Teaching the Iraq War

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The last time members of the graduating class of 2008 lived in a nation at peace, they were in the first month of their high school sophomore year. Because they are not subject to conscription; because the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are being fought by a professional army that has separated itself in many respects from civil society; and because the government has asked little of society in the way of sacrifice for the wars, today's undergraduates have little direct experience of conflict, the armed forces, or those people most affected by it. What do we teach students about the war? Political scientists are often reluctant to teach current events—aside from the fact emotions can run high and classroom discussion can be hijacked by unproductive ideological debates, in real-time we lack the kinds of patterned data that lend themselves to systematic analysis and prediction.

However, undergraduates often look to us for explanation of events in the "real world," and nowhere is this more the case than in Iraq. In a recent survey, nearly half of all international relations faculty in the United States identified the war as the one event that *most* influenced the way they taught their subject (Maliniak et al. 2007), yet few professors offer courses explicitly focused on the war. Because I served in the Iraq war, colleagues asked in the fall of 2005 if I could teach a class "on" the war. That proved to be a bigger challenge than it first appeared to be for precisely the reasons set out above—we lack perspective, scholarly detachment, and (above all) data. It will be a generation or more, for example, before scholars have access to primary documents from the George W. Bush administration—if even then, given changes to the Presidential Records Act and the administration's penchant for secrecy. However, that lack of detachment proved itself a curious pedagogical boon—it enabled me to concentrate on the effects of political decisions on the lives of ordinary people, rather than simply revisit events as grist for theoretical mills. Politics ceases to be something that "they" do, but is instead an art and science that produces immediate and tangible effects on civil society. In this essay, I propose an approach to teaching the war in Iraq as a semester-length course, though parts could be readily adapted to a wide range of political science courses.

In 1985, a self-described "not-so-young" teaching assistant and Vietnam veteran was shocked to learn that a campus fraternity had held a "Vietnam night" where party-goers dressed as Viet Cong, American prisoners-of-war, and Vietnamese peasants (Lovett 1997). At that moment, he understood that what was intensely personal to him was little more than spectacle and myth to his students. James Michener (1947) once lamented that "longer and longer shadows" would slowly obscure his war until then-familiar names like Guadalcanal, Okinawa, and Peleliu would again sound foreign and "distant on the ear." Will a similarly not-so-young T.A. and Iraq veteran someday learn of an "Abu Ghraib night," and will foreign and distant sounding places like Baqubah, Fallujah, and Ramadi resonate for students the way they do for her?

Given the very personal nature of war, and forced to rethink a pedagogy of war and peace without the benefit of a robust theoretical and empirical apparatus, I took an approach to teaching the Iraq war that bridges the gap between high and low politics, between elites and civil society, and (I hope) between students' splendid isolation and the not-so-splendid experiences of those at war. The goal of the course is not to "explain" the war, per se, but to provide students with political, historical, and social context for the war—to give them a better sense of how wars evolve, how theories of international politics can explain them, and how they affect those individuals who fight them and live within them. I hope to take students beyond the bumper-sticker wars of campus parking lots to not only enhance their intellectual understanding but also to enhance their abilities as informed citizens to judge the politics of the war.

Course Design and Materials

The professor's first challenge in teaching Iraq is not finding material—indeed, interesting (and often valuable) reporting on the war can even be found in those well-known venues for the analysis of world politics, *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Railroad* magazines! The challenge is organizing the avalanche of material into a holistic syllabus that does not ask students to break their book-buying bank. The second, and more substantive, challenge is to provide as much balance as possible in both readings and discussion—a challenge often noted in discussions of the pedagogy of Vietnam in the early 1980s. A large majority, 87%, of international relations faculty consider the war "unjust," and 85% are pessimistic about its likely outcome (Maliniak et al. 2007). While I reject claims by so-called "watchdogs" that college faculty seek to indoctrinate undergraduates (Horowitz 2007), faculty must nevertheless guard against using their pessimism about the war as a pedagogical crutch; in end-of-term evaluations students have expressed relief that this class was not unrelentingly negative and did not simply regurgitate simplistic accusations of malfeasance by, among others, the Bush administration, the oil industry, the so-called Israel lobby, or "anti-American" liberal elites.

I don't deny the value of passion either for or against the war, nor do I deny the appropriateness of sharing one's passion with students. However, it bears noting that there are nearly a half-million veterans of the armed forces currently attending college on the G.I. Bill, and one is likely to encounter friends or families of service-members in college classes. Though I felt the war was a strategic mistake even before deploying for it, I make every effort to

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fairly present the positions of those who support the war and those who promoted the war. Counterfactual thought experiments often prove useful—for example, as they learn more students can be challenged to rethink the claims of those who promoted the war or to rethink decisions that were taken after the March 2003 invasion. In this way, criticism evolves holistically from the material, lending it greater credence and validity.

To get at these two challenges, I teach the war thematically rather than with a more traditional chronological or empirical focus, in order to provide students with several analytic and experiential "windows" into the war. In this section of the essay, I review the organization and selection of material for the course syllabus; the wealth and diversity of material available on the war even now calls for careful choice and discrimination, but also provides faculty with diverse substantive interests to incorporate discussion of the war into classes from across the field.

There is a burgeoning literature on the Iraq war, but it is dominated by journalists and, increasingly, memoirists. While reportage and memoir have their places in the classroom and in research, their very advantages—immediacy and intimacy—can also be a disadvantage for scholarly analysis. While there is some scholarly literature currently available on the war, much of it is too specialized for use in the undergraduate classroom (Hashim 2006) and some of it is too polemical (Davis 2006).

Compounding these challenges is the fact that many of the best books on Iraq are both long and expensive, and my preference in the course is to sacrifice depth for breadth. For example, George Packer's excellent book, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (2005), is well-written, insightful, and chock-full of anecdotes that entertain, inform, and (often) shock, but at 467 pages is much too long for course adoption.

Likewise, the best books on the military aspects of the war—Thomas Ricks' *Fiasco* (2006) and Michael Gordon's and Bernard Trainor's *Cobra II* (2006)—are, like Packer's, much too big for undergraduate course adoption at 482 and 603 pages, respectively. While these would be excellent for military history or national security policy-making courses, for my purposes they are too detailed and too demanding for undergraduates interested in *the* war rather than war generally. There are also excellent histories of Iraq by Phebe Marr (2004) and Charles Tripp (2007), but these are more appropriate for classes on Iraqi history and are of limited use in a political science course. As a result, course packs—either physical or electronic—are essential tools for teaching the war.

There are three advantages to course packs. The first is cost; even with copyright royalties, students will have access to far more material than they could afford to buy piecemeal. The second is that the best material from the best books can be included, and that students can be exposed to a wide range of official documents, news stories, book chapters on related topics, and the myriad of reports by humanitarian, international justice, and protest organizations, as well as reports by think-tanks and non-governmental organizations. The third, and most important, advantage is that a course pack can be constructed to support each professor's pedagogical interest.

I am particularly interested, for example, in covering the war at both the ground level and the higher-order levels of decision-making and planning. I want students to leave the class with a sense that they have sampled the entirety of the Iraq literature—those who wish to know more will then have a better basis for choosing additional work. This not only appeals to them on the practical level—they feel, in evaluations, that they "know more"—but on a personal level as well. Memoirs and documentaries, for example, personalize the war in a way that nuanced analyses of executive-branch decision-making cannot. An additional advantage for faculty wary of controversy is that careful selection of material for the course pack can insulate the professor from charges of ideological bias; by offering official documents and reports by individuals who are ideologically sympathetic to the current administration, students can compare across accounts.

The course includes a number of documentary films that help students personalize the conflict and makes available several sites on the World Wide Web that provide further context and content, including videos, soldier or "mil-blogs," and Iraqis' blogs. Films and Internet-based material were chosen not only because they appeal to a visual and wired generation (Kiasatpour 1999), but because they personalize concepts encountered in class; in evaluations, many students said the highlights of the term were opportunities to see "real" soldiers and Iraqis. The appendix provides a bibliography of material I have found most useful both for structuring a full-term class and for incorporating shorter-duration learning modules into other courses.

The Classroom Dynamic

Many students come to class carrying not only notebooks and pens, but a wide range of partisan predispositions, beliefs, misapprehensions, and fears (Stockton 1995). Conservative students, for example, often appear spring-loaded to defend the war and the administration and to attack criticism of either as another example of liberal faculty bias; this is more often the case with male students, who tend on average to be more supportive of the war than females (Rohall, Ender, and Matthews 2006). Students often arrive to the first sessions concerned that they "don't know enough" about Iraq, the region, or even American foreign policy to make informed comments and are somewhat inhibited about the idea of "taking sides" (Dougherty 2003).

To encourage the taking of sides—and, more often than not, switching back-and-forth between sides—and because we lack the patterned empirical data that facilitate explanation and prediction, I have chosen to teach the Iraq war in a much-more interactive and collegial format. Classes are highly participatory and students are encouraged to offer personal reflections upon the readings and past discussion. The class meetings are traditional lecture/discussion-based sessions. Those classes provide historical and political frames for subsequent discussions; readings are directed at characterizations of Iraqi political history and civil society, the background of American policy towards Iraq since the 1980s, and the basic dynamics of the Bush administration. It is best, however, to keep these classes to a minimum. This is not a course in Iraqi history but an extended case study of one event in world politics.

The bulk of the term is devoted to interactive learning. Course enrollment is limited to 20, and though this was admittedly a university restriction and not my own, it facilitated interactive learning in a way that a large lecture hall would not. All students perform three roles during the term: Each must lead a session of the seminar, each must record all commentary and discussion during a seminar; and each must participate in all other class discussions. Students' grades are a composite function of these three roles and their grades on short writing assignments.

There are two inviolable rules, intended to enhance collegial discussion and minimize accusations of bias: First, no voices may be raised and second, no one's beliefs—for or against the war—may be declared "wrong." The challenge for students is to engage contrary views

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or beliefs intellectually, rather than emotionally. By leading a session of the seminar, each student is given the opportunity to decide which aspects of the day's readings are of greatest interest or meaning to her; she chooses which aspects bear further discussion. The student seminar-leader must provide five to seven discussion questions to his classmates at least one week in advance of the next class meeting, so that the other seminar members have an opportunity to frame preliminary responses. Those questions must be approved by the professor prior to their distribution to the class. In part, this gives the professor an opportunity to engage in one-on-one teaching with each student also to limit the risk of ideologically driven discussion. Course evaluations show that students thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to lead discussions, as they felt that it made the material more relevant to their particular interests or concerns.

A further advantage of the thematic structure is that by the end of the term, students have often engaged one particular issue from several different perspectives. The goal here is to show the linkages between, for example, decisions taken in Washington, D.C., and the experience of troops on the ground in Baghdad, as well as the similarities and differences in individual experiences of war and occupation. Thematic organization also opens up the possibility of wider-ranging discussions.

One theme, "The Soldiers' War," engages questions of gender and conflict; the pressures of combat; and the ability of individuals to subordinate their humanity to commit acts of violence. Another theme, "The Iraqis' War," asks students to consider the war from the perspective of an Iraqi female who also happens to be sympathetic to the former regime. The goal here, somewhat paradoxically, is to make the war more complex—to take students' understanding beyond the simplistic accounts they often encounter in the media and in student organization debates.

Each thematic section of the syllabus ends with a five-page writing assignment in which students are encouraged to offer "scholarly reflections" on the theme and how it has influenced their thinking about the war. These short papers are essays, not scholarly research—students are free to examine any aspect of the theme they choose but are expected to tie those reflections to the readings and discussion and to bridge gaps between themes and readings. The remainder of this essay briefly reviews the themes and material used to elucidate them. I provide a brief appendix with recommended sources for each theme.

Course Themes

Although students are exposed to less purely empirical work overall, I believe the advantage of a thematically organized syllabus outweighs the disadvantages. First, the emergent literature offers such diversity it seems a shame not to take advantage of it; students have access to a kind of intellectual smorgasbord—they leave the term knowing a little more about many dimensions of the war, rather than a lot more about one dimension only. My hope is that they will have a better understanding of the war's complexity and the fact that political decisions have personal consequences. Second, by increasing the range of material used in the class, I increase the probability that any given student will find something she or he truly enjoys—this is particularly valuable for those students who are not political science majors.

In past iterations of this class, for example, I have had positive feedback from students majoring not only in political science, but in anthropology, history, and women's studies. Third, by alternating between political or strategic perspectives and the perspectives of individual participants, I hope to enrich students' appreciation for the impact of politics on ordinary peoples' lives. Fourth, I hope that student will be encouraged to seek out courses in other fields that share substantive interests with political science, such as history, public policy, and sociology.

Theme 1: Lessons of History

This initial block of instruction tends to be more lecture-based than the remainder of the course. I cover the history of Iraq from its founding after World War I; the evolution of the Iraqi Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party and Saddam Hussein's emergence as dictator; and the British experience with insurgency in Iraq. In addition, students are familiarized with the ethnic and sectarian divisions of Iraq and core elements of Iraqi culture—particularly the importance of honor—which come into play later in the semester when students assess the conduct of U.S. military forces and its effect on the subsequent rise of the Iraqi insurgency. Here we build a kind of empirical database—we learn things that were known to, or available to be known to, American decision-makers, yet that appear to have been disregarded in prewar planning.

Theme 2: The United States and Iraq

In this section of the course, I explore the evolution of U.S. policy toward Iraq, focusing in particular on the period that began with Iraq's September 1980 invasion of Iran. Drawing on Bruce Jentleson's *With Friends Like These* (1992), we analyze the strategic logic of the Reagan administration's "tilt" toward Saddam in terms of the American strategic interaction with Iran and in terms of traditional American understandings of the strategic value of the Persian Gulf region. We also look at the evolution of the idea of regime change following Operation Desert Storm and the influence of the so-called "neocons" in promoting it during the Clinton administration.

To avoid partisan bickering, we treat the neocons not as rank idealogues but as critics of détente and containment; students are challenged to understand the strategic rationale for the neoconservative critique of American foreign policy and its basis both in their understanding of American exceptionalism and American primacy (Burgos forthcoming). We look, too, at the influence of America's experience in Kurdistan during the 1990s and the lessons that individuals took away from that experience.

Kurdistan is particularly relevant for study of the Iraq war, because many of those who promoted regime change in the 1990s (for example, Jim Hoagland, Judith Miller, and Richard Perle) had close personal relationships with leading Kurdish politicians and argued that the "ease" with which the U.S. enforced the Kurdish safe-haven "proved" that regime change would likewise be easy. We also look closely at the "road to war" that started with the September 11, 2001, terror attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. Here, too, our focus is on the internal logic of the arguments advanced by proponents of regime change. Though discussions are often heated, I find that students can deal fairly with the pre-war arguments for and against the war. One entire class is dedicated simply to the question of the use and abuse of intelligence. This has proven to be one of the most valuable modules, as we are able to cut away much of the war's mythology by looking at contemporary assessments of Saddam's WMD programs and comparing White House claims to other accounts and post-invasion revelations.

Theme 3: The Soldiers' War

With the course nearly at its midpoint, our analytic lens shifts from the

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world of high politics to the world of low combat. Memoirs and documentaries form the core of this module. I have used both Colby Buzzell's (2004) *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* and John Crawford's (2004) *The Last True Story I'll Ever Tell* as basic texts and have paired those works with the documentaries, *Gunner Palace* (2004), *Occupation: Dreamland* (2005), and *Combat Diary: The Marines of Lima Company* (2007). Students tend to react more positively to Buzzell than Crawford; Buzzell's book is an elaboration of his wartime blog, and Crawford is older than most of the students. The documentaries do an excellent job of showing the frustrations of counter-insurgency and occupation. This theme can also be taught with a third-person work of reportage, Evan Wright's excellent (2004) book on the Marines, *Generation Kill*, which began life as a series in *Rolling Stone*.

One runs the risk of glamorizing war by relying upon the combat memoir, a genre which, as Marilyn Young points out, tends to carry the message "war is hell . . . but boy, you should have *been* there" (Young 1979). However, I believe the risk is outweighed by the immediacy (and gore) of the sources; the documentaries, for example, while not explicitly anti-war, leave little doubt as to the "glory" of street fighting. Though fewer in number, explicitly pro-war memoirs are available, such as Wayne Bowen's *Undoing Saddam* (2007) and Robert McGovern's *All American* (2007); pro-war reportage can be found in Karl Zinsmeister's (2005) *Dawn over Baghdad*. Faculty interested in gender can assign students to read Kayla Williams' *Love My Rifle More Than You* (2005), or Kirsten Holmstedt's *Band of Sisters: American Women at War in Iraq* (2007).

Because the combat memoirs feature instances of prisoner/detainee abuse, students complete the module by reading a Human Rights Watch report (2004) on prisoner abuse and selections from Mark Danner's (2004) *Torture and Truth*. While we freely discuss students' personal reactions to these stories, most discussion is directed back to the high politics readings; I ask, for example, how the Bush administration's framing of the War on Terror and terrorists' motivations to "destroy our way of life" could contribute to the willingness of a soldier to abuse an Iraqi "terrorist." I also link these discussions to subsequent analysis of the Iraqi insurgency—for example, how might prisoner maltreatment provide a recruiting tool for insurgents?

Theme 4: The Civilians' War

Here I alternate between high and low politics. Our interest in this section is the experience and politics of reconstruction and rebuilding. I am interested in exploring, for example, how the assumptions that drove the idea of regime change affected the degree to which the administration was committed to rebuilding Iraq. Using Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (2006), I compare those specialists in post-conflict who took rebuilding Iraq seriously and those idealogues for whom Iraq provided a convenient laboratory for demonstrating the validity of programs they wished to see at home, such as the flat tax or unrestricted private ownership. Larry Diamond (2005) offers the perspective of both a Coalition Provisional Authority staff member and a political scientist. A British perspective on the C.P.A. that focuses more on grassroots reconstruction is Mark Etherington's (2005) *Revolt on the Tigris*. To link this theme to the following theme, we also explore the effect of unfulfilled reconstruction promises on Iraqis' social expectations and the extent to which failure to meet those expectations contributed to Iraqis' feelings of resentment and rage, feeding the insurgency.

Theme 5: The Iraqis' War

In this final section of the course, I shift focus from an American-centered perspective to an Iraqi perspective. The documentary, *The Blood of My Brother* (2006), provides a window into the experience of life in time of war. The film follows an adolescent Iraqi male who must come to grips with his brother's death at the hands of American troops and who wrestles with the competing obligations of providing for his mother and sister and seeking revenge on those who killed the family elder.

A female perspective that is highly critical of the invasion and occupation is the "girl blog" of the pseudonymous "Riverbend" (2004, 2006). Her two-volume collection, *Baghdad Burning*, offers students the perspective of an English-speaking, college-educated, 20-something young woman who is not only a fairly astute observer of American and Iraqi politics, but is also reported to be the daughter of a former Ba'ath regime official. Male students tend to react negatively to Riverbend, while female students are generally inclined to give her the benefit of the doubt. Riverbend's politics may cause some classroom debate, but her personal observations about the dangers and disappointments of life under occupation provide a valuable addition to the readings on the Coalition Provisional Authority.

Students also read interviews with Iraqi insurgents in Zaki Chehab's *Inside the Resistance* (2005) and watch a PBS Frontline documentary on the insurgency; the intent here is to demystify and personalize an otherwise faceless enemy. Almost without exception, students report that they can sympathize with the goals of the Iraqi nationalists, if not the foreign terrorists—like several of the soldiers they encounter in the earlier theme, they begin to appreciate Iraqis' desire to resist foreign occupation. I am careful, of course, not to excuse or rationalize abuses by Iraqis, just as I do not condone abuses by Americans. Most importantly, I am careful to distinguish on both political and ethical grounds—as both our readings and films do—between the Iraqi nationalist and Ba'athist insurgents and the foreign-born fighters from al-Qaeda whose sole objective appears to be sowing chaos.

Conclusion

The term concludes with an assessment of where the United States might go with respect to Iraq policy. We discuss the probability of democratization; the difference between internal and externally imposed transitions from authoritarian rule; and the likelihood that Iraq will degenerate into all-out civil war. We conclude the way the term began: by offering a set of personal reflections, concerns, and directions for future research. By the end of the term, I hope that students will have better questions, if no better answers, than they had when they first sat down to class.

My positive experiences with the class have led to a book project that will situate the current war in the wider context of American grand strategy and its goals in the Persian Gulf. Like this class, the book is directed at a general, undergraduate audience. By virtue of being a veteran of the war, I have not experienced "blowback" from campus ideologues; this does not mean I would not otherwise, but if there are highly critical students they must find my veteran status to be either an inhibition or an ideological trump card. With respect to my veteran status, I only share experiences when asked—this is a personal and not pedagogical choice, because I view this as "their" class and not mine.

Veterans or not, I encourage other faculty to build their own courses on the war. We often say that the most important experiences students have in college are the opportunities they have to lead, grow, and develop. On their own for

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perhaps the first time, students look to faculty for the tools they need to analyze and understand the world around them. While it may be the case that our traditional modes of analysis are not yet directly applicable to the war, there are other ways of understanding and teaching it. We should not shy away from doing so simply because we prefer the clarity of the past for the uncertainty of the present.

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Appendix: Recommended Sources

Theme 1: Lessons of History

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Theme 4: The Civilians' War

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Theme 5: The Iraqis' War

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