

Bring the War Home To Our Classrooms

By Bob Peterson

A slick, full-color print ad that has appeared in numerous publications features a child writing on a chalk board: "A history of Irak" with a caption punch line: "Debating Irak is tough. Spelling it shouldn't be."



Illustration: Michael Duffy

[The ad](#) is part of a massive \$60 million public relations campaign financed by the Gates and Broad foundations, called Ed in '08. The ad is disingenuous— as is the entire campaign ([see editorial](#)).

As a classroom teacher, I have no problem with the notion that kids should be able to spell the words "history" and "Iraq." But I am even more interested that they understand something about the history of the Iraq War.

There is no indication that even a penny of the Gates money or any of the policies of Ed in '08 encourage teachers or schools to debate the war in our nation's classrooms. In fact, since September 2001, a nearly McCarthy-like "anti-terrorism" atmosphere in schools and society, combined with an obscene obsession with standardized testing and factual minutia, have left most substantive classroom conversations behind.

There is another campaign however— running on a shoestring budget— that is encouraging people to not only talk about and discuss the war, but to act on their beliefs.

While educators should take care not to conflate study of the war in Iraq with protest against the war, a key component of any study should be the arguments for and against the war, and an examination of the antiwar and pro-war movements.

The current campaign, called Iraq Moratorium (www.IraqMoratorium.org), patterned after similar moratoriums in the 1960s against the Vietnam War, is sponsored by progressive academics, artists, and activists. They are calling on people to mount protests the third Friday of every month until the war ends. Suggested activities include:

- Wearing black ribbons and armbands
- Not buying gas on Moratorium days
- Pressuring politicians and the media
- Holding vigils, pickets, rallies and teach-ins
- Organizing student actions

I think this is a great idea.

It is one route for teachers and students to discuss and debate the Iraq War and the antiwar movement. Even in the current repressive climate, current events is a legitimate subject in

every school district. The war's origin, its human, financial, and ecological cost, and military recruitment are all high-interest topics for most students. And for those students who wish to act on their beliefs, the Iraq Moratorium offers multiple ways to get involved in the antiwar movement. The regular, monthly dates allow for thoughtful crescendos of activities to involve ever-greater circles of people.

And the Iraq Moratorium ties into the long tradition of antiwar protests stretching back to opposition to the U.S. War on Mexico — which produced Henry David Thoreau's famous essay, "On Civil Disobedience" — up through the massive antiwar Vietnam moratoriums.

As a high school student in the late 1960s, I participated in those moratoriums — through wearing black armbands, distributing antiwar lapel buttons, organizing schoolwide teach-ins and participating in demonstrations. One poignant memory I have of my high school organizing against the war was on February 24, 1969, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 7-2 in its *Tinker v. Des Moines* decision that students had the constitutional right to wear black armbands to protest the Vietnam War.

Five students in Des Moines had refused to remove their black armbands to protest the war and the killing of people on both sides of the conflict. The school suspended them. But they and their parents fought back and appealed their suspensions to the Supreme Court. Justice Abe Fortas wrote in the Court's decision, "Students or teachers do not shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" and "state operated schools may not be enclaves of totalitarianism."



Illustration: Michael Duffy

News of that decision spread through my high school like wildfire. We had maintained all along that we had these rights, but once the Supreme Court confirmed them, our high school antiwar organizing got a shot in the arm.

This fall in my 5th-grade class I am going to make sure that my students know how to spell "history" and "Iraq." More importantly, I'll make sure that the Iraq Moratorium is one of the topics in current events, and we'll debate the war, even though, according to Gates, it is "tough." I will also point out that 40 years ago students in Des Moines, Iowa, stood up against a different war, got suspended, sued the school district, and ultimately won— a victory that still benefits all public school students.

I recognize that my role has changed— from a high school student protesting the Vietnam War, to a teacher encouraging a critical look at the Iraq War. But my responsibility to encourage people— whether my students or my peers— to think critically about issues of war and peace has not changed.

Whether my students will exercise their rights to participate in the Iraq Moratorium is a decision each of them will make. Just as it is a decision that every teacher and parent has to make. Come to think of it, Bill Gates has to make that decision as well.

Bob Peterson is a 5th-grade teacher at La Escuela Fratney and a co-founder of Rethinking Schools.

Handout A

What Would Martin Luther King Say About May Day This Year?

Every January, on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, we hear about his belief in peaceful change and racial equality. But what else did King say about issues many people are raising on this May Day, 2008? The longshore workers union will stop work at every West Coast port, including the Port of Oakland, to demand an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These dockworkers are also demanding that the government use our tax dollars for quality education, health care, and housing instead of war. And all over the nation, people will march to defend the rights of immigrants who have come to the United States to find work and a decent life for their families.

Next to each of the statements listed below, check whether you think Martin Luther King had a strong belief about the subject.

<i>Belief</i>	Yes	No	Don't Know
1. We should work to achieve racial equality.			
2. U.S. military policy, including the Vietnam War, is wrong.			
3. Labor unions (workers' organizations that fight for better pay and working conditions) are good for most people, including African Americans.			
4. People should disrupt society and businesses until the government does more to help poor people of all colors.			
5. The U.S. military is committing terrible acts of violence against innocent people.			
6. The government should make sure that every American receives a decent income each year.			
7. Protests should be nonviolent.			
8. Our society cares more about letting businesses make money than taking care of people.			
9. Our government should spend billions of dollars on helping poor people instead of spending so much on war.			
10. Our government should take money from the rich and give it to the poor.			
11. U.S. businesses get rich off of the labor done by poor and hungry people around the world.			

Handout B

1. Read the quotes from Martin Luther King, Jr. on these two pages. (Your teacher will tell you whether to read these quotes by yourself, in pairs, in groups, or as a whole class.)
2. **As you read**, check the list of beliefs on Handout A. In the left column next to each quote, write the number or numbers(1-11) of the belief(s) listed in Handout A that you are expressed in that quote.

Belief #	Martin Luther King Jr.'s Ideas
	<p><u>The War in Vietnam – The Domestic Cost of War</u> <i>"Beyond Vietnam," Address," Riverside Church, New York, April 4, 1967:</i></p> <p>I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in [helping] its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.</p> <p><i>"The Casualties of War in Vietnam" Los Angeles, February 25, 1967</i> [T]he promises of the Great Society [anti-poverty program] have been shot down on the battlefield of Vietnam. The pursuit of this widened war has narrowed domestic welfare programs, making the poor, white and Negro, bear the heaviest burdens both at the front and at home. ...The security we profess to seek in foreign adventures we will lose in our decaying cities. The bombs in Vietnam explode at home. They destroy the hopes and possibilities for a decent America.</p> <p><u>The Greatest Source of Violence in the World</u> <i>"Beyond Vietnam," Address," Riverside Church, New York, April 4, 1967:</i></p> <p>[I have told our young men that] social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action. But they asked, and rightly so, "What about Vietnam?" They asked if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government.</p> <p><u>The War in Vietnam – Inflicting Suffering, Sowing Hatred</u> <i>"Beyond Vietnam," Address," Riverside Church, New York, April 4, 1967:</i></p> <p>Now [the Vietnamese people] languish under our bombs and consider us, not their fellow Vietnamese, the real enemy...They watch as we poison their water, as we kill a million acres of their crops. They must weep as the bulldozers roar through their areas preparing to destroy the precious trees. ...So far we may have killed a million of them, mostly children. They wander into the towns and see thousands of the children, homeless, without clothes, running in packs on the streets like animals. They see the children degraded by our soldiers as they beg for food. They see the children selling their sisters to our soldiers, soliciting for their mothers.</p> <p><u>Calling for a Revolution of Values</u> <i>"Beyond Vietnam," Address," Riverside Church, New York, April 4, 1967:</i></p> <p>I am convinced that ... we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.</p> <p>...A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: "This is not just."</p>

The Need to Equalize Wealth and Power

Martin Luther King, Jr., May 1967:

We must recognize that we can't solve our problem until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power... This means a revolution of values and other things. We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together. ... You can't really get rid of one without getting rid of the others... the whole structure of American life must be changed.

Abolishing Poverty

Teamsters and Allied Trade Councils, New York City, May 1967:

The limited reforms we have won have been at bargain rates for the power structure. ... [T]o repair the damage of centuries of denial and oppression... means the outlay of billions for decent housing and equal education. ... The real cost lies ahead. To enable the Negro to catch up, to repair the damage of centuries of denial and oppression means appropriations to create jobs and job training; it means the outlay of billions for decent housing and equal education...

The solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by a now widely discussed measure: the guaranteed annual income. We are likely to find that the problems of housing and education, instead of preceding the elimination of poverty, will themselves be affected if poverty is first abolished...

Forcing the Government to Help the Poor

From I May Not Get There With You, by Michael Eric Dyson.

Dyson describes King's plan to force the government in Washington D.C. to end poverty throughof "aggressive nonviolence" and:

...engag[ing] in massive civil disobedience, tying up traffic, staging sit-ins in Congress and in government buildings, and shutting down business in the capital.

In Inconvenient Hero (1997), by Vincent Harding writes about the Poor People's Campaign that King planned for the Spring of 1968. Harding says that King's plan "was to mobilize and train thousands of the poor and their allies to come to the nation's capital and 'just camp here and stay' until the country's elected leaders approved 'a massive program on the part of the federal government that will make jobs or income a reality for every American citizen...' Harding describes King's plan to lead the poor of all colors to disrupt businesses and the government in order to win their demands. Here is how King described his thinking about the campaign:

We've got to find a method that will disrupt our cities if necessary, create the crisis that will force the nation to look at the situation, dramatize it, and yet at the same time not destroy life or property...

We've got to camp in – put our tents in front of the White House... We've got to make it known that until our problem is solved, America may have many, many days, but they will be full of trouble. There will be no rest, there will be no tranquility in this country until the nation comes to terms with our problem.

The Importance of Labor Unions

Speech in 1965:

The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old age pensions, government relief for the destitute [poor], and above all new wage levels that meant not mere survival, but a tolerable life.

Teamsters and Allied Trade Councils, New York City, May 1967:

Today Negroes want above all else to abolish poverty in their lives, and in the lives of the white poor. This is the heart of their program. To end humiliation was a start, but to end poverty is a bigger task. It is natural for Negroes to turn to the Labor movement because it was the first and pioneer anti-poverty program.

Handout C

Reflecting on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Ideas and Applying Them Today

Answer the following questions on a separate paper. Your teacher will tell you whether to do this work individually, in pairs, or in small groups.

1. Read through the chart in Handout A again. Explain how your knowledge about some of the subjects and ideas that King spoke about has changed after reading Handout B. Which ideas quoted in Handout B did you find most surprising, interesting, or powerful? Why?
2. What do you think are the reasons that the public almost never hears or reads that King said these things?
3. Now apply King's words to the issues we face today:
 - a. **The Effects of War on the Iraqi People:** Look for quotes in Handout B where you have written 2 or 5 and then imagine what King would say today about the U.S. war in Iraq today. How do King's ideas about U.S. policies in other countries and apply to the Iraq war today? Give specific examples.
 - b. **The Cost of War to Social Programs in the U.S.:** Look for quotes in Handout B where you have written 9, and then imagine what King would say about the situation today. How do King's ideas about spending money on war instead of programs for poor and working people apply now? Give specific examples.
 - c. **The Longshore Work Stoppage at All West Coast Ports:** Look for quotes in Handout B where you have written 3, 4, or 7 and then imagine what King would say about this action. How do King's ideas about the importance of unions and of the need to sometimes disrupt businesses and government to make changes happen apply to this action?
 - d. **The Immigrants Rights March:** Look for quotes in Handout B where you have written 1, 6, 8, 10, or 11, and then imagine what King would say about this treatment of immigrants in the U.S. today. Although you won't find any quotes from King here specifically about immigrants, he does say a lot of things about how the United States government and big businesses (corporations) help keep people in other countries poor and hungry. Considering those words, what do you think King would say about how the U.S. government and businesses treat people who come here from other countries to help themselves and their families achieve a better life? See whether you think any of his comments here about the causes of poor people's problems or the possible solutions to these problems make sense today.

THE POWER OF WORKERS

by Bob Mandel, teacher at Neighborhood Centers Adult School

Because workers produce and build everything and make everything go, they have a lot of power. When they use the power, they can make society change.

South African workers, led by the gold miners, used that power starting in 1976. They led three general strikes that brought down apartheid. General strikes are strikes where all, or almost all, of the workers in a city, a state or a country refuse to work. Longshore workers in SF used that power to support their South African brothers and sisters: they refused to unload a ship's South African cargo for 11-days despite court injunctions and the threat of millions of dollars in fines.

Truck drivers in the US who worked for UPS used that power in 1997. They went on strike to demand full-time jobs for all UPS workers. Today many working people are only given part-time jobs. Nobody can live on part-time wages. So mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers all have to work or hold down two or even three jobs.

In 1999, Oakland teachers and Bay Area longshore workers used that power. They both acted to save the life of Mumia Abu-Jamal. He has been on Death Row since 1982, falsely convicted of killing a policeman. The teachers held a "teach-in" about his case and the Death Penalty in many Oakland schools. The "teach-in" made national and international news, dominating radio talk-shows and winning TV and newspaper coverage for three straight weeks. Then the longshore workers went on strike for a day, refusing to load or unload ships, to demand freedom for Mumia Abu-Jamal. Thanks to the teachers and the longshore workers and many others throughout the world, Mumia is still alive although he is still in prison.

In 2006, all the workers in the Oakland schools used that power. Teachers, custodians, and clerical workers all voted to act together against the State Administrator, Randy Ward, who was trying to wreck public education and privatize the schools. Because of the vote for unified strike action, Ward was forced to settle the contract, shut the schools for a day and leave town. Unfortunately the school workers stopped short of a strike so that the State Administration is still in place and the cuts in education continue.

And in 2006 millions of immigrant workers staged "stay-away" strikes on May 1st to demand full citizenship and the right to stay in this country and keep their jobs. They didn't go on strike where they worked; instead they went to demonstrations, marches and rallies across the US.

Now the longshore workers are acting again but this time its in every Port on the West Coast. On May 1st they are refusing to work. They are sick and tired of the Democrats and Republicans continuing to fund the occupation of Iraq. They say that the \$2.6 trillion the war is costing should be spent to fix our schools, provide good health care for everyone, clean up the air and provide lowcost housing.

May 1st is a Workers Holiday celebrated throughout the world. Decades ago the US government decided to block workers celebrations of May 1st and for many years the government succeeded. Now, thanks to the Immigrants Rights stay-away strikes and rallies two years ago, May 1st is slowly making a comeback among workers of every color in the US.

Who in your family works? What do they do? Do they belong to a union? What's the name of the union? What kind of job would you like to do when you graduate?

May 1st, An International Workers Holiday

Resources for May 1 and Beyond

Here are some resources that can be used for a May 1 teach-in. This is not meant to be comprehensive--just a start. But it's already enough for several lessons.

There's a great chart at the Cost of War page, which in itself could be the basis of a full lesson:
http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080331/cost_of_war

The National Priorities website really breaks down how government war spending has resulted in dramatic cuts to federal aid for state public programs, as well as providing an overview of where tax dollars go and other valuable information.

<http://www.nationalpriorities.org/>

An op-ed piece by Nobel Laureate (economics) Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes excerpted from their book, "The Trillion Dollar War":

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article3419840.ece

The UK Guardian has a website with links to anti-war organizations around the world organized by region:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/antiwar/subsection/0,12809,884056,00.html>

The Holt Labor Library's anti-war resources web page:

<http://www.holtlaborlibrary.org/anti-war.html>

Labour Start's Iraq war web page (this is British; note the links to news about the ILWU May 1 action)

Naomi Klein's book "The Shock Doctrine" is all about what Klein calls "The Disaster Capitalist Complex", describing how neo-cons/neo-liberals/capitalists plan disasters and/or pounce on natural disasters (shock no. 1), and then apply their remedy ("shock therapy", shock no. 2)--cases in point: Chile, Iraq, New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina. Although Klein herself is a proponent of the "mixed economy" (i.e., a Keynesian model), she presents a devastating account of an expanded war economy in practice (it's not the whole picture, but it's an important piece of it).

Here MarketWatch columnist Paul Farrell reviews Klein's book, and wonders whether the disaster capitalist complex is a nightmare for the world or a great investment opportunity:

<http://www.naomiklein.org/shock-doctrine/reviews/profitting-disaster-capitalism>

Here's an interview with Naomi Klein focusing on Katrina:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/aug/30/comment.hurricanekatrina>

This YouTube video of Naomi Klein is worth watching:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JG9CM_J00bw

Here is an excellent animation featuring Ben Cohen (of Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream) comparing the military budget to a stack of Oreo cookies. He takes a few of those cookies (each representing \$10 billion) off of the stack and shows what a fraction of the war budget could do for hungry people, education, alternative energy, and children's health care.

<http://www.truemajority.org/oreos/>

On line Comic Book

"Mixed Signals" A counter-recruitment comic book by artist Sabrina Jones. Check it out at the comic book's web page: Links: ordering info and one page:

<http://www.brethren.org/oepa/programs/peace-witness/counter-recruitment/resources/mixed-signals.html>

<http://antiauthoritarian.net/NLN/current/sabrina.html>

pdf suitable for printing on 11 x 17 paper:

http://www.newsds.org/agitprop/Mixed_Signals/

(file is called sabrina_11x17.pdf)

DVD's

The following DVDs are available for classroom use.

1. **"Cost of War"** (19 minutes) very clear, down to earth explanation developed by USLAW. Available for loan or to buy, \$10.

2. **"Arlington West"**, (74 min. - can be used in short segments) testimony by vets, other. A few copies available free, otherwise available for loan.

Contact Mary Prophet at mlprophet@earthlink.net (510) 527-1222 for either of these DVDs.

Two versions of "Arlington West" – the 74 minute one or a shorter one – are also available from Larry Felson at flameblossom@hotmail.com

A curriculum guide for "Arlington West" can be downloaded from

<http://www.militaryfreeschools.org/PDF/arlingtonwestcurricguide%5B1%5D.pdf>

Last, but certainly not least:

Winter Soldier Hearings

held March 13-16, 2008 in Silver Springs, Maryland. The hearings featured powerful testimony, including video and photos, from veterans of the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Veterans and others testified about a wide range of topics, including how the war is being conducted on the ground, the targeting of civilians, the GI resistance movement, and the fight for veterans' health care and support.

The corporate media ignored this historic event, but here are two links to audio and video excerpts of the hearings:

<http://ivaw.org/wintersoldier>

<http://warcomeshome.org/content/listen-archived-testimonial-audio-winter-soldier-event>

You can also go to the home pages of for each of the links listed above for a wealth of additional information on the U.S. occupations:

Iraq Veterans Against the War - <http://ivaw.org>

War Comes Home - <http://warcomeshome.org>