Americans that the U.S. was on a downward spiral (par. 1). While I acknowledge these instances
on the basis of their historical fact, I believe Joffe fails to realize that the current situation faced
by the U.S. is much direr than anything ever faced by the nation in the past. However, Joffe
rebuts my argument with his claim that the U.S. never fell into these predicted global economic
declines; instead, it experienced the “longest economic expansion in history” (par. 3). Even in times of war, Joffe asserts that the United States’ economy was never severely hampered. He believes this because taxes were never raised during times of war and the draft was never reinstated after Vietnam, causing the U.S. to at worst experience a “mild recession” in 1991, out of which it quickly rebounded (par. 1). With this statement, Joffe touches on a key point of disagreement between our respective views. If the U.S. experienced a mild recession in the past, I believe that the recession in our current times will be more severe and prolonged because of the unparalleled economic catastrophe which the nation currently faces. However, due to the nation’s track record of continued economic growth and ability to defy historical situations in which its decline seemed likely, Joffe views the current fiscal crisis of 2008 as another obstacle which the United States will be able to overcome (par. 3). Joffe predicts that the United States will pull itself out of its current economic struggles, just as it has in the past, leading to its continued economic growth and dominance far into the 21st century (par. 3). While I see Joffe’s line of reasoning and respect it, I do not share his belief in future success for the U.S. economy.

In addition, other critics’ disagreement with my position that the United States is in global economic decline stems from the idea that we have the most innovative society in the world, in which greats amount of time are spent on developing the latest technology. One scholar who espouses this view is Fareed Zakaria, who is the editor of Newsweek International and hosts the weekly public affairs show Fareed Zakaria GPS on CNN (Zakaria, introduction). Zakaria also authored the cover story for the November 1st issue of Time Magazine, entitled “How to Restore the American Dream,” in which he discusses America’s economic future at home and abroad (Rose, “A Conversation with Fareed Zakaria”). In a recent appearance on The Charlie Rose Show, (a daily, hour-long public affairs show on PBS) Zakaria discussed his belief
that America’s global economic hegemony will continue, due to a society which prides itself on
the leading the world in cutting-edge technology (“A Conversation with Fareed Zakaria”).
Furthermore, Zakaria noted that the United States leads the world in the amount of government
money spent yearly on technological research and development, a total which Zakaria
approximates at $300 billion or about 3% of the U.S. GDP (“A Conversation with Fareed
Zakaria”). Despite this spending on research and development, Zakaria agrees with my position
that the federal government needs to take more action to ensure that the nation continues its
global economic hegemony. On this matter, Zakaria and I both believe that spending on research
and development should increase to around 6% of GDP (“A Conversation with Fareed Zakaria”).
With greater commitment by the government to developing new technologies, according to
Zakaria, the U.S. finds itself in prime position to continue global economic dominance by
retaining its status as the country with the greatest amount of high-tech jobs (“A Conversation
with Fareed Zakaria”). Zakaria calls these high-tech jobs, which require knowledge in math and
science, “the jobs of the 21st century,” leading him to assert that the country which can “corner
the market” on these jobs will find itself in the best economic position (“A Conversation with
Fareed Zakaria”). While I agree with Zakaria that the nation which corners the market in these
jobs will find itself in the predominant economic position, I disagree that this nation will be the
United States. By leading the world with its continued emphasis on technology in the 21st
century, Zakaria claims that the U.S. has the “strength and dynamism to continue shaping the
world” well into the future (Zakaria, introduction). In my opinion, the U.S. has this potential
which Zakaria describes, yet multiple factors, which I will discuss in the coming paragraphs, will
prevent it from shaping the world well into the future.
While a number of fundamental disagreements exist between those who believe the United States will be able to maintain its position as a global economic hegemon and those, like me, who view it as a hegemon in decline, a degree of common ground also exists between our respective views. For instance, members on all sides of the argument have stressed their belief that the U.S. government should do a better job in its funding of technological research and development. Fareed Zakaria, Dr. Infranco, and I have all called on the government to double its funding of research and development to 6% of GDP (Rose, “A Conversation with Fareed Zakaria” & Infranco, lecture). Dr. Infranco called this lack of funding “abhorrent,” and noted that nations such as Brazil and China spend a much greater percentage of their GDP on research and development than the U.S. does (lecture). All sides in this argument have also stressed their hopes that the U.S. can have a successful, thriving economy for years to come. During his TV appearance, Zakaria made it a special point of emphasis to state that he “deeply hopes the U.S. can reclaim the American Dream and retain its current economic standing” (“A Conversation with Fareed Zakaria”). Dr. Infranco, in response to Zakaria’s comments, was quick to echo his sentiments by stating that he hopes “American economic prosperity will continue for many generations to come” (lecture). I agree wholeheartedly with both of these gentlemen’s comments. As an American citizen and a person who deeply loves this country, I will do everything in my power to see that the U.S. economy thrives for many years to come. I hope, just as Zakaria and Dr. Infranco do, that millions of Americans will find the American Dream of economic success within their reach well into the 21st century and beyond.

In my opinion, the United States is a global economic hegemon in decline. One of the major reasons for this decline is the nation’s astronomical and ballooning $13.7 trillion debt (U.S. Department of Labor). With this continued growth of the national debt, it will be
extremely difficult for the U.S. economy to grow and compete with the economies of other nations. One scholar who agrees with my point of view is Niall Ferguson, a history professor at Harvard University and a Senior Fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution (Ferguson, introduction). Ferguson notes that the U.S. economy will struggle in the 21st century due to the soaring “fiscal deficits” accrued by the federal government, leading him to call the U.S. “an empire on the precipice” of decline (introduction). Dr. Michael Infranco also supports my point of view that the United States will be greatly hindered by its large national debt. Infranco asserts that a nation with a large national debt will be “plagued by high unemployment rates, a stagnant currency, and an impoverished middle class” (lecture). In his opinion, these problems will plague the United States for many years to come, until the nation can “get its financial house in order by reducing the national debt” (lecture). I believe the U.S. economic decline will continue because the national debt will not be reduced anytime in the foreseeable future. My belief is due to the fact that one of the first votes in Congress’ new session will be to raise the national debt ceiling to approximately $14 trillion (Rose, “A Conversation with Fareed Zakaria”). Congress will have to continue raising the national debt ceiling periodically for at least the next 3 years, or the United States will run the risk of defaulting on its debt, which would cause a global financial panic (“A Conversation with Fareed Zakaria”). As the U.S. continues to increase its debt, nations such as China and Japan (the two largest creditors of the United States) will continue to hold more of the mounting U.S. debt (“A Conversation with Fareed Zakaria”). This trend is very alarming to myself and many scholars, including Peter Peterson, the former Secretary of Commerce under President Nixon, who called this “increasing reliance on foreign debt” a trend which threatens to “bankrupt America” (Peterson, introduction). In order to pay off this debt, the United States will have to make payments to these and many other nations around the world
As I see it, even if the U.S. manages to reduce its national debt, it will come at the economic cost of having to make payments to other countries, which would only work to strengthen the economies of these other nations and weaken the U.S. economy in the process. Thus, the United States’ large national debt has placed it in a lose-lose situation in the global economy.

While proponents of the idea that America can remain dominant in an increasingly globalized economy point to the strength of American workers as a reason for their belief, I view American workers and their lack of knowledge regarding high-tech jobs as a reason why the United States will suffer a decline as a global economic hegemon. Proponents of continued American economic dominance, such as Fareed Zakaria, have stated that America will excel in the high-tech industry jobs of the future (Rose, “A Conversation with Fareed Zakaria”). Zakaria views these jobs as ones which will cater to workers with strong backgrounds in math and science, causing him to believe that American workers are fully equipped to handle such challenges (“A Conversation with Fareed Zakaria”). While I respect Zakaria’s beliefs, statistics show that American workers are not ready to handle these high-tech jobs of the future due to their weak knowledge in math and science. A 2010 study by the Pew Research Group yielded some glaring findings about the knowledge gap between the U.S. and the rest of the world. According to the study, which looked at the world’s most developed nations, U.S. high school graduates rank 31st in the world in math proficiency and 22nd in science proficiency (Infanco, lecture). The research begs the question: Shouldn’t a country which is supposed to maintain its global economic hegemony rank first in the world in these critical skill areas? The findings were not only concerning to me, but to Dr. Infanco, who noted that a nation with a workforce so weak in math and science has “little chance of maintaining any semblance of global economic
hegemony” (lecture). In my view, a labor force with low amounts of knowledge in math and science will not have the necessary skills to perform high-tech jobs, meaning that these jobs will be shipped overseas to foreign nations with highly-skilled and knowledgeable workers. This outsourcing of high-tech jobs has already occurred (with companies such as Dell and Budweiser) and will continue well into the future, meaning that many American companies may move overseas due to a lack of American workers with the necessary skills to perform the jobs these companies employ (lecture). This emigration of American companies overseas would be severely detrimental to the American economy, with both liberal and conservative economists projecting that millions of American workers could be put out of work (lecture). To me, an economy with millions of unskilled, unemployed citizens signals a nation facing a precipitous global decline.

While all sides make compelling arguments regarding whether or not the United States is an economic global hegemon in decline, all sides also have shortcomings and faults in their arguments. In regards to those who disagree with me and promote the idea that the United States can maintain its global economic hegemony, they don’t take into account that never before has the United States faced so many countries which equal its technological and economic power in so many respects. One of these rising powers, China, has an economy which is growing rapidly and is expected to become the world’s largest economy in approximately 20 years (Infranco, lecture). With China’s booming population of over 1.3 billion people, it may be mathematically unrealistic to think that the United States, with a population of around 320 million people, can produce the same number of goods and services as its Asian rival (lecture). Another rising power in the global economy, India, also has a population of over 1 billion people and is considered by many to be the world’s leader in high-tech jobs, due to outsourcing of
technological work from the United States to India (Rose, “A Conversation with Fareed Zakaria”). Equipped with these high-tech jobs and a soaring population, India also seems poised, along with China, to surpass the U.S. economy in the years to come (“A Conversation with Fareed Zakaria”). My supporters and I, who advocate the view that the U.S. is in global economic decline, have a key shortcoming in our argument that the $13.7 trillion national debt will negatively affect the United States’ global economic performance (U.S. Department of Labor). My supporters and I sometimes forget that other nations all around the world are facing similar national debt problems, meaning that the United States does not face this debt crisis alone. For instance, all nations in the European Union currently face massive debt problems, creating a scenario in which the economies of many European countries, such as France and the United Kingdom, have been severely crippled (lecture). Thus, since other nations face similar debt problems, the United States faces a competitively level global economic playing field, giving the U.S. a better chance of economic success since all its global competitors are also hurting. In regards to the U.S. national debt, it is also important for my supporters and me to remember that a Republican majority has recently been swept into the U.S. House of Representatives, which has proposed many policies aimed at reducing the debt (Williams, “Election 2010”). NBC economic analyst Steve Liesman points out that these policies give “great hope” that the debt will be reduced, which will lead to “stable global growth for the U.S. economy” (“Election 2010”).

Regardless of one’s position, every U.S. citizen should be concerned with what direction the U.S. economy will take in the months and years to come. Joseph Nye, Dean of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, has deemed the United States the “most dominant power since Rome” and I wholeheartedly agree with his assessment (Nye, introduction). When a nation of
this magnitude faces such economic challenges, should not all Americans feel at least some level of concern as to the direction of the United States’ economy? An answer to this question in the affirmative seems to be one point upon which all sides of this debate can agree. As a college student and future full-time worker, I have great concern as to whether the U.S. economy will be strong in the years to come because the economy’s strength will affect my employment opportunities. I must echo the words of Stephen Walt, a professor at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, who said regarding the U.S. economy’s future, “The time to worry is now” (Walt, par. 4).

While the future of the U.S. economy may be uncertain, all sides (including my own) should realize that action is currently required to ensure our nation’s economic growth for years to come. The federal government needs to take action to reduce the national debt, which will take a large financial burden off the backs of future generations of Americans. As noted by Fareed Zakaria, the lack of an astronomical debt will benefit future Americans because their taxes will be lower, thereby allowing them to pay less to the government and stimulate the economy through the purchasing of goods and services (Rose, “A Conversation with Fareed Zakaria”). In my view, reduction of the national debt will create long-term economic stability for our nation; however, America’s political parties and citizens must seek a compromise and work together to tackle this vital issue. Furthermore, the United States’ economic situation will benefit from free trade negotiations with rival powers like China, India, and Brazil, which will allow for the flow of goods between all nations. These free trade pacts, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), will help the economies of all nations because important goods will be sold on the global market at fair, competitive prices (Infranco, lecture).
As Americans, we must have the boldness to seek bi-partisan solutions, such as these free trade agreements, to ensure our future global economic success for many years to come.
Works Cited


