

To Feed a Hungry World

I received my copy of the January/February 2007 *Social Education* yesterday and thoroughly enjoyed the lead article, “Nobel Peace Laureate Muhammad Yunus: A Banker Who Believes Credit is a Human Right.” However, there was a misstatement by the authors in the article when they stated “This is the first time the Nobel Committee directly linked peace with the struggle against poverty.” (pg.10) In 1970, Dr. Norman E. Borlaug, an Iowa native, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for a lifetime of work to feed a hungry world. Although a scientist with outstanding contributions, perhaps Dr. Borlaug’s greatest achievement has been his unending struggle to integrate the various streams of agricultural research into viable technologies and to convince political leaders to bring these advances to fruition. Because of his achievements to prevent hunger, famine

and misery around the world, it is said that Dr. Borlaug has saved more lives than any other person who has ever lived.

Dr. Borlaug, who has recently been honored with the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest civilian honor, also founded the World Food Prize, (www.worldfoodprize.org/index.htm) which is often called “The Nobel Prize of Food and Agriculture.” In fact, the 1994 winner of the World Food Prize was Dr. Yunus (www.worldfoodprize.org/press_room/2006/october/muhammad-yunus-nobel-prize.htm).

—Jason Follett
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The Ravitch-Chandler Exchange

I have to say I was perplexed, but not shocked by Prentice Chandler’s article (“Academic Freedom: A Teacher’s Struggle to Include ‘Other’ Voices in History”) and, in particular, his reply to Diane Ravitch’s letter about the article. That letter and Chandler’s reply appeared in the January/February issue of *Social Education* (2007). In her letter, Ravitch criticized Chandler for offering his students her two readers (*The American Reader* and *The Democracy Reader*) as “conservative” counterbalances to Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*.

As to being perplexed, I have to take Ravitch’s side in finding it bizarre that Chandler positions her two readers as conservative alternatives to Zinn’s Marxist interpretation of the American past. Chandler finds conservative bias in Ravitch’s brief comments on the scores of primary sources that are the substance of the two books. He also sees bias in the very fact of selecting certain sources and excluding others. No doubt Ravitch exercised judgment in making her selections. Yet it is impossible to comprehend how Chandler can see *The American Reader*, say, with passages from the likes of Susan B. Anthony, Angelina Grimke, Frederick Douglass, John Brown, W.E.B. Du Bois, Joe Hill, Woody Guthrie, Tom Hayden and Betty Friedan, as “endorsing the univocal metanarratives of progress, nationhood and militant nationalism.” Whom else on the left would Chandler add: the Unabomber?

Of course Ravitch’s collections include other voices of a more traditional and patriotic bent as well. If anything, however, the collections slight (somewhat) voices on the right: Feminists Betty Friedan and Margaret Sanger, for example, are included, but

no anti-feminists such as Phyllis Schlafly and Christina Hoff Summers, or even Camille Paglia for that matter. (I am looking again here at Ravitch’s *The American Reader*). Nevertheless, these readers are still wonderful resources, not for their uniformity of perspective but precisely for their rich variety of voices.

As for Zinn, Chandler’s decision to offer him to his students is reflective of the near-star power Howard Zinn has won for himself among K-12 history and social studies teachers. Yet in fact, many historians, and not all of the right, find Zinn’s radical polemic extreme and highly problematic. One of the most incisive critiques of him was Michael Kazin’s essay (*Howard Zinn’s History Lessons*) in the spring, 2004, issue of *Dissent*, a long-standing journal of the left. I recommend it urgently to those who think they are helping the radical cause by inflicting Howard Zinn on their students.

Perhaps Chandler’s choice of Zinn would make sense had he balanced it with an outspokenly conservative account of the American past. Why not let his students loose on Paul Johnson’s *A History of the American People* or Larry Schweikart and Michael Patrick Allen’s *A Patriot’s History of the United States*? Each of these works is as accessible to students as Zinn’s. Of course, both are also more temperate and open to alternative viewpoints than is Zinn. In any case, these books would balance out evenly against Howard Zinn in that each offers a sustained interpretation of the entire American past just as he does. Chandler claims his approach (balancing Ravitch against Zinn) teaches students “historical thinking.” Here, I think he is lost in wishful thinking. Chandler offers his students two sources whose points of view he identifies ahead of time (falsely in the case of Ravitch). He then pretends to let students make up

their own minds. With little context or training, they will likely conclude either as he clearly wishes them to, or they will take issue with him as a way to act out. Students do not normally have the history background needed to evaluate history surveys in any rigorous way. They do know how to read their teachers, however. Chandler's charges will easily pick up on his leftist preferences.

Sam Wineburg uses Chandler's phrase, "historical thinking," in the title to his excellent book *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*. However, Wineburg's notion of historical thinking differs vastly from Chandler's. In Wineburg's view, teaching historical thinking involves setting students to work on primary sources that clash with one another in many ways. It requires teachers to guide students in learning to interpret what are often bewildering documents in order to confront the past as that "other country" in all its discordant strangeness. It also requires that they learn to suspend simple judgments of right and wrong based on their own ideological preferences or common-sense modes of thinking.

Only after such experiences are students likely to be in a position to read conflicting interpretations of the past intelligently. It might then be productive to give them some. Yet, it is still irresponsible to set this sort of experience up as Chandler has. Zinn's book is a single narrative history. It should be balanced against another, equally comprehensive account. Ravitch's

commentaries on her sources do not constitute a systematic interpretation of America's past. All that students are likely to get from Chandler's exercise is the notion that for some reason their teacher thinks it is "conservative" to offer a wide spectrum of views from the nation's past. Is that really a message left-leaning teachers wish to communicate?

I said I was perplexed, but not "shocked," by Chandler's reply to Ravitch. In fact, I do take strong exception to Chandler's tone. His letter descends from guilt-by-association attacks (that is really all that his references to the Olin Foundation amount to), to rhetorical overkill, to incoherence—as when he charges Ravitch with hiding her ideological bias behind false claims of objectivity and neutrality, even as he himself hides his own bias by depicting his Ravitch vs. Zinn lesson as the essence of balance and neutrality. As someone who is in the business of presenting students with conflicting historical perspectives and encouraging teachers to give students maximum freedom to develop their own interpretations, I should be shocked by this tone and approach. Sadly, however, it is a far too common tone in our profession, especially when real or perceived "conservatives" are the target. 📧

—Jonathan Burack

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Doomed to Repeat

I am a graduate student in Monmouth University's MAT program and we used "The U.S. in Iraq: Confronting Policy Alternatives" from the Nov/Dec 2006 issue of *Social Education* as a class assignment. While what was included was excellent, I feel that the three options given were lacking in any necessary historical grounding.

A common complaint from students in history classes is, "Why are we learning this? What's the relevance to my life?" I think that every lesson can be tied to history and every history lesson can and should be tied to either the present or provide a life lesson. The expression that he who forgets the past is doomed to repeat it is never more true than in Iraq, a lesson that the United States government apparently neglected to research.

In 1917, as World War I dragged on, the most powerful nation on earth, Great Britain, decided to "help" the Iraqis remove themselves from the yoke of their "evil" masters, in this case the Ottoman Empire. The real reason was that the British feared an Islamic jihad spreading to India, but that wasn't the rationale they gave publicly. British troops drove the Turks out of Iraq and were feted as liberators, but soon after they were asked to leave. The British thought Iraq unable to govern itself and remained there several years to help the nation transform

itself into a new form of government. Pretty soon bodies started piling up in the streets, British soldiers were ambushed and killed, and the citizens back home were asking what they were doing there and what cost was too much.

Sound familiar?

How can any lesson on American involvement in Iraq leave out this crucial segment of history? The relationship to Britain's experience in 1917 is almost identical and if you described it without mentioning Britain or Turkey most people would assume you were speaking of the current situation.

History is all that came before us. We learn from our experiences, particularly our mistakes. That is the life lesson.

What other lessons could be taken from the pages of Britain's history in Iraq that would be useful in a modern American classroom?

To keep the peace after the Turks' defeat in World War I, the British resorted to aerial bombardment, often with delayed-action bombs, which are particularly dangerous to children, and gas attacks. Winston Churchill answered critics of this policy by saying, "I am strongly in favor of using poisoned gas against uncivilized tribes (to) spread a lively terror," although he was apparently referring to tear gas, not the deadly gases used during World War I.¹

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After a few bombing raids in 1923, Squadron Leader Arthur Harris, who would oversee the bombing campaign over Germany in World War II and become known to history as “Bomber” Harris, said, “The Arab and Kurd now know what real bombing means. Within 45 minutes a full-sized village can be practically wiped out, and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured, by four or five machines which offer them no real target, no opportunity for glory as warriors, no effective means of escape.”²

The lesson here is a lack of knowledge and respect by Britain toward Iraq was a fatal mistake, a lesson that holds true then, now and in the future wherever we go.

We will teach that Saddam Hussein was a Sunni and that Iraq was predominately a Shiite nation, but we will omit that this is another instance of history repeating itself. The Ottomans were Sunnis and ruled over the majority Shiites in what was then

called Mesopotamia for centuries. The problems in modern Iraq cannot be fully explained by a few decades of minority rule, but take on a new light when the time frame is a few centuries.

To ignore history, as the *Social Education* article did, is to fail to give students the necessary background to understand the present. There is one valuable life lesson that can be taken from the article, however, and that is that governments often make the same mistakes as the editors did and the messes nations get into have long-lasting and far-reaching effects.

References

1. Gilbert, Martin, Winston S. Churchill: Companion Volume IV, Part 1 (London: Heinemann, 1976)
2. Glancey, J. “Our Last Occupation,” *The Guardian* (April 19, 2003). Retrieved Feb. 3, 2007, from www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,939608,00.html.

—Howard Bass
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History of Iraq Resources at Hand

In Howard Bass’ letter to the editor of *Social Education*, he indicates that he has used the policy options on Iraq developed by the Choices Program at Brown University and printed in the November/December issue of *Social Education*. He notes that the lesson, as published in the magazine, “fail[s] to give students the necessary background to understand the present.”

Howard Bass is correct that the policy options by themselves do not delve into the history of the current conflict or explore parallels with other periods. Instead, they provide an opportunity for students to weigh the risks and trade-offs of alternative policies today and to debate and deliberate those choices. But the policy options were not intended to stand alone. Included in the published lesson was a link to the Teaching with the News section of the Choices web site www.choices.edu where teachers and students could find additional links to a range of online background resources, as well as to all the previous policy options the Choices Program published prior to and since the start of the war in Iraq.

More recently (January 2007) the Choices Program updated the online resources and published a full curriculum unit on this topic. *Conflict in Iraq: Searching for Solutions* includes extensive background readings and seven accompanying lesson plans that explore the early history that has shaped Iraqi society, the changing politics of the Middle East during the 20th century, and the dynamics at play in Iraq today. Armed with this comprehensive understanding, students participate in a simulation in which they act as members of Congress, considering three distinct policy options for the U.S. role in Iraq. Students also have the opportunity to make their own recommendations. The Choices Program believes the full curriculum unit provides the historical grounding Howard Bass rightly seeks, and that it helps students to “learn from our experience, particularly our mistakes.”

—Susan Graseck, Director
Choices Program, Brown University

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