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AN URBAN EDUCATION RESOURCE

Teaching Gulf War II



Lessons that encourage students to question the official story on Iraq.

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By *Bill Bigelow*

As I sat down recently to figure out how I was going to teach about the impending war against Iraq, I was struck by how much *information* was available and yet how little *curriculum*. What follows are descriptions of a few of the activities I've used this year to encourage my students to question the pro-war barrage from politicians and pundits.

Ordinarily, I don't write about lesson ideas when I'm in the midst of teaching them, but because of the Bush administration's rush to war, it seems to me that teachers need to share ideas even when they are works in progress. It's vital that we begin to build a collection of teaching experiences and resources. Please join the Rethinking Schools critical teaching listserv — (See subscription information on page 24) — to participate in this project of peace and justice curriculum development.



A student protests against the war in Iraq at the Jan. 18, 2003, rally in San Francisco, Calif.

-photo: Serge Morel

CREATING THE "ENEMY"

In the Spring 1991 issue of *Rethinking Schools*, I described the Popeye video, "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," that I used in class during the first Gulf War. I showed it to my Global Studies students again earlier this year. In the cartoon, Popeye the Sailor — in this instance, as a member of the U.S. Coast Guard — is pitted against Blutoas- Abu Hassan, an Arab marauder who rides through the land singing, "Now make no error, I'm called the terror of every village and town — Abu Hassan!" Popeye discovers the bandit hideout and, astonished at Abu Hassan's plunder, announces, "I have to give all these jewels back to the people." After Popeye inhales a can of spinach, his biceps turn into tanks and, while Sousa martial tunes play in the background, Popeye singlehandedly pummels Abu Hassan and his band of turban-wearing look-alikes. Afterward, Popeye, Olive Oyl, and Wimpy return enormous piles of loot to faceless cheering townspeople.

I introduced the cartoon by telling students that I wanted them to think about the images that Americans have absorbed about the role of the U.S. military in the world and about Arabs. I read aloud a quote from Ariel Dorfman's book, *The Empire's Old Clothes*, in which he introduces the idea of the "secret education" that children absorb from cartoons, comics, and "industrially produced fiction." I told them that as they watched the cartoon I wanted them to think about aspects of the secret education children were exposed to. On the board I wrote: "What does the cartoon teach about good guys and bad guys, the role of the U.S. military in the world, Arabs and Arab culture, men's and women's roles, violence, and how conflict is resolved?"

After the video, students wrote briefly on these questions before we talked. One student wrote: "To me, this cartoon is saying that we (the U.S., portrayed by Popeye) can do whatever we want to other people in other cultures, because we're always right. Violence is alright and gives you power and control." And another: "Arab culture and their language are funny and they cannot defend themselves. They need Popeye to come and save them. Women are absent in Arab cultures."

I wanted students to think about the frameworks that the media fashions for us — the purely bad guys and the purely good guys, the cleansing role of violence, the contempt for non-Western cultures, etc. And I wanted them to recognize how we are often led to organize information about today's global conflicts, especially those in the Middle East, into these frameworks.

I drew on this concept sometime later when I showed a six-minute excerpt from the video *Toxic Sludge is Good for You*, about the public relations industry. The video features a segment with Nayirah, a teenage Kuwaiti girl who testified in the fall of 1990 before a Congressional caucus (where witnesses are not under oath) and claimed to have seen Iraqi invaders dumping babies onto the hospital floor as they stole incubators. It was an arresting, heart-wrenching story, and politicians and the news media repeated it again and again during the buildup to the Gulf War. The only problem: It was totally fabricated. Nayirah was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the United States, and the entire charade was orchestrated by the giant U.S. public relations firm, Hill and Knowlton. I wanted students to think about how Americans' secret education prepared them to believe Nayirah's testimony without any other corroborating evidence. I asked students to consider why it was only many months later that Nayirah's claim was discovered to be untrue — why Congress and the press didn't greet her story with more skepticism.

BUSH'S BLANK CHECK

Bush's authority to make war on Iraq derives from a joint resolution that Congress passed earlier this year giving the president a virtual blank check. In the weeks leading up to the resolution's passage, many commentators remarked that this was the most sweeping military authority given a president since the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin resolution. We now know that this infamous resolution, opposed by no U.S. representatives and only two senators, was based on half-truths and outright lies. (The resolution is on the web at many sites including www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1964Tonkinbay.html. Also see the excellent reader *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, Marvin Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young and H. Bruce Franklin, eds., (Grove Press, 1995) for more background.)

I decided to pair the resolutions in a lesson. I distributed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution to students and briefly reviewed some of the background about North Vietnam and South Vietnam, but without giving any of the specific circumstances leading up to the alleged attacks on the U.S. destroyer Maddox. I asked students to work in pairs and to imagine that they were members of Congress when this resolution was introduced in 1964, and to come up with at least five critical questions that they would have wanted fully answered before they voted on the resolution. (I explained the structure of the resolution as an upside-down essay, with each "whereas" intended as a piece of evidence supporting the thesis, i.e., the resolution.)



*A member of Voices in the Wilderness accompanies an Iraqi man and his son to a hospital in Saddam City. (1998)
-photo: Reuters*

My students were much more critical and inquisitive than the compliant members of Congress who voted LBJ vast war-making powers in 1964. They asked things like: "How do we know that the attacks were part of a 'deliberate and systematic campaign of aggression'?" "What damage did the alleged attacks cause?" "What is the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam?" "What else besides the use of armed forces is the U.S. 'prepared' to do?"

I then shared with them information about what had actually happened in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964 and why Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. W. Fulbright later called Johnson a liar for what he had told Congress. [A personal and engaging account of the Gulf of Tonkin events is in Daniel Ellsberg's new memoir, *Secrets*.]

I wanted students to carry this critical stance into an examination of the resolution that the Bush administration sought from Congress. The Bush resolution (available at <http://www.msnbc.com/news/810152.asp?cp1=1> and other sites) is much longer than the Tonkin resolution, with 16 "whereas" clauses, so I divided the class into eight groups. I asked students to assume the same personae as in the Tonkin exercise: skeptical members of Congress. Each group was responsible for looking carefully at different sets of two clauses and coming up with at least one critical question for each "whereas." Everyone needed to examine the concluding "authorization of United States Armed Forces" section and decide on at least one critical question in response. Finally, I asked students to indicate any issues that were not addressed in the resolution. Note that many of the Bush clauses refer to United Nations Security Council resolutions — many of them moot now that Iraq is no longer occupying Kuwait. (These can be found at the U.N. website, www.un.org. Click on Documentation, then Security Council resolutions. Resolutions are listed by year.)

I was surprised — and pleased — that students were able to be so critical of the Bush resolution, and it was my first clue that there was widespread skepticism among students about the Bush claims. Based on their knowledge of the Tonkin Gulf lies, most of their questions centered on the lack of evidence provided in the resolution. Students wanted to know precisely what was in the previous U.N. resolutions, asking "What proof do we have that Iraq is harboring terrorists?" "What does Iraq have to say?" "How is Iraq threatening the national security interests of the U.S.?" "What exactly are the national security interests of the U.S.?" and "Why doesn't this resolution say anything about oil?"

SILENT WAR OF SANCTIONS

As Rethinking Schools goes to press, concern centers on whether the U.S. will go to war against Iraq. But I want my students to recognize that in many respects the United States is already at war with Iraq. This past week I showed the video *Greetings from Missile Street*, about several members of the solidarity organization Voices in the Wilderness who spent the summer of 2000 in Basra, in southern Iraq. These individuals chose the hottest months, when temperatures can hit 120° or even 130°. They wanted to experience the impact of sanctions from the standpoint of ordinary Iraqis. To my knowledge, this is the best classroom resource on sanctions. The video has a bit of a home movie feel to it, as we simply listen to several Voices in the Wilderness members talk about their Basra experiences against the backdrop of images of family and community life. It's too bad that we don't hear more from Iraqis themselves, but nonetheless the video has an intimacy that clearly had an impact on my students. In his reaction paper after the video, one student wrote, "After a while I start to think every Middle East person is just as evil as Saddam Hussein. What I saw on *Greetings from Missile Street* almost shocked me. I can truly say that it was the first time I haven't seen an Iraqi person burn an American flag or chant 'Down USA!' For the first time I saw 'them' as humans."

The video also includes the clearest and most detailed explanation that I've seen about the operation of the U.N. 661 Committee, the group that actually administers the sanctions and decides which items Iraq may or may not import. Operating by "consensus," the 661 Committee rules allow the United States to block the importation of countless items into Iraq — including blood bags, ambulances, and parts to rebuild Iraq's water treatment plants, destroyed by U.S. bombing in 1991. From this discussion it is apparent that these are not U.N.-imposed sanctions as much as they are U.S.-imposed sanctions.

I introduced the video by telling students that we were going to watch a film that was made illegally. I talked briefly about the initial imposition of sanctions on Iraq shortly after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August of 1990, and asked them to take notes on all the effects of sanctions that they could find — health, sanitation, economic, educational, psychological.

After watching the video, I gave students the choice to write on several questions:

- What would motivate U.S. citizens to risk so much in traveling to Iraq in violation of U.S. law? Try to imagine the kinds of experiences that these individuals had that would lead them to make these choices.
- In the video, "60 Minutes" correspondent Leslie Stahl asks then-U.N. Ambassador Madeleine Albright about the thousands upon thousands of deaths that have been attributed to sanctions, and whether or not it's worth it. Albright indicates that it's a difficult issue, but that it is worth it. Why do you think that Albright and other U.S. government officials believe this?

(Choose an Iraqi individual whom you encountered in the video or one of the U.S. members of Voices in the Wilderness and write a conversation between this individual and Albright.)

- The U.S. government says that one of the reasons that it is likely to go to war with Iraq is because it possesses — or may be developing — "weapons of mass destruction." Could the sanctions be considered a "weapon of mass destruction," and if so, what distinguishes this weapon of mass destruction from others?
- What did you learn about Iraq and Iraqi people that you didn't know before? What surprised you, intrigued you, saddened you, angered you?

Many students found the video disturbing — how could their government knowingly participate in denying people clean water or needed medicines? "This video saddened my heart," one girl wrote. But others were angry: "I just want to stand up taller than any building and tell everyone what is happening," wrote another. I was encouraged by how many people drew hope from the big-hearted defiance of the Voices in the Wilderness members: "They are the true heroes of America... I think it's people like them that makes the United States not seem like a completely selfish country." Another student wrote: "I'm so proud to be an American when I see Americans like them making a difference." Two valuable, student-friendly articles on the sanctions that could accompany the video are:

- "Iraqi Sanctions: Without Medicines and Supplies, the Children Die," by Matthew Hay Brown (*Hartford Courant*, Oct. 23, 2000), online at www.commondreams.org/views/102300-103.htm. Brown's article is an especially good match with *Greetings from Missile Street*, because it too describes life in Basra in 2000. It's relatively short, accessible, and moving.
- "What Happens to Your Heart," by David Morse, (*Yes!* magazine, Spring 2002), online at www.futurenet.org/21American/morse.htm. (A discussion guide at this site also includes several questions.) This also pairs well with *Missile Street* because it focuses on how people are themselves transformed by working in defiance of the economic sanctions. As one Canadian, Rick McCutcheon, says of his work in Iraq, "My heart had just filled with that darkness for many years. And then it just breaks open. And there in the midst of this suffering, is light." It's through exposure to the work of solidarity workers like these that students can learn about the horrific consequences of U.S. foreign policy without being defeated by that knowledge.

WHY WAR?

And there I am, feeling my way along, trying to piece together a curriculum that urges students to think critically about the antecedents to the coming war. The most important question wanders in and out of these lessons but still remains to be confronted directly in my classroom: *Why? Why* is the United States so intent on overthrowing Saddam Hussein? Why now? Why not other oppressive regimes, like China? Why not other nations in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions, like Israel? Why not other nations which, unlike Iraq, are known definitively to possess weapons of mass destruction, like Pakistan? Why not other nations with alleged links to terrorists, like Saudi Arabia?

My curriculum thus far has answered this question only in the negative: If the welfare of the Iraqi people were uppermost in U.S. policymakers' minds as they contemplate invasion, then it's unlikely that the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children through sanctions would have been deemed "worth it."

A fuller explanation will need to engage students in exploring the central role that Iraq's oil — proven reserves second only to Saudi Arabia — plays in this conflict. For example, what impact would a U.S.-controlled Iraq have on the power of OPEC? But Iraq is also a water-rich country in a water-poor region. What role does water play in U.S. war plans? The video *Hidden Wars of Desert Storm* (reviewed by Polly Kellogg, page 12) discusses ways in which the Saddam bogeyman has benefited U.S. elite interests — for example, convincing the Saudis to allow U.S. troops to be permanently stationed in their country and boosting U.S. arms sales in the region. And, as we saw vividly in the 2002 elections, how does saber rattling abroad distract attention from domestic misery and malfeasance?

This is not the time for social justice educators to hole up in our classrooms and play curricular lone rangers. The issues are too complicated, the pedagogical challenges too stiff. Let's join together in teacher study groups, anti-war teach-ins, and curriculum fairs, and share insights and dilemmas on critical teaching listservs. Now, more than ever, we need each other.

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Hidden Wars of Desert Storm, Greetings from Missile Street, and Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves are available from www.teachingforchange.org. Toxic Sludge is Good for You is available at www.mediaed.org.

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