

Panama, The 1991 Gulf War, and the War at Home

by Robert Standish

Whenever I tell my students that I was in the military, they just stare at me in disbelief; my pacifist leanings are well known within the tiny community where I teach. However, when I tell them that I joined in order to afford the cost of college, there is a unanimous nod of understanding. The financial worry of college is heavy on their eleventh grade minds, and the idea of four years of service doesn't sound too bad when the recruiter waves \$50,000 in their faces. As odd a match as I was to the military, I soon found that I wasn't alone. Among the reasons why my peers joined, none included such patriotic declarations as "to serve my country" or "to defend Democracy." Instead, the reasons were, more often than not, simply financial. We were mostly just working-class kids looking for any chance at a real opportunity. Indeed, Alex Molnar's letter to President Bush was the letter all of our parents wanted to write and the letter no politician wants to answer, because it picks at the scab of class issues in the military.

As a soldier, I was part of the massive public affairs machine during the 1991 Gulf War, doing "Hi, Mom"s for the troops as my commander escorted media pools to sanitized "events" so that the journalists could file enough copy and capture enough footage to earn their day's pay. It was disheartening to see how the journalists responded—unquestioningly, and thankfully. I was never quite sure if they were massively incompetent or if they understood our sleight of hand, but didn't mind as long as the show was entertaining. The lesson was clear: there is a serious vacuum in our Fourth Estate, and it has become part of the class problem in this country. The selections in Chapter 22 are a vital tool for showing students the darker side of United States military intervention and the role the media play in keeping it secret. It is a side we won't see on TV but will hear about from the ordinary soldiers and citizens like those in this book.

Document-Based Questions

ALEX MOLNAR

1. In what ways does Alex Molnar use the word “vacation” to make his point about his opposition to the Gulf War of 1991?
2. What part of the “American way of life” does Molnar criticize? What consequences of this lifestyle does he present?
3. How might Molnar’s opinion have been different if the United States had at least appeared to exhaust all diplomatic options before engaging our troops in the Middle East?

EQBAL AHMAD

1. What two post-World War II realities does Eqbal Ahmad suggest we face today? How do these contribute to the betrayal of the world’s hope for an end to war?
2. Ahmad directly asks the reader, “What happens now?” Do you think we are on the verge of a New World Order? If so, what will it be like, who will benefit, and who will not benefit?
3. What does Ahmad suggest are the real reasons for why the United States went to war with Iraq in 1991? Are these valid reasons for declaring war? Explain why or why not.

JUNE JORDAN

1. Read June Jordan’s first paragraph out loud. How does she effectively appeal to our emotions? Is emotional appeal a valid technique for discussing the Gulf War of 1991? Explain why or why not.
2. Why do you think Jordan argues that the Gulf War of 1991 was a racist war? Do you agree or disagree with her assessment? Explain.
3. How does Jordan portray the decision of President Bush, Colin Powell, and Dick Cheney to disregard the agreement that Iraq signed with Russia? Why do you think they were not interested in a peaceful resolution on the eve of the ground war?

YOLANDA HUET-VAUGHN

1. What credentials does Yolanda Huet-Vaughn list in the introduction to her letter? How do these credentials give validity to her refusal to participate in the Gulf War of 1991?
2. Describe some of the medical and environmental consequences of war that Huet-Vaughn discusses. Were her warnings merited?
3. What do you think were the positive and negative results of the Gulf War of 1991? Was the war worth the costs to Iraqis and to people in the United States?

INTERVIEW WITH CIVILIAN WORKER

1. What are some things the civilian worker mentions that indicate the United States military was not solely interested in capturing Manuel Noriega?
2. What do you think were the effects of using twenty-year-old soldiers in the invasion of Panama? How might veteran troops have acted differently?
3. How were civilians treated in the invasion of Panama? How did the results of this investigation differ from how the government and media portrayed the invasion?

MIKE DAVIS

1. In what ways did the Los Angeles riots of 1992 showcase the problem of poverty in the United States? Do you think the riots would have been as violent if there wasn't as much poverty in Los Angeles? Why, or why not?
2. Why were undocumented immigrants especially vulnerable during the riots?
3. How does Mike Davis compare the Rodney King trial to the Dred Scott decision of the Supreme Court? Do you think it is as historically important? Why or Why not?

MUMIA ABU-JAMAL

1. What is meant by David Kairys statement, "Law is simply politics by other means" How might Mumia Abu-Jamal's situation verify this statement?

2. What percent of the United States population is living below the official poverty line? Is this an acceptable percentage for a first-world nation?
3. What kind of “rebellion of the spirit” do you think Abu-Jamal envisions that the poor must undertake? Do you think this would help reduce poverty in the United States? Why, or why not?

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 22, “Panama, The 1991 Gulf War, and The War at Home”

After Reading Chapter 22 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are five possible main points:

1. United States foreign policy has historically been and continues to be militaristic, with profound domestic and international social consequences.
2. “Supporting our troops” does not mean blindly accepting the idea that poor and working-class soldiers be put in the line of fire, no matter what the alleged reasons for the war.
3. The United States government has increasingly used humanitarian causes to justify its wars abroad, as in Panama and Iraq.
4. The 1989 invasion of Panama and the 1991 invasion of Iraq helped to define a new role for the United States military as the Cold War with the Soviet Union came to an end.
5. Although largely ignored or demonized by mainstream media, a “permanent adversarial culture” has developed in the United States that seeks the possibility of a more equal, more humane society.

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 22, “Panama, The 1991 Gulf War, and The War at Home,” and in *A People’s History*, Chapter 22, “The Unreported Resistance”

If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in Chapter 22, “The Unreported

Resistance.” Following are five additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People’s History* are used together.

6. The military-industrial complex has so much influence that both Republican and Democrat leaders have sacrificed social reform in favor of military strength.
7. Elected party officials tend to ignore their constituents who, when polled, often express beliefs that are contrary to those of the Republican and Democrat Parties.
8. Contemporary contributors to the “permanently adversarial culture” include priests, farmers, doctors, soldiers, teachers, mothers, scientists, laborers, children, and other sectors of United States society.
9. The United States invaded Iraq in 1991, claiming that a big country (Iraq) could not be allowed to invade a small country (Kuwait); yet two years earlier, the United States had invaded Panama, a much smaller country.
10. Because many teachers of United States history are currently teaching with more candor and honesty than in the past, their academic approach has been variously interpreted; many in power see such education as a threat, while others see it as a sign of progress.

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 22, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. What evidence do the voices presented in Chapter 22 give to support the opinion that the 1991 Gulf War was “an immoral and unspiritual diversion . . . a blatant evasion of our domestic responsibilities”?
2. What is “the American way of life”? Does it have anything to do with the American Dream? How many people in the United States currently enjoy this way of life or the American Dream?
3. Do you think there could have been a diplomatic solution to the Gulf crisis in 1991—a solution that might have avoided war? How and why?

4. Comparing June Jordan's entry to that of Mumia Abu-Jamal's, what factors do you think contribute to a disproportionately high number of African Americans in both the armed services and prisons in the United States? Why might these facts make it understandable that African Americans were also disproportionately opposed to the Gulf War of 1991?
5. Many of these entries offer criticisms of United States foreign policy in the Middle East. What are some examples? What are some solutions?
6. How does the 1991 Los Angeles riot compare and contrast with earlier riots you have learned about in this/these book(s)?
7. If, as some of these voices suggest, the mainstream media, universities, and Congress have all failed to discuss the legitimacy of United States military actions, then who should take on this role? How and why?
8. After the 1989 invasion of Panama, there were no governmental investigations into alleged violations of the laws of war. Should investigations be required when such allegations arise? Why, or why not?
9. How do the voices in this chapter support the idea that the United States continues to pursue imperialistic aims at home and abroad?
10. Do the voices in this chapter sound as if the speakers hate the United States? How and why? Do they make a distinction between the people of the United States and the policies of the United States government? Explain.

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

11. These general-discussion questions are additional questions for student who have read Chapter 22 in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on ways the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.
12. What evidence is presented in both chapters that suggests corporations play a significant role in shaping United States foreign and domestic policy? What negative effects do the authors suggest might arise as a result of this?
13. In what ways did the Vietnam War change people's opinions of United

States military actions? What evidence is provided in both books to suggest that United States military actions have or have not changed?

14. If the media were to provide an open forum for dissenting voices in the United States, do you think that opportunity would cause more problems or help to solve the ones we already have? Explain why or why not.
15. What common values do you think the dissenters presented in both chapters share? Why do you think these values appear to be lacking in those who shape United States foreign and domestic policy?
16. What ways might the United States government respond to the “permanently adversarial culture” that Howard Zinn describes?
17. What is the “military-industrial complex?” How, why, and when did it become a reality in the United States?
18. What were the causes and consequences of the Gulf War?
19. Do you think most people in the United States respect the voices of dissent in the early twenty-first century?
20. Who are the loudest voices of dissent in the United States today? What are the reasons for their discontent? Do you believe these voices will bring about change? Explain.
21. How would you change the media’s presentation of the news in a way that would make you want to pay attention to the daily news?
22. How well informed are you as a consequence of using any or all of the following news sources: television news, online news, radio news, and newspapers? Which do you prefer? Why?
23. Prison construction in America became a growing industry in the 1990s. What does this fact say about America’s socio-economic health?

Evaluation Tools

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should

be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. Using the Internet, investigate the various reports on the number of people killed, on both sides, in the Panama invasion of 1989. Prepare a table that lists the different totals and indicate the possible accuracy and credibility of each estimate. In a report or a PowerPoint presentation, address the disparity in the counts and the possible reasons for them. Include in your investigation the accusation that the United States military dug several mass graves in Panama to hide the true number of casualties. In your conclusion, state whether or not you recommend an investigation into possible war crimes committed by the United States.
2. Compare several different media sources and how they report a particular day's international news stories. Be sure to include independent, non-profit, and non-United States media. List the headlines of each. Note similarities and differences of the stories. What did they include and exclude? Could you note any bias or agenda? Is there a way to get trustworthy news?
3. Invite combat veterans in your community to a panel discussion. Possible topics may include dissent among troops, Gulf War Syndrome, personal opinions of United States foreign policy, and the experiences of war.
4. Create a display board that highlights the voices of Iraqis. Visit several non-United States websites (such as the BBC at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/> and Al Jazeera at <http://english.aljazeera.net/HomePage>) to discover how the Gulf War of 1991, the subsequent embargo on Iraq, and the Iraq War of 2003 have affected Iraqis.
5. Write an opinion piece on "The War on the Poor . . . Is it Real?" Research the relationship of poverty to crime in the United States. What are the correlations between crime and education level? What are the differences between the ways white-collar crime is treated and crimes committed by the poor?
6. Write a letter to your member of Congress expressing your opinion of United States foreign policy and telling how it affects your life. Ask your representative to answer specific questions you have about where he or she stands on foreign-policy issues.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

In her entry in *Voices*, Yolanda Huet-Vaughn asks, “What is the worth of all this death and destruction?” Using examples from the reading, how would you answer her question?

1. Using examples from your reading, explain what led up to the Gulf War of 1991. What were the voices of opposition to the war? Why were they ignored? What were the consequences of the war? Do you think war could have been avoided? Why, or why not?
2. Some people believe that the unfinished business of the Gulf War led to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Using examples from the reading, as well as your own research, support or refute this belief.
3. Support or refute Howard Zinn’s contention that United States foreign policy historically has been and continues to be militaristic. Do you agree or disagree with the current direction of foreign policy? Explain.
4. Using various examples from the reading, support Howard Zinn’s belief that the United States government appears to be waging war on America’s poor.
5. Using specific examples from the reading, describe the “permanent adversarial culture” that has arisen in the last several decades. Does one exist? If so, what is it? What are the roots of its origin? What are its goals? What has it achieved? Do you think the existence of such a culture is a benefit or a detriment to American society?
6. What do the voices in this chapter have in common? How do their issues compare and contrast with the issues of those who dissented in earlier generations?
7. Do you think the Gulf War was worth fighting? How do the goals and accomplishments of this war compare to those of the Vietnam War? With the 2003 war in Iraq?
8. Drawing examples from the reading, explain whether or not you think it is important for the United States public to support troops during wartime. Must public support be unconditional? Explain.

SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES

1. Create an imaginary non-profit organization to help alleviate the problems of poor kids and to direct them to a hopeful, non-criminal life. Make a logo. Draw up a charter. Plan your first fundraising event. Explain how the money will be used to reach the goals of your charter.
2. Select several committees that will provide policy recommendations for the United States president in the early twenty-first century on one of the following topics: meeting United States energy demands; improving United States relations with third-world countries; reducing poverty in the United States; dealing with the growing prison population. Then use all your persuasive powers to present your recommendations to the president (the teacher or a designated student.)
3. Hold a Socratic seminar revolving around the question, "Should people be allowed to make a profit from weapons of mass destruction?" Use Chapter 22 as the reference text.
4. Write and illustrate a children's book on the origins, goals, and consequences of the Gulf War. Be sure you provide a balanced understanding of the war that includes a discussion of the antiwar movement. Your book should include maps that help the reader to understand the geo-political realities of the war. When you are finished, read the book to an elementary-school class. Ask the students for their comments and critiques.
5. Write an editorial on an international conflict or issue in which the United States is currently involved. Be sure to use the information about the media in this chapter as a guideline for your well-researched and informed editorial.
6. Stage a debate that you imagine might have been held in your community in 1991 on the following topic: It is imperative that the United States intervene in the conflict between Kuwait and Iraq.