

Bridging the Information Gap: American Youth Perceptions on Torture and Civilian Protection

Emily Rose

Few American youth are aware that there are universal laws that limit military conduct during times of war. Teaching students about respect for life and human dignity will prepare them to become responsible global citizens and leaders.

A recent survey commissioned by the American Red Cross about the attitudes of the post-9/11 generation toward the Geneva Conventions reveals that 59% of youth, compared with 51% of adults, believe that torturing the enemy is always or sometimes acceptable.

The Geneva Conventions are at the core of international humanitarian law (IHL) and protect civilians, allow safe passage of the wounded and sick, and prohibit torture and inhumane treatment of prisoners during armed conflicts. They have been adopted by every nation around the world, obligating nations to abide by certain humanitarian principles and imposing legal sanctions on those who violate them.

The rules of the Geneva Conventions have been especially relevant in the last decade, as the United States has been engaged in two wars that have seen tens of thousands of American troops fighting on the front lines in Afghanistan and Iraq. The death of Osama bin Laden also ignited a debate on the applicability of the rules of war to the attack on the Abbottabad compound in Pakistan, and on whether torture can be justified

to obtain military information to protect our nation. A sound understanding of the legal framework that governs armed conflict can be helpful in discussing and understanding these complex issues in the classroom.

What the Survey Found

Survey findings show that, in many cases, youth are more likely than adults to support illegal actions in times of war. This is particularly true regarding the treatment of prisoners, who must be given certain protections under the Geneva Conventions:

59% of American youth believe that there are times when it is acceptable to torture enemy soldiers, whereas only 51% of adults agree.

41% of youth believe that there are times when it is acceptable for the enemy to torture American soldiers, compared to only 30% of adults.

56% of youth say that there are times when it is acceptable to kill enemy prisoners in retaliation for killing American prisoners, whereas only 29% of adults agree.

71% of youth believe that it is acceptable for military authorities to prohibit visits by a representative of a neutral organization to confirm prisoner well-being. In contrast, only 55% of adults agree with this statement.

It is clear that a large proportion of American youth do not understand that prisoners detained in relation to an armed conflict must receive protection. This is even more surprising given that 7 in 10 youth have a relative or close friend who is a veteran of the armed forces.

On the other hand, youth show more sympathy towards civilians than they do prisoners of war. For example, over 90% of youth believe that it is wrong to attack religious and historic monuments when no enemy combatants are present. Similarly, the vast majority of youth believe that the United States should increase the accuracy of weapons to reduce unintended civilian casualties, and that civilians should not be taken hostage to be used for bargaining with the enemy.

The contradiction between the desire to learn more and support for illegal acts in war can reasonably be attributed to a gap in information. The survey showed that almost half (48%) have never even heard of the Geneva Conventions. Yet, 8 out of 10 youth surveyed believe that the

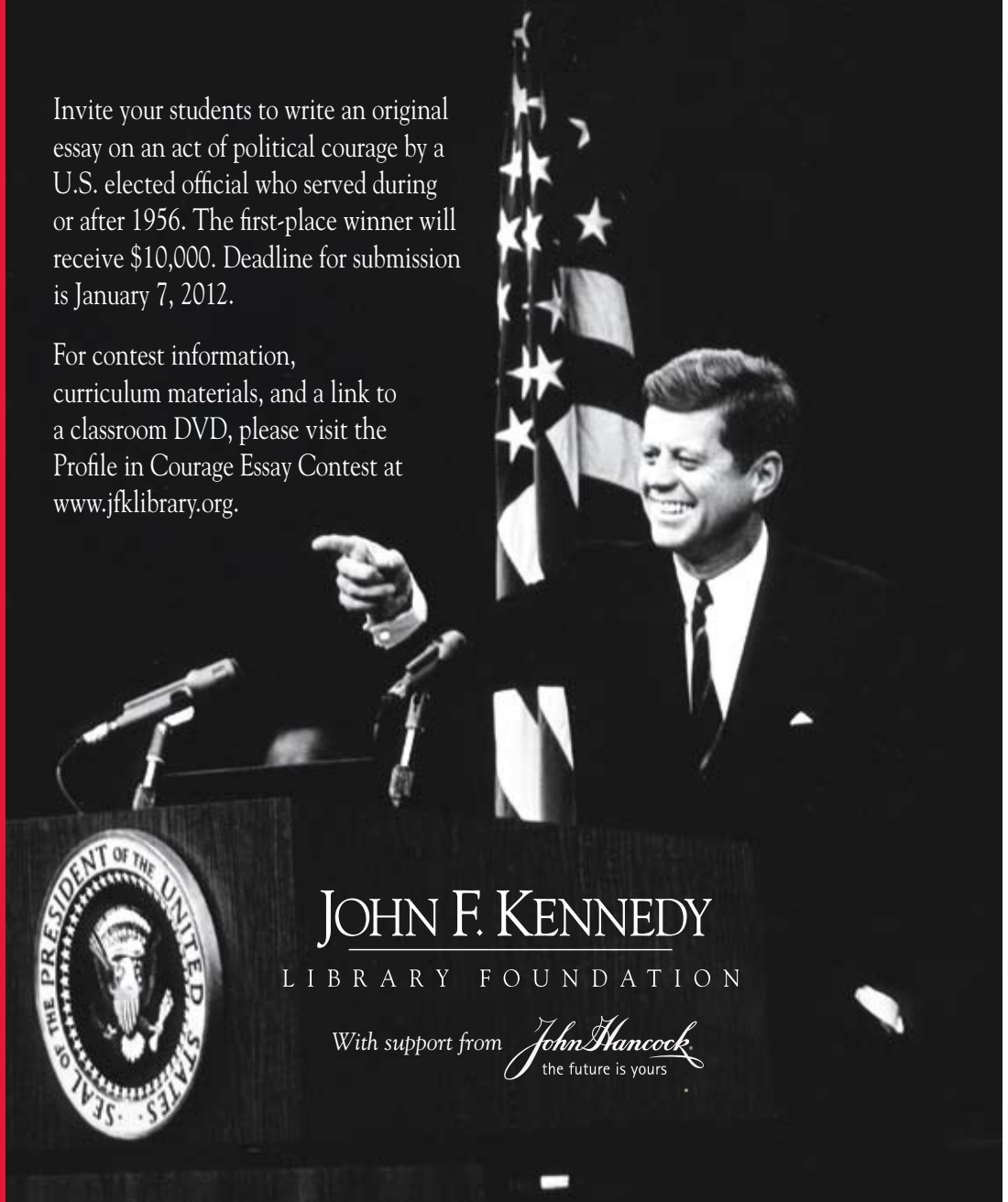
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United States should better educate them on the rules of war before they are old enough to vote or enlist in the military.

Help Students Understand the Rules of War

The Red Cross curriculum, *Exploring Humanitarian Law* (EHL), was developed to help educators improve the social awareness and civic responsibility of youth. The program not only teaches about the rules of international humanitarian law, but also encourages students to explore complex issues such as the plight of refugees and child soldiers, the protections afforded to prisoners of war, international justice, and the overall principle of respect for human dignity. Most importantly, the curriculum is designed to help young people develop the skills to become responsible global citizens and leaders.

For example, Exploration 5C of the curriculum focuses on the rules that are specifically intended to protect prisoners. The lesson begins with a discussion about the dangers and risks unique to prisoners, as well as the protections afforded under

the law. Students then learn about the mandate of the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit prisoners of war. Students strengthen their analytical skills by considering the dilemmas and consequences that detainees, prison guards, and humanitarian workers face. Finally, the lesson helps students understand why prisoners deserve protection and why upholding respect for life and human dignity is in the best interest of all parties involved in the conflict. This is just one example of how EHL provides young adults with the training needed to better understand complex issues, overcome cultural differences, and find solutions to conflicts both at home and abroad.

To build on the lessons from *Exploring Humanitarian Law*, the American Red Cross has also developed lessons entitled *The American Civil War: A Humanitarian Perspective*. These lessons create learning opportunities for students by examining the roots of the American Red Cross through Clara Barton's tireless humanitarian work; the development of a code of war by President Abraham Lincoln which pre-dates the first Geneva

Convention of 1864; and the basic principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality, which are still fundamental to modern international humanitarian law. One exercise from these Civil War lessons teaches students about the Elmira and Andersonville prisoner of war camps. Confronting the problems in these two prisons, students are asked to design and plan their own prison layout and procedures, in accordance with the rules of the Lieber Code. The goals of this activity are to prompt students to think about the circumstances confronting prisoners and the assistance and protection prisoners need, to be aware of the scale of effort required to meet the needs of prisoners arising from detention during armed conflict, to learn about provisions in the Lieber Code designed to protect the lives and human dignity of prisoners, and to understand the dilemmas and challenges that face prison authorities and guards.

Conclusion

The results of the survey come 150 years after the start of the American Civil War

What do the Geneva Conventions say about torture?

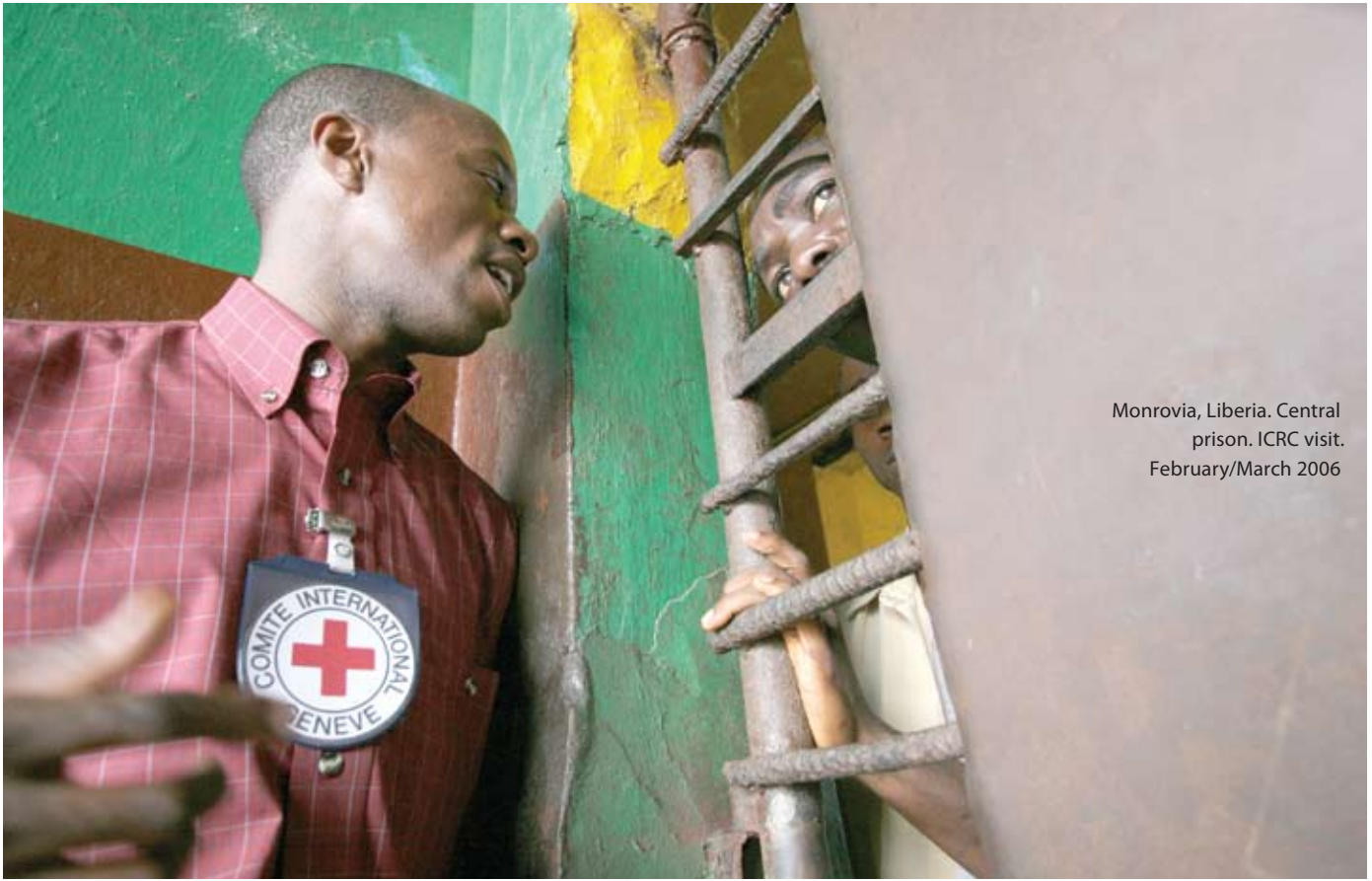
Prohibitions against torture and other forms of ill treatment during times of war have been included in the written rules of war since 1863, when the Lieber Code in Article 16 stated "military necessity does not admit of cruelty...or torture." The Geneva Conventions of 1949, which have been ratified by every country in the world, expand on this principle. Article 3, common to all four Geneva Conventions of 1949, prohibits "violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture." Additionally, all four Conventions state that "torture or inhuman treatment" constitutes a grave breach of the Conventions.

Article 12 of both the First and Second Geneva Conventions of 1949, which address the treatment of sick and wounded soldiers, states that the sick "shall be treated humanely...[and] shall not be...subjected to torture or biological experiments."

The Third Geneva Convention of 1949, addressing the treatment of prisoners of war, states in Article 17 that "no physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war to secure from them information of any kind whatever. Prisoners of war who refuse to answer may not be threatened, insulted, or exposed to unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind."

In addressing the treatment of civilians, Article 32 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, prohibits any contracting party from "caus[ing] the physical suffering or extermination of protected persons in their hands [including] murder, torture, corporal punishments, [and] mutilation."

For more information: www.redcross.org/ihl also www.icrc.org/eng/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions/index.jsp



Monrovia, Liberia. Central prison. ICRC visit. February/March 2006

and remind us of the role that our country played in promoting and developing the rules of war. Although the Civil War resulted in massive loss of life, destruction, the killing of innocent bystanders, and imprisonment of more than 400,000 soldiers, it also produced stirring examples of humanitarianism.

The first codification of international humanitarian law occurred in the midst of the Civil War when President Lincoln asked Dr. Francis Lieber to develop a code of war for the Union Army. Referred to today as the Lieber Code, the document contained provisions that prohibited the use of torture and clearly outlined appropriate treatment of prisoners of war. This document was so powerful that it influenced international discussion on the laws of war in 1874 at the Brussels Conference and led to the ratification of the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, the first formal international consensus on the laws of war.

The anniversary of the American Civil War also represents a milestone for the American Red Cross, whose founder Clara Barton upheld humanitarian principles on the battlefields of the Civil War. She dedicated herself to bringing medical support and comfort to the wounded and led an effort to search for missing men. She was also the primary catalyst behind the U.S. adoption of the first Geneva Convention of 1864.

The survey reveals a disconnect among youth regarding the relevance of international humanitarian law. Only 20% of American youth are familiar with the Geneva Conventions, yet the majority believes that it is acceptable to torture enemy soldiers, kill enemy prisoners in retaliation, and deprive detainees of the right to be visited by a representative from a neutral organization. How is it that the majority of youth condones torture but believes that those who violate international humanitarian law should be pun-

ished? As a country engaged in multiple wars, it is in our best interest to uphold the laws of war and teach them to youth. The results of the Red Cross survey show that young Americans have a thirst for knowledge, as 4 out of 5 youth surveyed said that the United States should better educate young people on international humanitarian law before they can vote and enlist in the military. The time is ripe to seize the opportunity. 🌐

EMILY ROSE holds a masters degree in *International Relations* from Syracuse University and is a former intern at the American Red Cross. The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the American Red Cross.

Note:

The American Red Cross works with teachers and students across the country as part of its mandate under its Congressional Charter to ensure that the principles of the Geneva Conventions are widely understood.

The survey methodology and findings as well as the Exploring Humanitarian Law curriculum and Civil War lessons can be found on the American Red Cross website at: www.redcross.org/ehl.

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