

What to tell students about war

By **WILLIAM C. KASHATUS**

When war broke out in the Persian Gulf, my first concern was about what to say to Chris and Alex.

For weeks before the initial assault, their seemingly endless questions had forced me to re-examine my own convictions as a U.S. citizen and my personal feelings as a member of the Society of Friends: "Can you justify our military presence in the Persian Gulf?" "Would you go to war if you were drafted?" "Will this be another Vietnam?"

My answers were half-truths at best. I was confused and they knew it.

Chris and Alex are two of my former students. Both are seniors in a prestigious secondary school; both plan to attend college next year — an aspiration that could be dashed by a selective service system that will refuse to grant college deferments if activated. And both of them are very concerned about their futures. So am I.

I believe all educators have a moral obligation to students that goes beyond conveying academic knowledge or skills. It involves engaging their minds as well as their souls, preparing them to become ac-

tive, committed members of a free society.

And so, in the classroom, I've tried to teach the responsibility of U.S. citizenship and, on the athletic field, the necessity of mental discipline and physical toughness. Above all, I hope that I have taught my students to be intelligent and caring human beings since, one day, they may be compelled to make decisions that will influence the lives of others.

But for all the idealistic hopes I have for my students, there is no escaping the hard realities that the cockpit of an F-15 is not a U.S. history classroom and the Persian Gulf certainly isn't a soccer field. Once I get beyond all the rhetoric, the alleged blood-for-oil motives and the Hitler-Hussein analogies, I am, quite simply, confused. And my confusion results most from how I should teach the fundamental dilemma of war itself: pitting the sanctity of human life against the responsibility we have to our country as American citizens.

It is easy for some Americans to adopt an unyielding pacifism in this conflict based on the position that human life is sacred, whether it be American, Arab or Israeli. My own religion has elevated this position to a fundamental tenet of faith. And yet I wonder, at times, how much the most vocal pacifists appreciate the

fact that others fought and died to protect the freedom of speech that they themselves enjoy today.

On those occasions, I can't help feeling that life wouldn't be worth living if I couldn't be a member of a free society. On the other hand, it is easy for those who justify war to do so based on the responsibility that each American has to serve this nation, particularly in a time of crisis. And I am left to wonder just how sacred human life is for them. Does it become as dispensable when a father, son or brother is killed?

The dilemma of teaching about war is that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers. Instead the issue challenges our judgment, the ability to discern fact from conjecture, to question rather than to blindly accept the stereotypes of our society. Under these circumstances, perhaps the best thing I can do for Chris and Alex — and for any of my students — is to teach them the importance of taking a stand and adhering to it, regardless of what others think because, in the end, they will have to live with the consequences of their decisions.

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COMMENTARY

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