



Lesson Plan: Perspectives on the Morality of Killing in Wartime

OVERVIEW:

This lesson plan is designed to be used with the film *Soldiers of Conscience*, which explores the morality of killing in wartime. Classrooms can use this lesson to help students consider opposing arguments on this issue and then develop and defend their own positions.

P.O.V. documentaries can be recorded off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from the initial broadcast. In addition, P.O.V. offers a lending library of DVD's and VHS tapes that you can borrow anytime during the school year — FOR FREE!

NOTE: This film addresses sensitive issues and contains graphic scenes of violence from the war in Iraq. Please preview before showing the entire film in a classroom setting.

Please visit our Film Library at http://www.amdoc.org/outreach_filmlibrary.php to find other films suitable for classroom use or to learn how to purchase the film for your school's permanent collection.

OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- React in writing to a wartime scenario that presents the dilemma of whether or not to kill a young combatant.
- Use viewing skills to understand and interpret video clips.
- Work in groups to research a debate question and prepare a three-minute presentation.
- Give an oral presentation and respond to an essay question posed by the teacher.
- Write a summary of their position on the morality of killing in war.

GRADE LEVELS: 10-12

SUBJECTS: U.S. History, Civics, Current Events, English

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Display method (varies by school) for showing the entire class online video clips and website resources
- Computers with access to the Internet

ESTIMATED TIME OF COMPLETION: Two 50-minute class periods, plus some homework time to prepare group presentations

SUGGESTED CLIPS:

Clip 1: Killing Haunts You (length: 3:03)

The clip begins at 3:57 with the quote “People are shocked by how upsetting it is...” and ends at 7:05 with the quote “People just don’t understand what it’s like to be over there.”

Clip 2: One Soldier’s Inner Struggle (length 3:00)

The clip begins at 29:02 with the imagery of a plane crashing into the World Trade Center and ends at 32:02 with the quote “Can I do it as long as I don’t give in to hatred?”

Clip 3: Becoming a Conscientious Objector (length: 5:48)

The clip begins at 44:06 with the quote “I saw my enemy...” and ends at 49:54 with the quote “...part of my witness of being a conscientious objector.”

Clip 4: The Problem with Conscientious Objectors (length: 00:59)

The clip begins at 56:45 with the quote “When it comes to conscientious objectors...” and ends at 57:44 with the quote “...when I could stop it.”

Clip 5: Sometimes Killing Is Morally Justified (length 1:05)

The clip begins at 34:36 with the quote “Sometimes killing is morally justified...” and ends at 35:41 with the quote “...if you’re not willing to defend them.”

Clip 6: What If the Good Samaritan Had Come Sooner? (length 1:08)

The clips begins at 1:03:05 with the quote “One thing that has always interested me...” and ends at 1:04:13 with the quote “...to protect the innocent person.”

BACKGROUND:

As members of the military, soldiers are trained to kill and expected to kill in combat. The film **Soldiers of Conscience** refers to a study with World War II veterans conducted by S.L.A. Marshall, a U.S. Army historian, which revealed that less than 25 percent of U.S. combat veterans actually fired their weapons at the enemy. The study went on to suggest that the average person has such a resistance to taking the life of another human being that at the critical point of pulling the trigger, he frequently refrains and becomes a de facto conscientious objector. Other soldiers have been more public about their decision not to kill and have applied for formal conscientious objector status. (For more on being a conscientious objector, please see the Resources section of this lesson.) Still others have engaged in combat and have wrestled afterward with their consciences, and some experience severe anxiety disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a response to their involvement in war.

The issue of the morality of killing in combat is central to this lesson plan, which features a number of clips from the film that reflect the perspectives of both conscientious objectors and sincere war-fighters. Students will explore ideas around this issue and develop their own position.

Note: It is important as educators to recognize that this is an issue associated with values and that members of the class will continue to disagree after this lesson is over. By creating a nonthreatening learning environment that allows students to freely express their ideas, you will be able to better evaluate each student’s critical thinking and reasoning skills as well as his or her ability to speak and write persuasively.

ACTIVITY:

1. Ask students to write a brief response to the following scenario: You are an armed soldier in Iraq and a 10-year-old boy is about to throw a grenade at your squad that

could kill or wound at least five or six of your fellow soldiers. Would you shoot the boy? Why or why not? Allow five minutes or so for students to react in writing and then invite a few volunteers to share their thinking. Be sure to react to student comments in a nonjudgmental way so that they will feel comfortable sharing and exploring their ideas on this issue.

2. Tell the class that a soldier actually faced the situation that the class wrote about. Have students watch [Clip 1: Killing Haunts You](#).

3. After viewing the video, ask students what they thought about watching the soldiers in basic training. Is it important for the military to train soldiers to become desensitized to killing? Why or why not?

4. Explain that although soldiers are trained to kill, many report that actually taking the life of another human being is deeply troubling. At some point, soldiers have to ask themselves, "Will I be able to kill someone in combat?" and "In what situations, if any, is killing acceptable?" Then show [Clip 2: One Soldier's Inner Struggle](#) and [Clip 3: Becoming a Conscientious Objector](#).

5. After the clips, ask students why they think so many people in the soldier's company reacted with hostility when they learned that he was seeking to become a conscientious objector. Ask students to explain their reactions to the soldier's decision.

6. Play the remaining video clips. Ask students if the arguments they have heard for and against killing in wartime have changed the position they took for the scenario in step one of this lesson. If so, have students describe how.

7. Tell the class that they are going to debate this question: Do you believe that it is morally justifiable to kill in combat? Divide students into groups of four or five and determine which side of the question each group will argue. If possible, have students take the side that is the opposite of their personal viewpoint.

8. Each group should use the [Special Features](#) and [Resources](#) from the P.O.V. website to develop a three-minute presentation that introduces the group's position and provides arguments and examples to support that perspective. Tell students to be well prepared because after each presentation, you will ask a specific member of each group a challenge question to which they will need to give a one-minute response.

9. Allow an appropriate amount of research and preparation time for your students, and then have each group give its presentation in class and respond to your challenge question. Consider asking questions such as:

- What parameters (who, when, why, how) would you set around killing in wartime?
- How would your justification for taking human life apply to the issue of capital punishment?
- What is your position on killing in war? Explain your argument. Does your position change in response to certain wars (Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, World War II, etc.)?
- If our country is attacked, how should we defend our families and ourselves?

10. Conclude the activity by having students write a summary of their position on the morality of killing in war.

ASSESSMENT SUGGESTIONS

Students can be assessed on:

- Completing the written response to the scenario about the boy with the grenade.
- Contributions made to their groups during the debate activity.
- How well they used persuasive techniques to present and support their positions in the debate.
- Completing the written summary of their views on killing in war.

EXTENSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

- Help students better understand PTSD, an anxiety disorder that can result from extreme trauma, such as military combat. Students can use the following resources to find details on causes, symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment:
 - P.O.V.: Questions & Answers: About PTSD
 - P.O.V.: Share Your Stories/Mental Illness Information
(http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2003/west47thstreet/special_share_pos.html)
 - NOW: "Veterans of PTSD"
(<http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/339/index.html>)
 - FRONTLINE: "What Is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder"
(<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/heart/themes/ptsd.html>)

Students can also work with school leaders to provide community access to the resource, "Returning From the War Zone: A Guide for Families" (<http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/manuals/GuideforFamilies.pdf>) from the National Center for PTSD.

- Examine how responsibilities related to war are divided among the three branches of the U.S. government. Create a chart with three columns labeled, "President of the United States," "Congress" and the "Supreme Court." Read the Online NewsHour story, "Congress Competes for War Control!" (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/jan-june07/iraq_04-02.html) and outline the role each branch plays in terms of war. What checks and balances are in place to limit any one branch's authority? Do students think that power is appropriately distributed? Why or why not?
- Explore the messages that media communicate about fighting in war. Ask each student to identify an example of a film, book, video game or other form of media that depicts combat. Have students share their examples in small groups and work together to develop descriptions of how the violence is portrayed. Discuss if students think these portrayals are realistic and what impact such media could have on society (i.e., increase or decrease military recruitment, policy development, global view of the United States, etc.).
- Watch and discuss other P.O.V. and PBS films that relate to the themes in *Soldiers of Conscience*, such as *Camden 28*, *Regret to Inform*, *War Feels Like War*, *The Good War* and Ken Burns's *The War*. Each film has companion website resources and educator activities to support their use in the classroom.

RESOURCES:

A Closer Look: Conscientious Objection

<http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/334/conscientious-objection.html>

This report from NOW defines the term “conscientious objector,” provides statistics related to conscientious objectors and the war in Iraq, and gives a brief history of conscientious objection.

Going AWOL

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military/jan-june05/deserters_5-25.html

This 2005 report from Online NewsHour outlines arguments both for and against military service in Iraq and the consequences of refusing to fight in the war.

***Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* by S.L.A. Marshall**

From Google Books: www.books.google.com

Google Books offers excerpts from Marshall’s famous and controversial book about the fire level of American soldiers during World War II.

STANDARDS:

These standards are drawn from "Content Knowledge," a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning) at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>.

Behavioral Studies

Standard 4: Understands conflict, cooperation and interdependence among individuals, groups and institutions.

Civics

Standard 13: Understands the character of American political and social conflict and factors that tend to prevent or lower its intensity.

Standard 25: Understands issues regarding personal, political and economic rights.

Geography

Standard 13: Understands the forces of cooperation and conflict that shape the divisions of Earth’s surfaces.

Language Arts

Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes.

Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

Thinking and Reasoning

Standard 1: Understands and applies the basic principles of presenting an argument.

U.S. History

Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as director of PBS Interactive's Education division, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource website (now PBS Teachers), and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and northern Virginia.