

Why We Teach Social Studies

by Ron Levitsky

Published by the United States Institute of Peace in May 2003, as the Iraqi War was ending, *The Road Ahead: Lessons in Nation Building from Japan, Germany, and Afghanistan for Postwar Iraq* analyzed the nation-building the United States was about to attempt. Author Ray Salvador Jennings warned that this would take a long time (Germany and Japan were each occupied for seven years), would require huge and immediate reconstruction efforts, and cautioned against blaming all Ba-athists for Saddam's sins.

Eerily prescient, this booklet was based on the author's experience in advising overseas programs and on one more thing—social studies. Jennings used a broad knowledge of history, geography, political science, sociology, and psychology to reach his conclusions. Our difficult experience in Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion confirms the importance of such breadth of knowledge and inquisitiveness.

In the documentary, "The Fog of War," as well as his book, *Argument Without End*, octogenarian Robert McNamara shows this curiosity by seeking to understand the tragedy of Vietnam. Through research, reflection, and meeting with the same men he'd once fought, McNamara concludes that serious misunderstandings were made on both sides, including our assumption that North Vietnam, historically a

bitter enemy of China, would somehow, because of Communism, act as China's shill. Nobody in the Johnson administration really understood Southeast Asian history. There was, McNamara asserts, a desperate need for empathy. This is why we teach social studies.

We live in an era of sound bite, simple message, and self-importance. Talk shows are filled with talkers who never listen but only want to trump the other guy. Everything has become common except common ground.

Recently I showed my 8th grade U.S. history students an old docudrama, "Lure of Empire," which recounts the Senate debate regarding annexation of the Philippines after the Spanish-American War. The film's speeches are based on actual Senate records. What's wonderful about this video is its modeling of civic discourse. Senators asserted their opinions intelligently, articulately, and courteously. Unfortunately, there is little evidence of such discourse in today's society. Rather,

we live in an era of sound bite, simple message, and self-importance. Talk shows are filled with talkers who never listen but only want to trump the other guy. Everything has become common except common ground.

As educators, we have a responsibility to provide opportunities for civic discourse, a crucial skill of citizenship. Fortunately, organizations, such as Brown University's Choices for the 21st Century Program and the Constitutional Rights Foundation, provide models for this approach – where students discuss important issues, and from this dialogue are willing to listen, modify beliefs and respect each other's positions. This too is why we teach social studies.

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Students deliberate about public policy issues.

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The *Chicago Tribune* recently noted an increase in students whose main goal in life is wealth. During the last decade, the number of millionaires has risen, as has the number of those in poverty. Such a widening gap endangers democracy. A rigorous curriculum is important, but the head cannot live without the heart. The best book I've ever taught was William Saroyan's *The Human Comedy*. In it, Mrs. Macauley says, "Oh, I've had good luck, thank God. My kids are human beings, besides being children. They might have been children only, and then my luck wouldn't have been so good." We need to make sure that our students are human beings. Service learning and ad-

vocacy work, which help young people see beyond their own lives, are as important as the Punic Wars or Battle of Yorktown. This is what Professor John Patrick calls communitarian behavior, one of the pillars of a democratic society. Going further, we need to instill respect and tolerance for everyone, no matter what race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or gender preference. There's far too much apocalyptic talk of "clash of civilizations" and far too little of our common humanity. We need to remind our students constantly how similar all of us are, no matter what the difference in neighborhood or country. As a poet once wrote, "...no one exists alone;

Hunger allows no choice to the citizen or the police...."

Yes, these are dangerous times, but so was the outbreak of World War II, when sitting in a New York bar "[u]ncertain and afraid," that same poet, W.H. Auden, didn't spew hatred against the enemy but rather said, "We must love one another or die."

And that is the greatest reason why we teach social studies.

Ron Levitsky teaches eighth grade social studies at Sunset Ridge School in Northfield, IL. He is retiring at the end of this school year. He serves on the Executive Board of the National Social Studies Supervisors Association. In 2006 he was the first recipient of the Aharonian Award from the Genocide Education Project.