LESSON PLAN
Before and After: Asking Questions about Going to War

OVERVIEW
American middle and secondary students typically study a dozen or more wars, from ancient Greek and Roman military campaigns to the armed conflicts that shaped modern Europe and the United States. Despite these opportunities, few are asked to examine the decision-making process behind the choice to wage war. This lesson fills that gap.

Using clips from the documentary film *Nowhere to Hide*, which provides a portrait of civilian life in a volatile Iraqi province following the U.S. troop withdrawal in 2011, the lesson asks students to consider the questions they want their political representatives to ask before authorizing military action. As they think about their roles as citizens who elect representatives with the power to authorize force under the War Powers Act, they’ll also look at concepts that permeated news coverage of the Iraq War, including “nation building” and “preemptive war,” as well as “pacifism.”

OBJECTIVES
In this lesson, students will:
- Look at the War Powers Act and understand what it says
- Research the terms preemptive war, nation building and pacifism
- Write short explanatory paragraphs summarizing the definitions of those terms and their positions favoring or opposing the approach each represents
- Develop a set questions that policy makers should consider before going to war
- Engage in group discussion
- Write a letter to each of their representatives in Congress

GRADE LEVELS: 9–10

SUBJECT AREAS
Civics/Government
English/Language Arts
Media Literacy/News Literacy

Political Science
Research Skills
U.S. History

MATERIALS
- Film clips and a way to screen them
- Students will need Internet access for research

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED
1 1/2–2 class periods

FILM CLIPS
Film clips provided in this lesson are from *Nowhere to Hide*. Access the streaming clips for free on POV’s website by visiting [www.pbs.org/pov/educators](http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators). Borrow the full film from our DVD Lending Library by joining the POV Community Network: [communitynetwork.amdoc.org](http://communitynetwork.amdoc.org).
Clip 1: Introducing Nori Sharif (1:57 min.)
The clip begins at 03:30 with Nori Sharif, a nurse, bandaging a patient. It ends at 05:27 after Sharif acknowledges that psychological wounds persist, even after the fighting ends. We see Sharif at work in a hospital in Jalawla in Iraq’s Diyala province.

Clip 2: Caught in the Crossfire (5:16 min.)
The clip begins at 35:00 with Sharif saying, “I'm at the hospital,” and ends at 40:16 with him urging his family to move faster and saying, “I am not comfortable here.” A sparse staff at the hospital is trying to treat those wounded in the fighting between ISIS and the Kurds. Violence has led most of the hospital staff to evacuate.

Clip 3: Return to Destruction (3:24 min.)
The clip starts at 48:40 as Sharif begins to describe his “new reality.” It ends at 52:04 as he surveys the damaged hospital and says “damned war.” Sharif and his family are trying to build a semblance of a normal life in a refugee camp. He is asked to return to and report on the hospital where he worked.

ACTIVITY: First Class

Step 1: Introduction
Ask students if they know what the War Powers Act is. Before moving on, make sure everyone understands that the act says that only the U.S. Congress can declare war, though the president can legally deploy the military in emergency circumstances. Without providing answers, invite students to speculate about how individual members of Congress, and the voters who put them in office, decide whether it is advisable to go to war.

Then share one of these famous quotes:

“Those who don't know history are destined to repeat it.” - Edmund Burke

Or:

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” - George Santayana

Briefly discuss with students what the quote you chose means in the context of military strategy and war.

Step 2: Framing the Assignment
Explain that in this lesson you are going to ask each student, working individually, to create a list of three questions they would want their political representatives to ask before deciding whether or not to declare war. For historical background, instruct them to take a general look at one of America’s most recent wars: the Iraq War. Be clear that this is not an investigation about whether the U.S. should have gone to war in Iraq. Rather, their task is to examine aspects of the war, including the impact on civilians, in order to inform their thinking about what they would want to know before going to war—any war, anywhere—again.

Step 3: Film Clips
Show a map of Iraq and point out the location of Diyala province, noting its location relative to other places with which students might be familiar (e.g., Baghdad or Iran).
Explain that you are going to show clips from a documentary film called *Nowhere to Hide*. It is set in Diyala province in the years immediately following the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011 and features an Iraqi nurse named Nori Sharif.

Show the three clips, pausing briefly after each to invite students to share what they noticed. Be sure that they note the changes over time and the plight of civilians who play no direct part in the ongoing conflicts.

**Step 4: The Assignment**

Give students a two-part assignment:

**Part 1: Research these three terms: preemptive war, nation building, pacifism.**

For each term, write two paragraphs based on the following:

1. What does the term mean and how was it applied to the decision-making behind the war in Iraq?
2. I favor/oppose this approach because…

You might also add this option: A third paragraph comparing how the term is used/described by news sources, reference sources and/or partisan websites.

**Part 2: List three questions you would want a president or congressperson to ask before going to war and the answers they should need in order to authorize an invasion.**

You might also assign this option: In a sentence or two, explain why you think each question is important.

Let students know what, if anything, they must turn in to you for assessment purposes.

**Step 5: Sharing Questions**

In a second class, have students share and discuss the questions they wrote. Do common themes emerge? Now that they’ve heard options posed by others, are there questions they would add to their original three, or questions they would delete from their lists? Which questions seem most important to them and why?

As time allows, ask students if they have seen any evidence that their questions were asked before the start of any of the wars they have studied.

End the lesson by inviting students to share their final list of questions with their members of Congress.

**EXTENSIONS/ADAPTATIONS**

Follow-up with an in-depth study of the War Powers Act. Investigate whether the act requires anyone to ask the questions that students thought were important. If not, what could citizens do to make sure important questions are asked before troops are sent into battle?

In English classes, use the activity as a springboard for reading a novel about war. Compare the book’s descriptions of daily life with the film’s depictions of Nori Sharif’s life.
In history classes, use the activity as a springboard for examining the human dimensions of a war that students are studying (e.g., the Civil War or World War II). Invite students to examine what sorts of information their texts include (or omit) about immediate or lasting impact on civilians.

Examine how wars are covered in mainstream media and compare to the film. The free curriculum kits on Media Constructions of War, Media Constructions of the Middle East, and Media Constructions of Peace and Social Justice: Reflecting Diversity from www.projectlooksharp.org are good starting points.

Have students who have been involved in restorative justice programs consider whether the principles and strategies they have learned can be applied to international conflicts.

RESOURCES

POV: Nowhere to Hide
http://www.pbs.org/pov/nowheretohide - The site includes a general discussion guide with additional activity ideas.

Preemptive War

_The American Prospect: “Perils of Preemptive War”_
http://prospect.org/article/perils-preemptive-war - This exploration of President George W. Bush’s preemption doctrine gives an overview of the issues prior to the start of the U.S. war in Iraq.

Brookings: “The Preemptive War Doctrine Has Met an Early Death in Iraq”
https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-preemptive-war-doctrine-has-met-an-early-death-in-iraq/ - This opinion piece assesses the preemption doctrine after two years of war in Iraq.

Nation Building

Constitutional Rights Foundation: “Election Central”

National Review: “For the U.S., There’s No Avoiding Nation-Building”

Pacifism

BBC: “Pacifism”
http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/war/against/pacifism_1.shtml - This page offers a general overview of the variations of pacifism and its opponents. A different style of overview is available here: https://www.thoughtco.com/ethics-antiwar-arguments-4078916.

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films
http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

**STANDARDS**

**Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects**
(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

- **RH.9-10.4**
  Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social or economic aspects of history/social studies.

- **RH.9-10.10**
  By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend history/social studies texts in the grades 9–10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

- **SL.9-10.1**
  Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

- **SL.9-10.2**
  Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

- **SL.9-10.6**
  Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

- **W.9-10.1** Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

- **W.9-10.2d** Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic.

- **W.9-10.4** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

**Content Knowledge:** (http://www2.mcrel.org/compendium/) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
Language Arts, Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.
Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.
Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.
United States History, Standard 31: Understands economic, social and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Faith Rogow, Ph.D., is the co-author of The Teacher’s Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World (Corwin, 2012) and past president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. She has written discussion guides and lesson plans for more than 250 independent films.