

Teaching about Iraq; It's More Than Current Events

by Mollie Hackett

Far too often in American high schools, history and current issues are taught as separate, isolated subjects. Course subjects such as “Ancient World History” or “Contemporary Issues” compartmentalize historical eras. As a result, many students don’t recognize the relevance of the past or the complex history of current issues. To make social studies curricula more meaningful, we must break down the barriers between yesterday and today. As the late historian Arthur Schlesinger recently said in *The New York Times*, “history is to the nation as memory is to the individual. As persons deprived of memory become disoriented and lost... so a nation denied a conception of the past will be disabled in dealing with its present and future.” Yet it is not enough just to teach about the past: educators must help students understand this vital connection between past and present (and even, as Schlesinger points out, the future). By demonstrating the continuity between yesterday and today and by drawing comparisons between time and place, educators can better help their students to appreciate the force of history.

The most pressing issue facing our nation today is the conflict in Iraq. However, for most American youth, knowledge of Iraqi history is piecemeal at best. In an ancient history class, students will learn about Mesopotamia (“the land between two rivers”) as the first civilization; they might also study the ancient kingdoms of Assyria and Babylonia. They may learn about the



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The ruins of the ancient city of Babylon (photo taken in 1932)



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Iraqi sheiks stand and U.S. army soldiers salute as the Iraqi flag is raised at a power-transfer ceremony in Tikrit in 2004

origins of Islam, and, if they are lucky, the split between Sunnis and Shi’as. But beyond this, the region might as well fall off the map, for the next time many students will encounter Mesopotamia, it pops back up as a place called Iraq and in the context of the current conflict. In other words, there is a gap of more than a millennium. With this kind of disconnect, why should students care about history and how can we expect them to understand the thorny nature of the current situation?

Let’s imagine a class where a teacher illuminates the continuity of

past and present, where students learn about historical developments over the span of centuries to see how history has shaped the world we live in today. Before examining the current conflict, students would learn about Iraq’s strategic location between the Sunni Ottomans in the north and the Shi’a Safavi dynasty in the east. They would learn about the historical tensions among Sunnis, Shi’as and Kurds, as well as Iraq’s vexed relationship with Western powers going back a century – from European colonization, through the Cold War and to today’s conflict. Students could begin to analyze cause and effect, and recognize the historical forces shaping our modern world. Such an approach would lead to more thoughtful examinations of the current situation, with the understanding that there are no easy solutions to the Iraq war.

If one does not have the time to cover such an extensive span of history, relevant connections can be made in other

ways. By engaging in comparative studies students will begin to understand that what happened in one time and place has important lessons to teach about what happens in another.

For example, in a world or European history course, many parallels could be drawn between the era of the Reformation and the current situation in Iraq. During the 16th and 17th century, Europe was fraught with endless wars of religion. Europe was not yet a secular society, so with the Reformation came challenges to political and eco-

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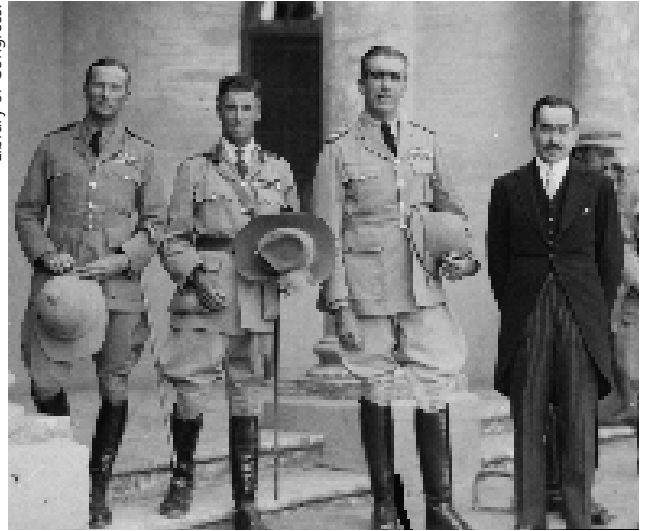
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nomic power. In France, the Huguenots (French Calvinists) threatened to usurp the monarchy's power. In Germany, religion was closely tied to the most valuable resource of all—land. And while differences in religious ideology mattered immensely, to fully understand the conflicts of the era, one must also understand the interrelationship in a non-secular society among religion, politics and economics. Students who have this historical perspective are much more equipped to examine the current conflict in Iraq between Sunni insurgents and Shi'a militias. By encouraging such comparisons, students will see that historical problems are not confined to the past and that the dif-

ferences Iraq faces aren't unique to Islam or the Middle East.

Mollie Hackett is Professional Development Director for the Choices Program at Brown University. Mollie joined Choices in 2006 with thirteen years of social studies teaching experience at the secondary level in Seattle, Washington. She was also responsible for leading the professional development in her high school under a grant from the Gates Foundation. Most recently, Mollie contributed to the development of Conflict in Iraq: Searching for Solutions, a curriculum unit published by the Choices Program.

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British officers in Iraq in 1932, three days after handing power over to Iraqis.