

## Reflections in a Time of Crisis

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# Teaching about Terrorism, Islam, and Tolerance with the Internet

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I'M WRITING THIS COLUMN on the one-month anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. A week ago, at the Texas Council for the Social Studies annual meeting, I heard a woman say while introducing a speaker, "This is a great time to be a social studies teacher." Perhaps it is, but I'm not so sure. While America and the world reeled in shock, most teachers whom I talked with were struggling with how to present and discuss issues related to the attacks, terrorism, Islam, and discrimination against Arab Americans and Muslims. Many felt that it was impossible to provide any information more comprehensive than what the television news programs were offering. Most said that discussions of tolerance or understanding of Islam would be rejected by students and their parents. Moreover, nearly every teacher I talked with was reluctant to spend too much class time on the topic because it would take away time to prepare their class for the TAKS, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

Unfortunately, throughout the nation, teachers are struggling with the same issue. In Indiana, September 11 was the day when many tenth graders took the high-stakes ISTEP+, the test that they must pass to graduate from high school. Schools had permission to delay the test until another time, but many school districts chose to administer the test anyway.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, I've heard many comparisons to Pearl Harbor, another deadly sneak attack on the United States. Yet, as many historians have argued, some clear signs were overlooked or misinterpreted that could have given us warning about Pearl Harbor. The same could be said about September 11. A month before the attack, the Drudge Report ([www.drudge.com](http://www.drudge.com)) had provided links to stories that said that a major attack against "U.S. interests" would occur before the end of September. I told my secretary and wife about these stories but thought they were referring to "interests" overseas, such as embassies or business locations. But even more official warnings came out long before the Drudge Report predictions. Read the chilling quotes below:

Between now and 2015 terrorist tactics will become increasingly sophisticated and designed to achieve mass casualties. We expect the trend toward greater lethality in terrorist attacks to continue. The probability that a missile armed with WMD (weapons of mass destruction) would be used against U.S. forces or interests is

higher today than during most of the Cold War and will continue to grow.

And, even more frightening:

The combination of unconventional weapons proliferation with the persistence of international terrorism will end the relative invulnerability of the U.S. homeland to catastrophic attack. A direct attack against American citizens on American soil is likely over the next quarter century. The risk is not only death and destruction but also a demoralization that could undermine U.S. global leadership. In the face of this threat our nation has no coherent or integrated governmental structures.

The first quote was from the January 2001 CIA report, *Global Trends, 2015*. Based on symposia at major universities and think tanks throughout the U.S. and other countries, this report ought to be required reading for every social studies teacher. It can be found at [www.cia.gov/cia/publications/globaltrends2015](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/globaltrends2015). Its predictions, not always pessimistic, about world food supplies, global warming, water supply, and population growth should be incorporated into social studies classrooms in the middle and high school grades. The second quote, which seems darkly on target today, is from the U.S. Commission on National Security, 21st Century. Chaired by former senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman, the report recommended the creation of "a new independent National Homeland Security Agency." President Bush has created such a position but has not given it the authority that the Commission recommended. The Commission's report can be found at [www.nssg.gov](http://www.nssg.gov) and is another report that history and government teachers should read.

For teachers grappling with student emotions, pressures of standardized testing, and a lack of appropriate materials on these topics, the Internet provides a wealth of resources. I did a search for "terrorism, education, and lesson plans" and found more than twenty pages of web links. I found almost the same number when I substituted "World Trade Center" for "terrorism." After several hours of surfing, I've selected several sites that could help teachers accomplish three goals: (1) Provide information for teachers and students about terrorism, the September 11 attacks, and lesson plans on these topics; (2) assist teachers and students to understand Islam, a religion that seems foreign to most Americans but is actually closely related to Christianity and Judaism; and (3) provide information and

lesson plans related to understanding and tolerance at a time when there is too much misunderstanding and hatred.

For up-to-date news and analysis, as well as well-designed lesson plans, it's hard to beat some of the best-known and popular web sites. *USA Today's* teacher's site ([www.usatoday.com/educate/home.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/educate/home.htm)) has a daily lesson plan that's usually pretty good. On one of their sub-sites, [www.usatoday.com/news/world/2001/thetaliban.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2001/thetaliban.htm), there's an excellent history of the origins, beliefs, and activities of the Taliban. It's written at the middle and high school levels. It can be downloaded and printed for student use. The *Time* magazine educational website ([www.time.com/time/education](http://www.time.com/time/education)) also covers daily news and provides analyses of contemporary issues. Teachers will find many interesting articles about education, such as home schooling and educational policy. *Time for Kids* ([www.timeforkids.com/TFK](http://www.timeforkids.com/TFK)) is written for students. It's especially good for elementary and middle school students.

CNN's site for teachers ([fyi.cnn.com/fyi/teachers.ednews](http://fyi.cnn.com/fyi/teachers.ednews)) has a comprehensive report on Islam and misunderstandings about that religion. It also has a special section for U.S. history and government resources. Teachers can sign up for weekly updates outlining new lesson plans and other resources. My two favorite newspaper websites for teachers are the standards: *The New York Times* and *The Christian Science Monitor*. At the *Times*, there's a special page of superb lesson plans developed in partnership with the Bank Street College of Education. You can find these lesson plans, for grades 6-12, at [www.nytimes.com/learning/general/specials/terrorism](http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/specials/terrorism). For grades 3-5, there are "news snapshots," featuring a photograph with questions and information that help teachers explain contemporary news to elementary students.

I've subscribed to *The Christian Science Monitor* since 1974. It features the most comprehensive analyses of world issues that I've found. Its educational page ([www.csmonitor.com/learning/k12.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/learning/k12.html)) has some wonderful stories about and by students in the days since September 11. One story printed on September 27 and available at [www.csmonitor.com/2001/0927/p1s1-wogi.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/0927/p1s1-wogi.html) is titled, "Why Do They Hate Us?" and is one of the best analyses of why many Muslims feel that U.S. foreign policy is aimed aggressively toward the Muslim world.

Here are some other interesting and useful sites for teachers on the topics of terrorism, September 11, Islam, and tolerance.

[www.slate.msn.com](http://www.slate.msn.com)

This wonderful online magazine has some great writers and superb articles analyzing contemporary issues, including terrorism and U.S. foreign policy. Teachers and high-achieving students will benefit from the articles. It also has a summary of what's in the major news magazines each week and a daily summary of the headlines in all the nation's major newspapers. It's a daily stop in my web-surfing habits.

[www.foreignaffairs.org](http://www.foreignaffairs.org)

*Foreign Affairs* magazine has lengthy, scholarly articles that are more appropriate for teachers than for students. Still, it's the best source for truly in-depth analyses of foreign policy and world affairs. Recent articles include "The Nightmare of Bioterrorism" and "A Foreign Policy for the Global Age." The site also includes links to other magazines dealing with foreign policy.

[www.forbetterlife.org](http://www.forbetterlife.org)

This foundation supports the belief that each individual is entitled to personal dignity and self-respect and that most individuals are willing, when given the opportunity, to take personal responsibility for their actions and well-being. It has wonderful stories of students who initiated projects to help others, heroes in all sorts of circumstances, and uplifting stories about teachers and students. You cannot leave this site without feeling good about many human endeavors.

[www.islamicity.org](http://www.islamicity.org)

This is a "mainstream" site that offers a collection of resources about Islam and Muslims. It features all kinds of information about Islam and is suitable for both students and teachers. It is a sophisticated site, with many multimedia presentations, including stories about the world's creation. One of the best features is "Understanding Islam and Muslims." It has easy-to-read answers to questions, such as "What do Muslims believe?" and "What do Muslims think about Jesus?" The answer to the second question is that they "respect and revere him and await his Second Coming." If you want your students to know more about Islam, this is the site.

[www.tolerance.org/teach](http://www.tolerance.org/teach)

This site is sponsored by the Southern Poverty Law Center, the folks who serve as watchdogs for hate groups and intolerance in the United States. They have an excellent free publication of materials and lesson plans for teachers, *Teaching Tolerance*. They also have several thoughtful lessons and background materials on building citizenship and racial profiling. The site includes a search engine, which allows teachers to search by grade level, subject, and topic.

I have about ten more sites that I wish I could include. Many, of course, may "pop up" when you go to the sites listed above. As I conclude, I guess that I do agree with the Texas woman who said, "This is a great time to be a social studies teacher." It certainly is an important time for the nation and the world. In the past few weeks, I've wanted to be back in the classroom more than ever. Best wishes in this crucial work. 📝

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