

Rethinking Schools online

AN URBAN EDUCATION RESOURCE

Drawing on History to Challenge the War

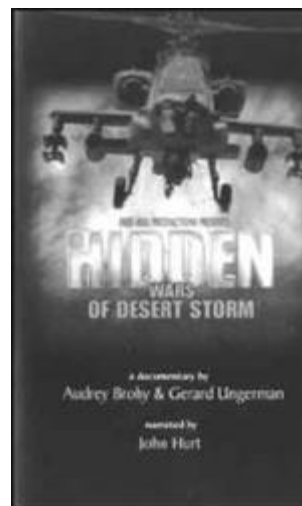


Spring 2003

By Polly Kellogg

As I watched the mainstream media minimize the tremendous opposition to the Bush administration's drive to attack Iraq, I became determined to encourage my students to think critically about the war plans and to seek out alternative media perspectives. I created an effective unit using 1) a video on disinformation about the Gulf War; 2) a media project to explore alternative media perspectives on the Internet; and 3) an action project to educate others about Iraq. Although I teach university students, this unit can be used with high school students.

Hidden Wars of Desert Storm is a revealing documentary on the history of U.S. maneuvers to control oil in the Middle East and hidden manipulations surrounding the Gulf War. The video raises questions about the current war rhetoric and possible motives behind the current call to war.



To engage students' empathy, I began the unit with the last 17 minutes of the 64-minute video, because this segment on war disabilities is emotionally compelling. It shows both U.S. veterans and Iraqis made ill from depleted uranium, which the U.S. military uses to harden bullets, tanks, and missiles. After seeing video images of Iraqi children dying of leukemia caused by depleted uranium, it was hard for students to see Iraqis as "the enemy." One student said, "I had no idea children were dying." Another asked, "How does the military get away with being so cruel? They didn't even warn people about the radiation."

The second day, I showed the first part of *Hidden Wars*. The video opens with crucial history about U.S. activities in the Middle East, history that our mainstream media ignores. To control Mideast oil, from WWII to 1988, the U.S. encouraged war, helped install dictators (Hussein and the Shah), and supplied them with billions of dollars of weaponry. In the 1980s, U.S. corporations supplied Iraq with biological, chemical, and nuclear components.

Twenty-two minutes into the video we watched the first president Bush bullying the United Nations into supporting an invasion. I stopped the video here to let students discuss obvious parallels to the present tug-of-war between Bush II and the United Nations over how much time to give the inspections. They had many questions about why the United States has so much power over the United Nations. I suggested they think about Bush's struggle with allies in the United Nations in light of the administration's goal of U.S. global dominance. As part of this discussion, I asked them to brainstorm the pros and cons of U.S. global dominance.

The rest of the video carefully documents its thesis that the U.S. government secretly wanted Hussein to invade Kuwait because then the U.S. military would have an excuse to get a long-desired base in oil-rich Saudi Arabia. For example, we see an interview with the reporter who discovered that U.S. generals showed the Saudi monarchy falsified satellite photos of Iraqi troops poised to attack

the Saudi border in order to get the Saudis to accept a U.S. military base.

CHALLENGING WAR RHETORIC

I wondered how students would relate to revelations about a war they knew little about. When the video ended, they jumped right into an angry critique of the rhetoric surrounding the present war. One indignant student asked, "If our companies gave Hussein weapons of mass destruction, why are we going to bomb him because he might still have some?" Another said, "Our government is certainly not fighting for democracy in Iraq, because that's never been their goal." A woman said, "If this war turns out to be about oil, I'm going to be really mad."

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

I introduced the media project by saying that we could find news other than the "official story" because the Internet makes it possible for us to seek out different perspectives from non-corporate, alternative media, and from media of other nations.

For the assignment, I asked students to collect examples of how both the mainstream media and the alternative press were covering the war buildup. They were to clip articles about Iraq from the local newspaper, and I handed out a list of alternative media websites. After several weeks of following the news, they would write a paper analyzing contrasts between the two types of media. What differences did they see in what is emphasized? What differences did they see in headlines? Did pictures differ? I encouraged them to highlight and mark up the articles with their comments. They were to look closely at such things as loaded language, plays on emotion, historical context (or lack of), and depth of investigative reporting. I also included some lively anti-war websites to convey a sense of anti-war activism.

To get students started, I ran through one example by showing a couple alternative press headlines about oil — a topic the mainstream media practically ignores. Anticipating that the assignment might seem overwhelming at first, I asked students to share their findings in small groups for 10 minutes at the start of each class for a couple weeks. In these groups, the web exploration came alive. Students who loved using the Internet gave tips to those less experienced. As they shared their "finds," they spurred each other on. Students found pictures of large anti-war protests around the world that the mainstream press all but ignored. One found a picture of an Iraqi girl that held great meaning for him. At the Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) site they discovered critiques of mainstream coverage. One student proudly announced that she read that in a 30-minute speech on Iraq, Bush had used the word "terrorist" 30 times in order to link people's feelings about Bin Laden to Hussein. Several students brought in lists of "talking points" on why we should not attack Iraq. Students noticed the lack of mainstream publicity about polls, now that most Americans oppose a unilateral attack. Colorful anti-war posters and bumper stickers from the activist sites were popular.

The next time I teach this unit, I'd like to increase the focus on international media. I feel strongly that we need to find ways to bring international news into our schools and make it a part of our lives.

ACTION PROJECT TO EDUCATE

As their awareness grew, many students were getting into arguments about the war. This inspired an assignment to make these discussions focused and productive. I asked them to plan an educational session(s) to teach others about Iraq. They were required to put some thought into how best to share the information they had discovered. They should be able to back up their arguments. Their educational sessions should be substantial, not brief. I offered them the option of writing to an editor or public official, but they all jumped at the option of talking to friends. A couple of students showed a video on the impact of sanctions to friends. Many used the alternative press articles to start discussions.

Their papers reporting on the project radiated enthusiasm. "I was so proud to know how to argue with my dad. I told him 'I'm telling you realities. You think what they want you to think.'" "My mom actually checked out the Zmag website herself!" Students were also discouraged at how little people knew. "My friend thinks he knows everything and won't listen to reason."

These papers were fun to read and encouraging. As our country moves headlong toward war, we need informed people — both young and old — speaking out against it. I believe many of my students will make their voices heard.

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Hidden Wars of Desert Storm, 64 minutes, directed by Gerard Ungerman and Audrey Brohy, narrated by John Hurt. \$25, www.hiddenwars.org or from www.teachingforchange.org.

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