Journal of International Social Studies, v. 11, n. 2, 2021, pp. 64-77

Leaving Time for Modern History to Facilitate a Vibrant Peace Education in the U.S. Classroom

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Abstract:

Modern history, particularly the time frame from the 1960s to the present, is often either completed skipped or given a cursory overview in many K-12 classrooms. Often, this is not done intentionally but is rather due to time constraints in the school schedule and inadequate planning for the disruptions of the typical school year. This contention of this article is that this is not only problematic from the aspects of historical knowledge and proper pedagogy, but particularly in the U.S. classroom this tends to reinforce ideas of militarism and the justifications of war by only focusing on more celebrated wars such as the War of Independence or World War II. By focusing on modern conflicts, teachers have an opportunity to integrate core ideas of peace education. Examples are given on how this critical and peace education approach can be used regarding four primary areas in recent U.S. history: The War in Vietnam, CIA interventions during the Cold War, the War in Afghanistan, and the 2003 Invasion of Iraq.

Key words: critical pedagogy, militarism, modern history, peace education

Introduction

It is May, and the typical high school social studies teacher has to review for the final exam or standardized test. The problem is the class has just finished studying World War II. The teacher has a week to cover the rest of the material, so Monday and Tuesday will be dedicated to the 1950s and 1960s, Wednesday and Thursday will cover the 1970s through 1990s, and then there will be one day for the 2000s. As a former high school teacher, situations like this are far too common even for those who are passionate about teaching more modern history. It is a problem that has become almost the norm in the history class-the teacher only gets to World War II, or at the best the 1960s or 1970s. If they do cover more modern history at all, it is merely a cursory

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overview. Though there are many pedagogical problems with this practice, one that might often be overlooked is the issue of how skimming over modern history relates to students' views on war and militarism in general. The last war teachers may cover in any depth is World War II. McCorkle (2021) argues that the narratives of conflict around World War II, particularly in the United States, often tend to create a more positive view of war. One of the ways to challenge this is to expand more deeply into other historical conflicts.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is based in the larger theoretical framework of peace education (Harris, 2004; Page, 2000; Salomon, 2012). McCorkle (2017) describes why this is especially important in relation to how we view and teach history, particularly related to the problematization of historical wars. The author also explores how this is particularly relevant to wars that are often seen as sacrosanct in American thinking, such as the American Revolution (2020) and the American Civil War (2018).

Others scholars such as Page (2000) argue how studying history in a critical way can lead to a more peace education-based approach. One crucial idea that Page addresses is the need to demystify the notion that war is inevitable. Rather, war is often due to the actions and poor decisions of leaders. Page argues that the fear of not wanting to assign moral judgment for historical figures causes us to act as if no one bears the blame for violent historical actions. Page also argues that history has often been told from the broader view like a chess match where the lived experiences of individuals, particularly those who suffer the most in war, are often minimized.

This focus on using history to deconstruct militarism is perhaps best illustrated in the popular historian, Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (2003) where Zinn seeks to not only critique the more controversial wars in U.S. History like the Vietnam War and Mexican-American War, but even the more sacrosanct wars like the American Revolution and even World War II. Zinn in his book *The Bomb* (2010) discusses his own experiences fighting in the U.S. army in World War II and the needless lives that were taken by his own unit at the end of the war. He argues that even some of the myths of the Good War need to be challenged. As Zinn (2006) stated at a speech near the end of his life in reaction to the U.S. invasion of Iraq,

> We don't want to have to struggle against this war and then against that war and then against the next war. We don't want to have an endless succession of antiwar movements. It gets tiring. And we need to think and talk and educate about the abolition of war itself, you see.

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Harris (2004) argues that this approach of taking a critical view towards war is actually in line with the original goals of peace education. Many of the roots of the ideas of the peace education movement came from Europe after the Napoleonic Wars, and they were also present in the U.S. in the early 20th Century with the School Peace Leagues. A movement for peace education was also present after the brutality of World War I. Harris notes that at the end of the 20th Century the broader focus on international peace was reduced and the focus on peace education became more on areas such as human rights, conflict resolution, and dealing with more inter-personal and local conflicts. It even went as far as dealing with themes such as environmental education. As Salomon (2012) highlights, in some aspects the term peace education has become so broad in its scope that is difficult to define. McCorkle (2017) argues that history educators need to re-emphasize these historical anti-war roots of peace education while not neglecting the other important aspects.

Militarism in American Society

The central problem that this paper seeks to address is the militarism at the heart of American society. In the United States there is vast spending on the military, which surpasses the spending of the next seven countries combined (McCarthy, 2018). There is also the continual US military presence in other nations and illegal international conflicts such as the War in Iraq. There are also more subtle examples of militarism particularly related to the education system that perhaps few have truly considered, such as the presence of so many ROTC programs in schools. In fact, the Army is currently seeking to increase ROTC programs in schools in order to increase lagging numbers of younger recruits (Rempfer, 2019). There is also the issue of the militarization of many sporting events. Astore (2018) describes how this trend became greater after September 11th. As he points out,

> What started as a post-9/11 drive to get an American public to "thank" the troops endlessly for their service in distant conflicts — stifling criticism of those wars by linking it to ingratitude — has morphed into a new form of national reverence. And much credit goes to professional sports for that transformation.

This level of militarism can also be seen in the U.S. with the strong public support of troubling practices such as enhanced interrogation and pre-emptive strikes. For example, in 2017, a Gallup poll found that 58% of Americans would support war against North Korea if peaceful solutions failed (Saad, 2017). Another Gallup poll from 2002 found that 66% of Americans supported a pre-emptive strike against Iraq (Saad, 2002). In a 2014 poll, nearly two thirds of Americans supported

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enhanced interrogation (torture) of terrorist suspects to obtain information on terrorism. Only 15% of the respondents said that it should never be implemented (Kahn, 2016). Polling also shows that the U.S. public has the highest trust in the military compared to other institutions with 74% of individuals having a great deal of trust in the military compared to only 29% for public schools, 26% for organized labor, and 23% for newspapers (Saad, 2018).

As Astore (2019) highlights, there are often also more understated forms of militarism that are present in the American society such as the obsession with entertainment related to police, crime, and the military. There is also the tendency of former military generals to become pundits and commentators on news outlets, thus regurgitating more militaristic talking points. In addition, there is little to no pushback from the extensive sale of U.S. weapons around the world. In this way, the U.S. is becoming a type of "merchant of death". As Astore highlights this "soft militarism" where "Jackbooted troops may not be marching in our streets, but they increasingly seem to be marching unopposed through—and occupying —our minds."

Lack of Focus on Modern History

A second issue that this paper seeks to highlight is the lack of modern history within the social studies classroom. There are plenty of anecdotal examples that most students and teachers could reference.[1] As the author of this article and a former high school social studies teacher, I will also confess that I have been guilty of this practice as well. It could be argued that much of this is not intentional. The original syllabus may include time to cover modern topics. However, often times earlier sections of history take longer than expected and then there are the unexpected fire drills, school assemblies, snow days, etc. This trend almost certainly was even more of an issue in the spring of 2020 as schools shut down because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This lack of focus on modern history has numerous problems. What is the advantage for students to know all the details of the War of 1812 or of the royal line of the Middle Ages, when they do not know what happened in their own countries in the 1990s and 2000s? Are perhaps many not even aware of the modern economic and political realities in the world? It also tends to make history seem like something very distant and irrelevant to students' lives.

Some of the problem may also lie in the noble aspects of trying to broaden the curriculum to focus on social studies more broadly and even critical thinking within the classroom (Ravitch,

[1] From the initial exploration of the literature, there was little quantitative research that provides evidence for what percentage of teachers cover modern history.

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1985). In some aspects if the focus is more on learning critical thinking skills and applying issues to broader topics in social studies, it could be tempting to not necessarily worry about extensively covering modern history. So, for example, a teacher may do a good job comparing what happened in the American Revolution to modern day issues of conflict and oppression. While this is very valuable, it could be possible that in the midst of going in depth on these historical issues, there is no time left to cover the more recent history, which would help to further clarify current events. As Ravitch points out,

> Unless historical-mindedness begins in the early years, in the home and the elementary grades, in the books that children read and the television they watch, even these small steps will not be enough. The free mind, as Aldous Huxley dramatically reminded us, needs to know its past, to debate and discuss how the world came to be as it is, in order to know what to defend and what to change and how to resist imposed orthodoxies (p.50).

One option that teachers could consider is teaching history in reverse. Atkins (2000) describes how she is implemented this method in her classroom with quite resounding success. She starts class with having the students examine 1960 to the present and then works her way backwards. Though there could obviously be some logistical issues and needed rearrangements with teaching history in this way, it could be something considered to ensure that modern history is actually covered.

Relation between Militarism and Lack of Focus on Modern History

The argument of this article is that militarism in the U.S. society and the lack of focus on modern history are linked. The problem is that far too often, especially in US history, there is a celebratory, uncritical view of historical wars. This is particularly true of the American Revolution (McCorkle, 2020) and at least of the Northern perspective of the Civil War (McCorkle, 2018). The last war that students often cover in any depth is World War II, which lends itself very heavily to the idea of war being justified given the peculiarities of that conflict (McCorkle, 2021). There are conflicts in earlier history, such as the Mexican-American War, the Filipino-American War, and World War I where a more critical approach to warfare could be easily used. However, the question is how much these wars are actually covered, and if so, how much of a critical lens is used? Focusing on modern history can open up the possibility of a more critical lens to war and a more peace education-based approach. This paper focuses particularly on four areas of modern

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history where this approach can be taken: The War in Vietnam, US interventions during the Cold War in general, the War in Afghanistan, and the US War in Iraq (2003).

Vietnam War

The War in Vietnam may be the most heavily critiqued war in US history. It was one of the few wars, or arguably the only, where the US actually lost. It led to a widespread peace movement and in many ways led to the end of the military draft (Vandiver, 2014). It also exposed the dishonesty in regards to warfare by officials in the US government (Ellsburg, 2001). Having students truly engage with the history of the Vietnam War, both the actual conflict and the peace movements and domestic rejection of the war, is important in creating a more peace education-based approach.

Focusing on the Vietnam War would be a great opportunity for students to engage with much of the protest music related to the war. There are many songs to choose from whether it be the critique on the class aspects of the war in Clearance Clearwater Revival's *Fortunate Son* (Fogerty, 1969) or the more direct critique of militarism of *War* from Edwin Starr (Whifield & Strong, 1970). There can also be a look at the more direct opposition to the draft in a song such as *I'm Not Marching Anymore* from Phil Ochs (1965) or to the war more broadly in Tom Paxton's *Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation* (1965). Liebefreld (2007) highlights the strong literature to draw from in relation to the Vietnam War in the classroom especially novels such as *The Things They Carried* (O'brien, 2009). He also argues that it could be helpful for students to view and critique a film such as *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* from the 1980s to understand the distorted narratives that it is presenting about Vietnam and the role of the U.S. government.

The Vietnam War is also a good topic in helping students understand the concepts of historiography in seeing how the Vietnam War was viewed over time. There is the 1979 text from Griffen and Marciano that critically examines how textbooks treated the topic of Vietnam at the time. This can then be compared to how more modern textbooks, particularly the textbook used inn the class, cover the topic of the War in Vietnam and see possible change over time. This can lead into the broader issue for how the view on war often changes over time from a more positive and nationalistic perspective to a less embracing position.

CIA Interventions

Likewise, students need gain awareness of an issue that is often not focused on at all in American history, the more clandestine US interventions during the Cold War including ones that helped

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depose democratically elected leaders. There are many examples that the students could analyze, but for a cursory overview, two of the most important may be the U.S. supported coups in Iran and Chile. In Iran, students could read documents regarding the overthrowing of the socialist government in the 1950s and the re-empowerment of the Shah for U.S. and British interests (McGlinchey, 2013). This in turn led to greater unrest, which eventually led to the Iranian Islamic government, the same government with which the US is currently engaged in conflict. Without student understanding the historical context, it is very easy to see the US and Iran conflict today in terms of good versus evil, freedom versus theocracy, instead of a much more nuanced conflict often shaped by the US imperialist ambitions. Additionally, there can be an examination of how the US overthrew the government of Salvador Allende in Chile and put in the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, who killed and tortured many of his political rivals (Shenon, 1999). As has been widely discussed, how much of the instability in modern Latin America may be due to the US actions from the Cold War (Borger, 2018)?

The War in Afghanistan

Another example that students could examine is the War in Afghanistan. This is one of the most unique contemporary wars given the almost complete acceptance of the war at its outset, the initial sense of victory in ousting the Taliban, but then the prolonged nature of the war with U.S. troops remain in the country almost two decades after the initial attack. Teachers can analyze the early support for the war, when 93% of individuals said the war was not a mistake in 2002 compared to only 48% that had the same feeling in 2014 (Newport, 2014). The war in Afghanistan also gives the students a chance to consider how acting in a moment of anger and revenge can cause unwise decisions. For example, would it have been better to simply have entered negotiations with the Taliban to turn over Osama Bin Laden (Gannon, 2001) instead of seeking to overturn the Taliban government? (Grenier, 2015). Joel Mathis' (2020) article is a strong resource for students to consider as Mathis lays out the fact that Afghanistan was the one war he wholeheartedly supported, but that he was wrong in that assessment. He argues that the U.S. was wrong because it forgot the lessons it should have learned from Vietnam. Furthermore, he argues that,

> Staying and trying to recreate Afghanistan in something like our own image was the crucial error, both hubristic and well-intentioned — we thought we could be the conquerors who left the country better than we found it. We are not.

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He argues that more broadly we should not think we can fight a traditional war to stop terrorism as it is much more complicated than that. Carroll (2019) argues that the War in Afghanistan has so often been portrayed as the good war in comparison to the "bad war" in Iraq, that we perhaps have not sufficiently critiqued it. He contends that one way that we can do this is by examining the Afghanistan papers, which reveal both the dishonesty of the U.S. government and the lack of real understanding of what was occurring. He hopes that much like the Vietnam papers, these papers may cause a "direct confrontation with the errors of the twenty-first century, might begin to repair them." Perhaps given the fact of Afghanistan being considered the good war (Caroll, 2019) or due to the soft militarism of American society (Astore, 2019), there have not been a lot of films or music directly critiquing the War in Afghanistan. However, there has been a recent documentary entitled *Combat Obscura* (Lagoze, 2018), which contains actual footage from Marines in Afghanistan that strongly critiques some of the official narratives from the U.S. Though some of the footage may be too graphic or inappropriate to show students at the K-12 level, certain clips could be used to show some of the realities of modern warfare beyond the patriotic narratives.

The War in Iraq

Finally, there is the example of the Iraq War, which also initially had rather large support (though not as high as in Afghanistan), but then dramatically decreased going from 72% support in 2003 to only 38% by 2008 (Rosentiel, 2008). Teachers can analyze the subsequent civil war and oppression of minorities that occurred after Saddam Hussein was overthrown (MacDiarmid, 2018). They could also explore what many would see as the dishonest pretexts the U.S. had for entering the war (Stein & Dickenson, 2006). Finally, the students could examine how some of the instability of the Middle East, particularly related to the rise of ISIS (MacDiarmid, 2018) and even the increased tension between the U.S. and Iran is partially due to the War in Iraq (Vidon, 2020). There are many examples of literature, music, and films that relate to the Iraq War that teachers could bring into the discussion and use as sources to help offer a more critical lens. An example of the traumatic stress that war causes can be seen in the film, *In The Valley of Elah* (Wachsberger, Samuels, Caamaño Loquet, Haggis, & Becsey 2007). A more recent film, *The Last Flag Flying* (Sledge & Sloss, 2017), is based on a father who has to bury his soon after being killed in Iraq. For the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular, studies could consider interviewing a family member who may have served in the war and gain their perspectives on the conflict. Students could also read and reflection collection of poignant letters from soldiers in Iraq is put together in one resource ("Soldiers Stories," 2006).

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New Conflicts

If we do not have a clear view of our recent history and the deception and disaster that often defined our conflicts, it is easy to get drawn into the next war, which the media seems to always portray as both justified and inevitable (McCorkle, 2017). In just the last few years, there have been times we have come far too close to the edge of war with both North Korea (Johnson, 2018) and to a larger extent Iran (Dozeier & Walcott, 2020). There has been even greater danger in the growing confrontations between the U.S. and Russian governments (Stent, 2020) and the U.S. and China (Kristian, 2020). Though for many these conflicts may seem like impossibilities, unless there is a deep commitment to peaceful resolution and a rejection of militarism, they may be more likely than anyone would like to believe. The next generation that will decide the course for the nation and global community has more access to information about both recent and older history than any other generation before, however, in the midst of this barrage of information it is important that they have a strong grip on the history over the last few decades to understand the forces, individuals, and decisions that have shaped the current world order and how they can play a role in making sure that they strive for a more just and peaceful future.

Conclusion

Merely teaching modern history will not guarantee a critical or peace education approach to history. Modern history can also be discussed in such a way that merely reinforces more nationalistic and militaristic thinking. However, focusing on modern history does offer more opportunities for a greater critique of militarism and U.S. interventionism. To actually have a more peaceful society, it may not only be sufficient to teach a critical history of war (Page, 2000). It might also mean restructuring the social studies classroom to make sure modern conflicts are actually covered.

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