Invisible Wars

Iraq, Afghanistan, and Teaching Insurgencies in Public Schools

By Christopher L. Doyle

"We don't think about them because they've been going on since we were little. It's like background noise." One of my students is answering my question. She is 17, upper-middle class, taking my Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. History class. I had asked about the low level of understanding and high degree of apathy among her peers as we studied America's two current wars.

Neither is necessarily their fault. Few of my students know anyone serving in Iraq or Afghanistan. In the suburb where they live, hardly anyone joins the military right out of high school, and there is no Fort Carson or Fort Bragg nearby to remind people there is a war or two going on. Unlikely to read newspaper coverage of the wars, this generation prefers the Internet. And our school's curriculum has changed since early 2002 when the No Child Left Behind law went into effect just a few months after American soldiers entered Afghanistan. Contemporary issues classes no longer have currency, as standardized test results are the litmus test for education. In my school, and hundreds like it, students are isolated from firsthand accounts and formal study of events that textbooks will one day proclaim as defining experiences of their generation.

My own teaching about the wars improvises and flies under the radar. Moments of opportunity arise in AP U.S. History, after the national exam in early May, and in Humanities, a rare, endangered elective with a flexible curriculum detached from standardized testing. I begin by gauging my students' hearts and minds. Asking what they know about the subject, I hear some fascinating stuff: "Osama bin Laden was the dictator of Afghanistan until we overthrew him." "Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruc-

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tion that he was giving to al-Qaeda." "We invaded Iraq because that's where bin Laden was, and then he went to Afghanistan, so we invaded there." I have my work cut out for me.

I define a reading list and use each work on it selectively. U.S. history students tackle Bob Woodward's *Plan of Attack* (on tension between Colin Powell and Dick Cheney in the Bush White House), Dexter Filkins's *The Forever War* (describing how long-term war has coarsened and degraded Afghan culture), Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (revealing the unprecedented extent to which war has been privatized in the Bush era), Rory Stewart's *The Prince of the Marshes* (explaining factional divisions in Iraq), Russ Hoyle's *Going to War* (showing the failure of weapons inspectors to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq), Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (on how neoconservative ideology drove decision making in Baghdad's Green Zone), Colby Buzzell's *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (a memoir), and the *New York Times* on U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan. I worry these sources might seem daunting, but I don't have much time, and there is no single work that does justice to the topics I need to teach.

My fears are partially realized. Some students have trouble making sense of what they read. I intervene with impromptu lectures and discussions on the histories of Iraq and Afghanistan, who held what post in George Bush's cabinet, and the status of women under Taliban rule. A few kids, insisting there were illicit weapons in Iraq, complain that the sources have a "liberal bias," and they tell author Russ Hoyle just that when he comes into my classes to speak with them. (Hoyle responds that they can check his footnotes, read *The 9/11 Commission Report* online, and form their own conclusions.) I am probably trying to do too much, too quickly, and some kids are losing detail and nuance.

Not all of them engage successfully as historians of the wars, but my students are affected emotionally when they hear from people who have seen conflict firsthand. Humanities students, with whom I take a different approach by focusing on the psychological effects of combat, read chunks of Buzzell's memoir and are thrilled when he returns an e-mail to answer questions about posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They also warm up to the PBS *Frontline* series on PTSD; it elicits a long discussion about what a nation owes veterans when they come back from war. Kids usually prefer individual stories to big-picture complexity.

When two vets speak in Humanities class, the room is packed and you could hear a pin drop. One, a retired major, confirms that society seems largely indifferent to the emotional distress suffered by troops in battle. He had PTSD, and describes his sense of letdown upon returning from a war zone.

Students cry when a navy medic describes how his marine platoon killed an Iraqi couple for running a roadblock and then discovered a 5-year-old child, unhurt, in the back seat of the pair's bullet-riddled car. The medic himself almost breaks down telling about the time he had to clean up a vehicle in which two of his friends had been killed by a mortar shell.

My class is speechless when the medic, asked if he would go back to Iraq, says, "I've done my turn. Now it's someone else's." Does he support a draft? "Yes. It's not fair that we have to do so many tours." The implications of this comment leave the kids uneasily silent.

Together, the speakers, books, television series, and newspaper stories raise troubling questions about individual and historical perspective, morality, the limits of our democracy, obligations of citizenship, and the traps that come with superpower status. I remind my kids how an earlier generation of students, also somewhat privileged and sheltered, reacted to these questions. In history class, we had read Tom Hayden's Port Huron Statement from 1962. Hayden complained, then, about college being disconnected from world-shaping events like the Cold War and civil rights struggles. He criticized higher education for playing too readily to the military-industrial complex. He and like-minded baby boomers formed an organization as a reaction, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

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My students know that 2011 is not the 1960s. They need not fear a draft and have little incentive, except conscience and, lately, deficits, to care about wars thousands of miles from home. College has become so expensive, and seemingly so much rides on it, that my students view political activism as a luxury few can afford. Many want only to get into an elite school, graduate, get a job, pay back their student loans, and make money. Secondary education has also become narrower, more test driven, and less open to classroom inquiry that does not offer "measurable outcomes." The news media has fragmented and is not generating the same public outrage it did when reporting on Vietnam. Maybe the media has become polarized and has lost persuasive force—as suggested by my students' comments about "liberal bias." It sounds quixotic to invoke the SDS to kids today.

I have little nostalgia for the upheaval of the '60s, but I remain convinced that public education must engage the most pressing and troubling issues of our time. Because these two wars do not yet conform to any historical cliché, such as World War II being a "good war," they force students to form their own interpretive meanings—just the kind of thinking we say we want them to do. I watched my students come to life when listening to those veterans talk, something that rarely happens when we study events from the distant past. There is nothing like a combat vet telling well-to-do high school kids that he favors a military draft to get them thinking about civic participation.

The 10th anniversary of September 11 suggested a related dif-

ficulty for educators. Many felt compelled to say something to students about the date, but their priorities seemed confused. The vast majority opted to stress solemnity, reverence for the dead, and national unity. In doing so, teachers and scripted 9/11 lessons too often fell back on stock phrases and images: planes hitting buildings, firefighters raising a flag, statements about American resolve being tested, and explanations for the ensuing wars as efforts to promote freedom globally. This may be appropriate as commemoration, but as history it falls short, especially 10 years out.

It falls short because historians ascribe meaning. The British philosopher and historian R. G. Collingwood once asserted that "nothing capable of being memorized is history," a remark I use with students to illustrate the historian's job as meaning maker. (Many of my students are not pleased to hear this; it confuses them.) The process of definition requires historians to move beyond sound bites and clichés, and it necessitates argument. Intrinsic to history, argument does not play well given current levels of discord in politics and society; this is especially true about a subject as sensitive as 9/11.

Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys* illustrates the problem of making historical arguments about the recent past, while pointing out an imperative to try. Set in an English secondary school in the early 1980s, in one scene two teachers and their students debate the meaning of the Holocaust. Some in the class take the position that the enormity of the event makes it unspeakable: "Nothing is appropriate" except silence. But this is not satisfactory, and a young teacher gets the last word:

> No. But this is history. Distance yourselves. Our perspective on the past alters. Looking back, immediately in front of us is dead ground. We don't see it and because we don't see it this means there is no period so remote as the recent past and one of the historian's jobs is to anticipate what our perspective of that period will be … even on the Holocaust.

And even about September 11 and the wars, as I tell my students when we read that passage from the play. They, too, must distance themselves by trying to detach emotionally from their own moment in history. They have to articulate meanings using evidence and reason. Arguing over meaning, larger truths will emerge. That is a premise of historical scholarship and, I think, of democracy.

My classes' amnesia and misinformation about the "war on terrorism" reflects a larger phenomenon: contemporary history too often goes missing from school. Education journalist Michael Winerip ran a story about my teaching of the wars in the *New York Times* on May 23, 2011; he, too, found newsworthy the curricular void that ignores important contemporary issues. The responses I got to the *Times* story suggest that it resonated elsewhere. Schools tend not to teach many, perhaps most, headline-making problems: climate change, debt crises, the national and international polarization of wealth, revolutions in the Middle East, and oil dependence. No wonder we commemorate 9/11 without teaching it as historical cause and effect. Students can graduate from many, perhaps most, high schools today and remain tragically naive about the public history of their own times.

Thus I feel a bit like an insurgent, slipping my lessons into our school culture covertly so they will not raise accusations about me deviating from the official curricular script. As an insurgent might, I fight for the attention of an audience subject to ignorance, distraction, and apathy. Ultimately, though, my goal differs; it is not to propagandize but to educate. I want to inform my students and get them to care about their nation's involvement in these conflicts. As compelling as those veterans' stories are, I cannot rely solely on their emotion to convey larger truths about the wars. I need sources that invoke higher meanings, use dispassionate analysis, and embrace complexity. I have to let students mull over the issues and to answer their questions. I have to deal with their confusion and even their occasional hostility. Doing so takes time, and it necessitates a legitimate place in the classroom. But with our national fixation on standards and test scores, massive teacher layoffs, and a growing preference for merit pay based on test results, teaching about today's wars demands furtiveness.

My experience reveals disjointedness in public education of the sort that John Dewey criticized a century ago. School must reflect the history-making events of modern times. If it does not, it offers poor training for democratic citizenship and the life of the mind. I am enthusiastic about teaching the wars again. I believe I can do it better next time. Yet I suspect the only way Afghanistan or Iraq will find their way into my school's official curriculum is if someone makes these conflicts into a question on a standardized test.

The only other option is public pressure. One need not have a political bias to insist that schools restore current events to their curricula. Congress has not made it a priority, but the No Child Left Behind law is overdue for revision, and we can insist that when Congress acts, it takes a broader view than mere bottom-line number crunching. It would be a mistake to reduce education merely to test success, job training, or the pursuit of high-status college admission. Schools must connect with life beyond the classroom, and public education properly done has to prepare students for citizenship in a democratic society. ☐