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WAR AND THE CAMPUSES

By Paul Rogat Loeb

How should we as educators respond to the coming war on Iraq? On the first day of the 1991 Gulf War, several hundred University of Washington students gathered in the school's main central plaza, and then dispersed to enlist further support for their student body president's call to strike. Nearby, in a medieval history class, 400 students sat talking in muted voices, leafing through newspapers, and wondering whether they should walk out as well.

Then the professor arrived, and said: "I guess people have some other things on their mind today beside medieval history. But this class is medieval history, so we should proceed with it." Without further comment, the professor went into his standard lecture on Charles Martel, Charlemagne, and the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire. He might have pointed out parallels between wars and empires past and present, but said nothing to remotely link the subject to the day. Students who'd begun the class visibly upset were soon dutifully taking notes. By halfway through the period, they'd lost all sense of any possible responses to the war except continuing with their lives.

If proceeding as if nothing has happened is an inappropriate moral response when war breaks out, what do we owe our students, our educational institutions, and ourselves? Our responsibilities differ depending on our institutional role. But wherever we are in our institutions, we need to nurture diverse voices, and encourage critical thought and mutual respect. Our students also need safe spaces for reflection and conversation, the expression of anger, fear, mourning, and perceived powerlessness. They also need encouragement to keep acting on their ideals, even as our leaders dismiss citizens who disagree as misguided or worse. For ourselves, we need to be true to our souls, our core beliefs, and our honest responses to the world, including our moral outrage. Our response during the war's initial days may set a tone for how students view it for the rest of their lives.

Our students and colleagues won't all agree on the war. Many will support it, particularly in an environment that equates patriotism with blind obedience, and in a time when the media treats the war like a sporting event where our only responsibility is to root for the home team. Many students have friends and relatives in the military, particularly in working class communities, and feel inevitable tugs of loyalty. We need to respond in a way that honors the divergent views, respects bonds with America's soldiers, but also raises the difficult questions about the roots and consequences of our actions.

At our institutions, we need to foster diverse dialogue, which acknowledges that democracy requires disagreement. We can begin this dialogue through visible public events, teach-ins, speak-outs and chapel convocations. We need to create a discussion that is richer, more humane, and more complex than the blind cheerleading. We need to encourage all faculty and students to participate, not only those in subjects with obvious links.

Students may have their own responses. Some may walk out and protest. Most will have their private doubts, but be encouraged by the culture to suppress them. Others will rally in support of the troops, or the war itself. So long as student actions are nonviolent, we need to respect and honor them, and not threaten penalties or sanctions.

There will be a tendency for all of us simply to wish or pray that the war goes well and quickly, and that not too many die. Iraqi deaths will largely be invisible, though they topped 100,000 in the last war, and will likely be still higher in this one. Many Americans will simply wait and see until it is over. But the question was never whether or not the US military could defeat that of Iraq. And the core problem of this war is that it will not be over when the fighting ostensibly stops, and that its most problematic consequences will likely be delayed or invisible. Our media won't draw the links if Iran reverts to fundamentalist theocracy, extremists capture a nuclear-armed Pakistan, or India attacks Pakistan in its own preemptive strike. If the deaths we inflict inspire a new generation of terrorists, we may see the terrible consequences, but the journeys that lead them to act will not make the network news. We may hear much about the virtues of a benevolent Pax Americana, but little about its downside.

We need to get our students thinking about these questions now, while they are concerned and listening. We don't want them to bury their doubts, fears, and questions. If we wait to begin that dialogue, the teachable moments will be buried in parades of triumphalist celebration.

As individuals, we have a responsibility to speak our minds, voicing our own perspectives while respecting student responses. We further the necessary dialogue most by articulating our own views, including the possible judgment that this war is not be a fulfillment of democracy, but a betrayal which makes the world more dangerous. We also need to perform a pastoral role--helping students process their fears and vulnerabilities. And we need to model civil dialogue with those who disagree with us. In a time when silence is equated with disloyalty, we need to retain our moral voice more than ever. We can't exempt our campuses from this call.

Our students need us to listen to them, to support them in their concerns. But we also need to help teach them that they can understand neither this war nor any other national or global crises by passively watching TV. Whether or not the difficult critical questions about actions and consequences make the nightly news, we can raise them in our classrooms. We may well have been doing this for a while. But work, school, and all our culture's seductions and delights have distracted our students, like most citizens. Now that the war is upon us, they're paying attention. We need to respond in a way that opens up reflection and wise action.

We also need to talk of how courage and engagement can be sustained over the long haul. This is a moment when many of our most idealistic and engaged students will feel powerless, when their most heartfelt actions and outcries will seem to have been spurned. Some may be tempted into self-destructive political rage, blindly lashing out. More will face the risk of withdrawing into political cocoons, concluding that their efforts to forge a more humane world can no longer matter.

Though it's no easy task, we need to remind them that their voices do count, even in the face of leaders who treat democracy with contempt. We need to remind them (and ourselves) that those who've built a more just world have succeeded precisely when they've persevered in the moments that seem darkest and bleakest, whether in Communist Eastern Europe, Apartheid South Africa, or the struggles that have moved us forward in the United States. We can also become models of engagement in our own efforts as active citizens. If they see us acting despite our own temptations toward despair, this may show them a way to continue as well.

We may feel like waiting to raise the hard issues until after the war ends. We'll be less likely to be baited, attacked, or called names. But if we wait until then, a national chorus of self-congratulation will have buried the issues. Normal life will take over. Now, all eyes are focused on the war. We have the chance to remind students that it is not a bloodless video game and that the consequences our leaders promise may not be the ones their actions deliver. Asking the hard questions goes to the heart of our mission as educators. It's also what we owe to ourselves.

Paul Loeb is the author of *Soul of a Citizen: Living With Conviction in a Cynical Time*, *Generation at the Crossroads: Apathy on the American Campus*, and two other books on civic engagement. See www.soulofacitizen.org. To receive his articles, email list@soulofacitizen.org.

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