

## U.S. CHILDREN NEGOTIATING THE PROTECTIVE SILENCE OF PARENTS AND TEACHERS ON THE WAR IN IRAQ

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The first major military phase of the war against Iraq by the United States began on March 21, 2003, with heavy aerial attacks on major cities. Baghdad fell to U.S. forces, and the statue of Saddam Hussein was brought down on April 9. On May 1, 2003, President Bush declared victory and an end to major combat operations (InformationPlease, 2004). In March, the American public was mixed about the war, with 47% agreeing that Bush had made the case for war in Iraq, but 44% disagreeing with that statement (CBS News, 2003). During April 2003, approval ratings for the war among U.S. citizens was high. A *Los Angeles Times* poll taken April 2 to 3 reported an overall approval of Bush's handling of the situation in Iraq at 74%. In the same poll, 65% of adults were following news very closely, and cable TV was the preferred source of news about the war in Iraq, with 69% of adults listing it as a source, as opposed to 30% for newspapers and 18% for network news (*Los Angeles Times*, 2003).

The information environment in which this study took place includes media consumed by the children, primarily print publications in school and TV viewed at home, and discussions with adults, although these were surprisingly few. It is important to recall that adult consumers of news in the United States experienced a shifting flow of information about the war—some of which turned out to be erroneous—and that U.S. adults appeared to

be ambivalent toward news about war—with many avoiding coverage shortly after the war's beginning. Despite self-reports of news viewing, TV ratings dropped sharply after just 2 weeks of news coverage. Two weeks into the war, extensive battle fatigue among TV viewers was reported in the press, and ratings of Cartoon Network and Disney Channel surged.

While early coverage of the war attracted large numbers of viewers and led to lower Nielsen ratings for the Academy Awards show and NCAA Tournament basketball, that situation has reversed. Nielsen ratings for March 24–30 showed that war-weary viewers made two episodes of *American Idol* and an episode of *Survivor* the most popular shows of the week. No news programs were in the top 10. (Feran, 2003, p. 10F)

What did U.S. children know about the war in Iraq? Where did they get their information and what would they have liked to see on TV about the war? In this study of children's understandings of the war in Iraq, 22 children (13 boys, 9 girls) were interviewed on April 2 and April 4, 2003 (as part of a comparative study; see Götz, chapter 1, this volume; Lemish, chap. 3, this volume) and in a follow-up on May 19, 2004. The students were interviewed in groups of two or three best friends, the structure was open ended, and all of the interviews were conducted by the author, with whom the children were already well acquainted. The study was one brief part of an extensive longitudinal ethnography of children's media preferences and use of the Internet (Seiter, 2005). The setting was an after-school computer class, in which the children produced a quarterly newsletter and for which the author served as lead teacher. The sample was predominantly working class, ethnically and racially diverse, and attended a school that is pejoratively termed *low performing* within its Southern California school district (Seiter, 2004).

The children's discussions among themselves and with the interviewer were audiotaped while they completed drawings of how they imagined the war and what they would like to see on TV about the war. The two objectives were to capture children's *inner pictures* concerning war and to learn something about their wishes with regard to media coverage. Questions asked the children to describe their drawings and also included: What do you remember seeing on TV about the war? Do you talk to your parents about the war? Teachers? Friends? How do you feel about the war and about seeing it on TV? What would you like to see about the war?

Television news was not shown during April 2003 in the classrooms attended by these subjects, probably a result of concerns raised after teachers had used TV coverage during the Persian Gulf War, and after viewing 9/11 coverage in classrooms had unpredictably traumatized teachers and

students, producing a tidal wave of complaints from parents worried about the traumatic effects of watching TV news at school. These complaints led to many school principals instituting policies against TV news viewing in the elementary school classroom.

Children reported that adults rarely spoke to them about the war, except to alleviate their fears and reassure them about their safety. Some children were frustrated by attempts to shield them from disturbing news and adult reticence on the topic of the war in Iraq. The children volunteered several reasons their classroom teachers had given them for avoiding the subject of the war during school: The children had a lot of work to do in school, the children should not worry, and the war was too difficult to explain. The following exchange with two boys about their teacher was typical:

Ellen: Have they shown any news in school?

Jason and Aaron: No.

Ellen: Has your teacher talked about the war?

Jason: No.

Aaron: Not that much . . . . He says teaching is more important and he says like um we don't need to talk about that and he says we don't want you kids to be worried about it.

U.S. media coverage addressing parents of young children and adolescents during the 2003 Iraq war was full of expert advice about keeping the youth protected and unscathed by the unfolding global events. News stories in newspapers, on TV, and via national wire services followed a similar format: advising parents on ways to shield children from the war, usually characterized as a distant event made relevant only by escalating fears of terrorist attacks in the United States (see Pincus Kajitani, chapter 12, this volume). There was widespread agreement in the press, however, that the proper action for adults was to help stop children from thinking about the war and minimize their exposure to TV news coverage, such as CNN. Television news programs for children do not exist on U.S. commercial or public TV, unlike most European nations, where stronger public service broadcasting ideals still exist. In 2003 to 2004, the only news show produced for U.S. children about the war was a special on Nickelodeon by Linda Ellerbee, which was praised for its sensitivity to children feeling traumatized by the war (Hefley, 2003). In our discussion of this program, however, the students expressed their disappointment that the special was about managing feelings about the war, instead of more informative coverage.

Emma: I think it if they actually had kids who actually had parents die in the war so we could see their perspective. Because the

only perspective we're seeing is the kids who have parents in the war. [Mocking.] "Oh, I miss my daddy!" But what about the kids whose parents actually died? Doesn't that matter, too?

*Aaron:* I would have liked to see like the war actually happening, seeing the life of the people, of the troops out there, the Iraqi war, see what they're going through.

*Ellen:* So what was it about instead?

*Shaq:* Talking about how do you deal. They were talking about how does it feel and how does it affect me.

Overall, the children were disappointed by the mental health perspective taken in the show and the avoidance of the topic of death.

### The Initial Study

Most children reported seeing news about the war on TV, quickly tiring of or worrying about it, and either changing channels or avoiding the coverage. Although all of the children recalled TV news about the war, many of them distanced themselves from the coverage through humor. The children reported fears provoked by the coverage, but also resentment at the continual messages from adults not to worry, which they found patronizing. In addition, they reported a reticence on the part of adults to speak to them about the war.

During this first phase of interviews, a pronounced gender difference characterized the responses. Although most adults in the United States approved of the war at this point in time, women showed less enthusiasm. The most enthusiastic participants in the exercise were the Anglo-American (White) boys, who make up a minority of students in the class, which is primarily Latino (40%) and African American (40%). All boys were more outspoken than girls about their opinions on the war and tended to be enthusiastically prowar. Boys conceived of the war as personalized conflict between George Bush and Saddam Hussein, one that had involved a series of verbal threats and warnings by the United States. When Saddam Hussein ignored these, he deserved the kind of beating he would receive in return. There was no consideration of the Iraqi civilians or military in this scenario, although U.S. servicemen figure heavily.

Girls were evenly divided between pro- and antiwar positions, but were quite conscious of the civilian casualties of war and the hardships on the Iraqi people. This reflects a gender difference in national polling figures for adults in April 2003, which reported 66% of women as opposed to 82% of men approved of how Bush was handling the situation with Saddam

Hussein in Iraq (*Los Angeles Times*, 2003). They were less verbose on the topic than the boys. Even when they did not explicitly object to the war, they expressed a desire to see it end quickly, as in the close of this interview;

*Ellen:* Is there anything else you'd like to say about the war or what would you like to see happen?

*Nicole:* I would like. . . . What I really want to happen is just them to find Saddam Hussein and just get it over with.

Another girl responded to the question about the news:

*Ellen:* So how does this make you feel?

*Sarah:* I feel, um, sad. Really, really sad.  
(referring to her drawing) I wrote a girl that says she thinks it's not good to fight.

Although the boys embraced the opportunity to portray war in their drawings, the girls preferred the "what you would like to see on TV" part of the assignment, and every one of them carefully drew a scene close to TV's visual representations, usually a newscaster announcing either the end of the war or the decision to halt the war for humanitarian reasons (see Fig. 2.1).

The boys included in their drawings lots of bloodshed, weaponry, and scatological allusions. There is a great deal of captioning and multiple scenes (some of them sequential, some simultaneous) depicted in each of the boy's drawings. The war is akin to a playground fight, with cheers and laughter by the victors. Strikingly different from the high-technology warfare featured on TV, knives were the preferred weapon in the boys' drawings, and decapitation was a recurring cause of death, with many depictions of throat slit-

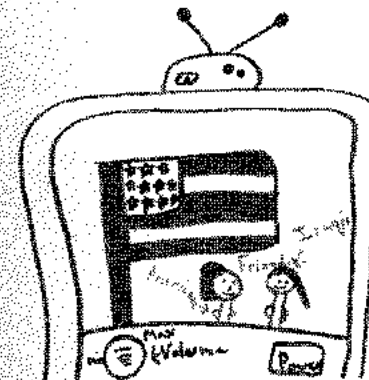


FIG. 2.1. Angel: Newscaster friendship.

ting and blood dripping (see Fig. 2.2). A typical boy's drawing of the war was the death of Saddam: "My picture is . . . the TV and then there's Saddam Hussein and his neck's cut open and there's blood because he's dead." No doubt or possibility of U.S. failure at this point in time seems to exist in the boys' minds, and the boys express less anxiety about the war than do the girls' interviews.

Consider the example of Aaron, an 11-year-old redhead whose mother is a clerical worker and whose father is a construction worker. Aaron hoped to join the Navy Seals as a career. Aaron was an articulate and confident student, always the first to answer questions in class. He occasionally got in trouble for fighting with or pushing other students, but never seemed troubled or unusually violent. Aaron describes his drawing of war this way (see Fig. 2.3)

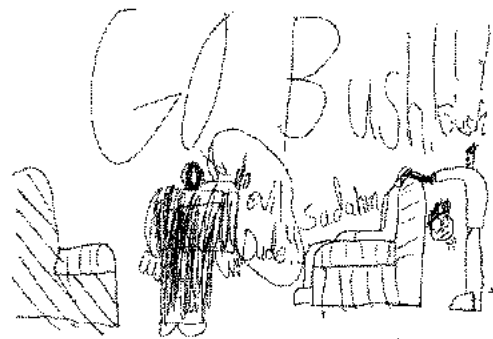


FIG 2.2. Bush and throat-slitted Saddam.



FIG. 2.3. Aaron: Bush kills Saddam.

*Aaron:* That's Saddam. Those are bullets. That's some guy taking a pee and he gets stabbed and um someone shoots off his head. Like, we do this, attack his kids and his family and another kid and him, and Bush (comes?) in with a machine gun and up there we're destroying the air force planes and right there US is inside a 'copter and destroying it and it says "US Won!" That's what I'd like.

*Ellen:* That's what you'd like to see?

*Aaron:* Yeah. And then right here is a description of Bush killing him. So this is like Saddam and then um, uh, he's dying, he's dead, because of the honorable thing that George W. Bush has done. Honoring him. A very precious moment in history.

Another boy drew Saddam at his moment of death:

*Ellen:* What's this?

*Boy:* It's Saddam Hussein.

*Ellen:* Oh, and what's this?

*Boy:* A gun shooting right in his heart. That's what I want to see.

Other boys used their drawings to tell action narratives, some of them hard to follow. One 11-year-old boy explained:

I saw people getting shot with handguns and AKA-57s and all those other guns. There were some planes dropping nuclear bombs. Not nuclear bombs, but, some mustard bombs and stuff. And at night you could see lots of, um, lights and all the bombs dropping.

Aaron's best friend, Jason, a White, middle-class 11-year-old described his picture this way:

Allright, this is what happens. This tank goes over there and sees Saddams's warriors . . . runs 'em down just crush 'em and then, go over there, shoot 'em, and then throw 'em up in the air and destroy them with a missile.

When the threat of attack on the United States was raised in the interview, Jason dismissed it and Aaron switched to the fundamentalist Christian discourse familiar to him from church:

*Ellen:* Well, how do you guys feel? Do you feel worried? How does all this war stuff make you feel?

*Jason:* I don't really care. Cuz', like, I know we're gonna win.

*Aaron:* I don't care if I die. I know I'm going to Jesus.

*Jason:* And even if he comes after me, I can like shoot him up or something. (laughs)

The method of best friend pair interviewing seemed to grant permission to boys to express fear: If one boy acknowledged feeling worried, his friend was likely to chime in:

*Shaquille:* When the war started, he (Bush) said they had, like, nuclear bombs that could go all the way to our school and stuff and I was getting kind of worried.

*Calvin:* Mushroom bombs, too. Mushroom bombs.

*Shaquille:* I was really getting worried and stuff, like they could come attack me any minute. . . . We were playing outside and we wouldn't know.

*Calvin:* (agreeing, confirming) They could!

*Shaquille:* Any second now . . . (see Fig. 2.4)

Girls were more open about their fears and their avoidance of TV news coverage. When asked what she could remember seeing on TV about the war in Iraq, a 10-year-old girl stated her fears about nuclear warfare directly:

*Nicole:* I don't really like to watch the war.

*Ellen:* So do you try to avoid it?

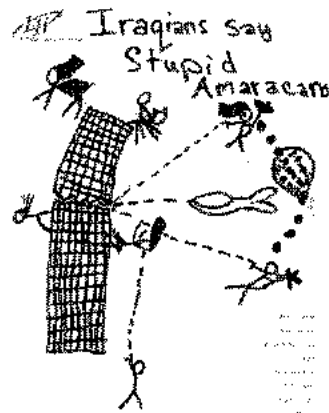


FIG. 2.4. Shaquille: Stupid Americans.

*Nicole:* Yeah.

*Ellen:* Yeah. Uh-huh. How come? How does it make you feel to watch news about the war?

*Nicole:* I don't, it just makes me, it feels scary. And I'm scared about a nuclear bomb or something.

*Ellen:* So do you like change the channel or leave the room or...?

*Nicole:* If somebody's watching, I just leave the room. But if it's me, I turn it off.

*Ellen:* Do you get cable?

*Nicole:* Yeah.

*Ellen:* So then you can watch news about the war all day long.

*Nicole:* It's basically on every channel.

Some of the girls responded to the question about what you would like to see on TV by simply drawing their favorite TV show—a cartoon such as *Powder Puff Girls* or a situation comedy.

At the other end of the spectrum were interviews with girls who adopted a unilateral antiwar position. One Larina was upfront about her antiwar position:

*Ellen:* So, first of all, what would you say war is?

*Christina:* Bad.

*Ellen:* Mm-hm. But how would you explain it?

*Christina:* Um, well it is bad. It's not good to fight, that's why. I hate fighting. And I hate shooting, too. It's so bad. War.

Girls tended to discuss the painful effects of war and to imagine the women and children suffering in Iraq. This was the case with all but one of the Latina and African-American girls in the class, who readily adopted an anti-Bush position. Peace signs and friendly hand shaking between Americans and Iraqis, or between Bush and Saddam, appeared in the drawings. One girl imagined children appearing on the popular cable show *Larry King Live* to explain how they feel about the war.

Claudia was so reluctant to participate that I had to call her over, and by this time her friends had left the table. This may be why she was the only student who, in the following excerpt from our interview, openly revealed some of her confusion, rather than competitively displaying her knowledge of the war or arguing over facts. Her reticence was typical of all the immigrant children in the class, who seemed wary about others overhearing and possibly disagreeing with their position. In discussing the war, as in most of

her school life, Claudia kept a low profile at school. Claudia was an exceptionally good student, who often translated from English to Spanish for her parents, her cousins and siblings, and other students in the class. She constantly sought out adult approval and one-on-one attention. She had an excellent memory and took her work very seriously.

*Ellen:* OK, now tell me about your picture. Who's this?

*Claudia:* A soldier.

*Ellen:* And what does it say?

*Claudia:* It says no more war because a lot of people are getting killed, innocent people. And there's a soldier shooting and people are saying no more war because a lot of people are dying.

Pause.

*Claudia:* . . . I got a question, Saddam destroyed the Two . . . ?

*Ellen:* World Trade . . . the two towers?

*Claudia:* Yeah.

*Ellen:* No, that was Osama Bin Laden.

Pause

*Ellen:* So tell me what this word is. Oh, that's his gun firing off.

*Claudia:* Mm-hm. No more war

Claudia's hesitant question about the relationship between Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein reflects the confusion many children in the study felt at this time as evidenced by their drawings of scenes with Bin Laden and Hussein in close proximity. She is also typical of girls and immigrant children whose drawings and captions reflected a deeper knowledge of war's consequences, especially on the lives of civilians.

### Facts and Causes

Overall, the drawings and interviews betrayed much confusion in the children's minds: between Iraq and Afghanistan, between Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, between retribution for 9/11 and nuclear threat. The children saw the war's purpose as killing Saddam Hussein because he was an unfair leader, cruel to his own people. The children viewed the war primarily as a rescue operation for the Iraqis and a punishment for Saddam for being so selfish and greedy. Weapons of mass destruction, as a search for weapons on Iraqi soil, was absent, although certainly a generalized nuclear threat was strongly felt.

In this respect, the interviews resemble those of education researcher Sherry L. Fields, whose collection of student narratives about the Persian Gulf War were full of "omissions, deletions, exaggerations, and inaccuracies." Fields conducted a study of children's historical understanding of the 1991 Persian Gulf War at a middle school (Grades 6-8) in Texas in September 1993. These students were in grades 3 to 5 during the Persian Gulf War—the same age range as the students in my study—and in Grades 6 to 8 two years later when the study was conducted. The study was aimed at understanding how much children remembered about the Persian Gulf War since it was the first time elementary school students were given instant access to news about the war, specifically in the form of watching live network and CNN coverage. Fields reported that the results "showed that the majority of students had vague understandings of the events that transpired as well as its precedents." Fields also notes that the school's response to the war consisted primarily of an increase in patriotic activities: flag ceremonies, anthem singing, and assemblies.

Much of what the children in this study knew about the Iraq war they learned from the publication *Time for Kids*, a magazine provided by the school and often assigned as homework by classroom teachers at the elementary school. Two third-grade girls, both of them 8 years of age, from different classrooms, reported the following experiences in school with *Time for Kids*:

*Ellen:* So what about at school? Do they talk about the war at school?

*Natalie:* No.

*Gigi:* Well, they did one time. Cuz we always read *Time for Kids* and it talks a lot about the war, and Iraq and the people in my classroom ask a lot of questions, why.

*Ellen:* Is that like *Time Magazine* for kids?

*Together:* Yeah.

*Gigi:* They said why do we have to go to war with Iraq?

*Ellen:* Who said that?

*Gigi:* One of my classmates.

*Ellen:* And then what happened?

*Natalie:* When I was at class, um, my teacher she gave us a *Time for Kids Magazine* and we had it for homework so we had to read it and that's how I got those, um . . .

*Gigi:* Ideas?

*Natalie:* Ideas for writing my article.

Ellen: So what were the stories in that about?

Natalie: Oh, just talking about bad things about him (Saddam Hussein) and . . .

Gigi: Mostly bad . . .

Natalie: Bad things, bad things.

Ellen: Did it say stuff about the US, too?

Natalie: No, because it was just about Saddam Hussein.

Ellen: Do you have the same teacher?

Gigi and: No.

Natalie:

The publication *Time for Kids* (*TFK*) was required homework in all of the classrooms ([www.timeforkids.com](http://www.timeforkids.com)), provided free to the children by the school, in a "World Report" edition designed for Grades 4 to 7. In checking back issues of *TFK*, I recognized some of the themes repeated verbatim by the children in the interviews. *TFK* clearly influenced the children's drawings in April 2003. *TFK* reporting emphasized an approach to the war as an individualized struggle between Saddam Hussein and George Bush. *TFK* devoted extensive coverage to Bush's speeches—cover stories devoted to each State of the Union address, for example, and flattering depictions of Bush as defender of freedom and fighter against fear. Cover stories about Saddam prepared children for the war, carefully following the Bush White House's agenda for justifying the intervention with stories such as: "What Should We Do About Saddam Hussein?" (October 2002) and "Is Saddam Hiding Something?" (December 2002). The image of the statue of Hussein being brought down in Baghdad was featured on the cover with the following triumphant story of Iraqi gratitude towards the Americans, typical of *TFK*'s reportorial style.

With bare hands, sledgehammers and, finally, the aid of U.S. Marines, Iraqis tore down a 40-foot statue of Saddam Hussein last Wednesday. The fallen statue, which had towered over a square in central Baghdad, symbolized for many the end of Hussein's rule. For the first time in decades, Iraqis dared to dream of a country that was not ruled by fear. As U.S. tanks rolled into Baghdad, joyous Iraqis cheered in the streets. "Bush good! America good!" (April 18, 2003, Vol. 8, No. 24)

An unintended consequence for teachers may be that *TFK* materials, which are strongly supportive of the Bush government's position on Iraq, are likely to be the exclusive source of information available to children, in the absence of children's news programs or political discussions with parents

and teachers. It is understandable that overburdened teachers find *TFK* a convenient classroom reference, with the added advantage that the Web Site provides teachers with prefabricated worksheets and quizzes related to each issue on world news that can easily be assigned as homework. Besides the slant of the reporting in *TFK*, the magazine—and even more so the Web Site—exposes the children to a great deal of promotional material for Time-Warner TV programs, music stars, movies, and books—all of it presented as editorial content, rather than advertising. The format of *TFK*—reducing complex historical events to simple narratives full of facts that can be easily transferred to a quiz format—may also be responsible for the simplistic view of the war adopted by many students. As Fields (1994) notes about the Texas student narratives:

The thinness may also be the result of a school culture in which students are usually simply asked to recall factual materials, are seldom asked to make interpretations, and most often see little cause for or value to remembering things not on a test. . . .

Whatever the reason for these thin narratives, teachers must be concerned about the students' limited understanding of cause and interpretation and examine their teaching in light of what we have learned in our study. What is being done in school classrooms today so that interviews in two years will not find the same degree of ignorance and superficiality when today's world events are discussed?

In a discussion among themselves of *TFK*, one student raised an objection on political grounds, but she did so cautiously:

Ellen: So you guys have seen another *Time Magazine* for kids?

Shaquille: Yeah, we get those almost like every week.

Ellen: And have they had stuff about the war?

Kids: Yes!

Ellen: What did they have?

Shaquille: War in Iraq, about how they're doing. . . . We learned that Iraq . . .

Aaron: Sucks.

Shaquille: Iraq bombed, Iraq bombed, it bombed . . . They bombed it . . . Iraqians . . .

Aaron: They're morons!

Shaquille: Saddam Hussein bombed Iraq because he thought that . . .

Aaron: That's the end of the war right there . . .

**Shaquille:** Saddam Hussein thought the smoke would just like cover it up so they won't see, but we were able to see.

**Aaron:** *Time*? I hate *Time* . . .

**Ellen:** So did you read that because you were interested in it?

**Shaquille:** No, we had to read it.

**Emma:** *[says something unintelligible under her breath]*

**Ellen:** What did you say?

**Emma:** Nothing.

**Ellen:** No, what did you say?

**Shaquille:** She said something about a bunch of Republicans.

**Ellen:** Did you say *Time* Magazine is written by a bunch of Republicans?

**Emma:** No, *Time for Kids*.

**Ellen:** *Time for Kids* is written by a bunch of Republicans?

**Emma:** The kids, the articles are never about kids who want the war to stop. They're always about the kids, it's always about the kids who are like, "Yeah, my dad can beat 'em up, Go go go, my dad can beat 'em up."

**Shaquille:** No it's not.

**Emma:** Yes, it is.

**Shaquille:** No, it's not.

**Emma:** Yes, it is.

**Nina:** We all have to read *Time for Kids*.

**Ellen:** How do you all have to read it? Do they ask you questions?

**Nina:** Yeah, on the worksheets.

**Shaquille:** We have to read it with the teachers.

**Ellen:** So, Emma, did you think that yourself or have your parents said that about *Time for Kids*?

**Emma:** No, they don't read it.

In the spring of 2003, Emma was the most explicitly critical student in the class and the only one skeptical of the political slant of the news they received. When the U.S. students were interviewed in a follow-up study on the war in Iraq 1 year later, however, their attitudes to the war, and their readings of news had changed. Public opinion in the United States had also

swung against the war, but it also became apparent that one teacher in the school had implemented classroom policies that achieved a deeper understanding of the war and critical thinking about the news.

### May 2004

Thirteen months later, in May 2004, I repeated the interviews to see how children's views of the war might have evolved as they matured developmentally and as news about the war shifted to questioning U.S. motivations for initiating the war and actions during the occupation. Of course, the news from Iraq had changed dramatically in the intervening months, and public approval of the war had declined. On February 2, 2004, President Bush had established an independent commission to study intelligence failures with regard to the failure to discover any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Car bombings and suicide attacks had increased through February and March. On March 31, a crowd in Falluja had killed four American civilian contractors. On April 30, 2004, photos of the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse at the hands of U.S. soldiers were circulated around the world.

The same group of students was asked to draw pictures of the war and of what they would like to see on TV about the war, and their discussions were taped. Because there was much greater eagerness to talk, these interactions took a less structured form than the 2003 interviews and involved more exchange among the children. The students were much more active in expressing opinions about the war and its effects on Iraq and the United States. There are striking differences between the first set of interviews and the second, in that many children had changed their minds about the war, had more fully formed opinions about the war and about U.S. engagement in it, and were more knowledgeable about the news.

When Aaron drew a new picture of Saddam Hussein in May 2004, he again focused on individual male leaders and images of combat. The story of Hussein's capture in the foxhole had left a big impression in him and all the boys in the class. For them it seemed to signal a captivating form of humiliation, and they were taking great pleasure in imaging and expanding on the ridicule. Aaron writes a sitcom-style joke (Honey, the Americans are here for you!?) about the exchange between Saddam and his wife in the foxhole as tanks and soldiers are rolling in to capture him.

Although this cartoonish view of the war is similar to his attitude in April 2003, his discussion indicated greater doubt. A hesitant critique is emerging—even from Aaron, who imagined a career in the military for himself. He wonders out loud: "What I don't get is, why are we still at war if Saddam has been caught?" Although he seemed unaware of the weapons of mass destruction rationale for the war at our last interview, he now asks, "and what happened to the nuclear weapons?"



Shaquille is more explicitly critical of President Bush and also incorporates his critique into the drawing: a bleak image of war and killing on the side labeled war, and an Iraqi jail with an American flag on the side labeled peace (see Fig. 2.5). As with other students in the class, the images of Abu Ghraib left a deep impression on the children and inflamed their sense of injustice. Children were startlingly accurate at reproducing the images (images that did *not* come from *Nick News* or *Time for Kids*).

In Eden's picture, an American Flag burns on one half while a hooded prisoner from Abu Ghraib occupies the other side. It is notable how precisely her drawing captures the news photos of May 2004 and how the picture implies causal relations. Prisoner abuse was widely cited as the reason to oppose the war and a reason for shame over U.S. actions in Iraq, a concern for the U.S. image internationally. In this focus group discussion, Shaquille joins two girls in denouncing the prisoner abuse:

*Rachael:* Most of the time I'm thinking we are not really America any more, since we are not really the land of the free and home of the brave anymore because we are not really giving most of them freedom. All of them immigrants, Iraqi people [sic], they should all be treated the same.

*Shaquille:* They should all be treated fair and stuff. People are probably all going to think that it's all lies and what are people going to think of America since the Iraqi prisoners and stuff?

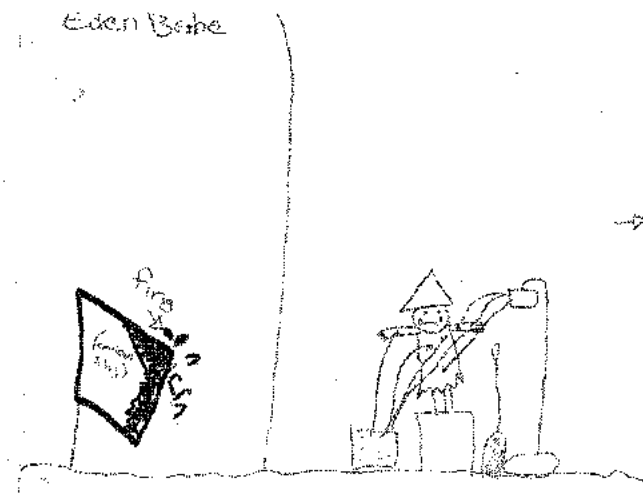


FIG. 2.5. Eden: Burning flag at Abu Ghraib.

Besides Rachael's comments about the emptiness of the patriotic sloganeering that has surrounded the war in Iraq, other girls drew pictures that were striking in their cogent critiques of the war. Claudia drew a woman saying goodbye to her husband just as he is about to be killed by a bomb. The word *Please*, in the phrase no more war, erupts in red from the flames of the bomb (see Fig. 2.6).

In understanding the comments and drawings of U.S. boys in particular, it is important to note that cartoonish images of violence in drawings that would seem to trivialize the war coexisted with a more informed and critical political opinion about the war. The presence of such drawings might say more about media consumption habits and joke making for the benefit of peers than it does about the real ideas of the children who drew them. The girls were more consistently horrified by the images of war, sympathetic to the effects of the war on civilians, and worried about civil rights. These reactions were most pronounced in the girls whose families were recent immigrants, either from Mexico or Eritrea. The lengthy relationship of the researcher with the students (4 years) helped to gain the trust and openness necessary to elicit the opinions of these students, who are often the quietest in the classroom.

It is possible that, in the households of recent immigrant families, news sources originating outside the United States or more critical of U.S. policy than national news sources were more common. Pollsters in the U.S. consistently leave out participants who are non-native speakers of English. Recent immigrants, often scrutinized by government agents of various kinds, are also less likely to participate in phone polls. Finally, many citizens in the United States, and especially in the city where this study was conducted,

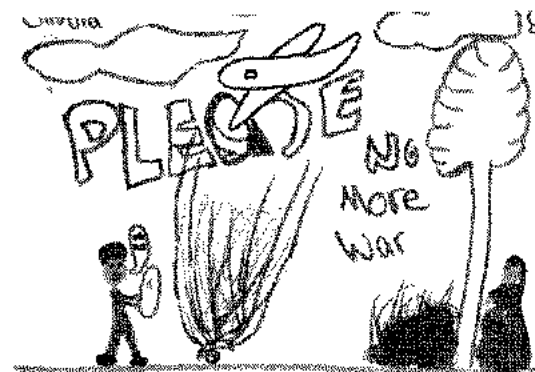


FIG. 2.6. Claudia: Please no more war.

where there is a large military presence, felt pressure in neighborhoods to exhibit patriotism, which often is taken to mean a prowar stance. In fact, some citizens fought to recapture the term with the slogan *Peace is Patriotic* during the Iraq war.

How do we explain the more questioning and critical response of the children in the follow-up study? Although there is a great deal of joking around in the follow-up interviews, there is also a greater capacity for critically examining news sources—although it is interesting that when it comes to mentioning the role of political parties in the war, and explicitly antiwar positions, Emma shifts to a barely audible register, and her comment might have been lost if I did not work to elicit it in the interview. If my methodology provided less information about the everyday school lives of these children, it would have been easy for me to attribute the change in attitude to developmental differences and a changing climate of public and journalistic opinion. In the weeks following the interviews, however, I was able to discern that all of the students that I would place in the category of *critical viewers* (i.e., they questioned the kind of information they were receiving, they were suspicious of the Bush administration, they were questioning the entire basis for war) were enrolled in the same classroom.

This shift is especially striking in light of the Texas study by Fields, in which their knowledge of events had deteriorated after the initial excitement of the war's outbreak, despite greater maturity. In contrast, the students were better informed in May 2004, than they were at the war's outbreak, with a clearer understanding of the weapons of mass destruction rationale than they had at the war's outbreak and fewer confusions as to leaders, nations involved, and so on. All of the students who had developed such critical viewing capabilities were enrolled in one fifth-grade teacher's class. This one teacher had broken with the school's policy of ignoring current events and insisted that the students watch TV news and discuss the news on a weekly basis. This teacher seemed to be practicing the kind of recommendations Fields set forth as correctives in the Persian Gulf War study: follow through, persistent discussion of TV news to remove misconceptions, and open discussion of the reasons for war. This study suggests that watching news with a teacher interested in teaching critical media literacy skills can have a deep impact on children. When children are left to materials such as *Time for Kids* as the only classroom treatment of world news, they are left with a simplistic version of events, are easily bored by the material, and are quick to adopt cynical postures toward frightening events such as war and terrorist attack. The far-reaching changes in U.S. public education of the last two decades are also in evidence here. In the absence of adequate funding, teachers are more likely to rely on prepackaged free material from commercial sponsors such as Time. When administrators reassure teachers to stick to the basics and adhere strictly to educational standards

for each grade level, it becomes difficult to practice any kind of citizenship education in the classroom.

Further research may uncover significant differences in attitudes based on race and ethnicity, but these are difficult to capture through survey-based public opinion research. In my class, some of the most reticent students held the most thoughtful and best-informed opinions about U.S. actions in Iraq, but their voices had to be encouraged and brought out through extended interview contact.

Finally, there are grave consequences for a childrearing philosophy that shields children in the United States from disturbing news and current events. The reticence of parents does little to allay fears and probably increases them. When teachers abdicate responsibility to discuss the war, they leave children's political and citizenship education in the hands of *Time for Kids* journalists who are voicing the Bush administration line. The children in my class were demanding something more and something better from the media, their teachers, and their parents.

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