

MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE GULF WAR

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will review the history of the Gulf War of 1991.
- Students will learn about the U.S. government's role in influencing media coverage of the Gulf War.
- Students will identify bias in a documentary video.

VOCABULARY & CONCEPTS

censorship	invasion of Kuwait	Operation Desert Storm	Saddam Hussein
Coalition forces	Iran-Iraq War	press pools	U.N. Security Council
George H.W. Bush	oil	public relations (PR)	

MEDIUM

Video clip from Lines in the Sand video essay (Total running time: 4 min, 22 sec)



MATERIALS NEEDED

- Unit 3, Lesson 3 video clip from DVD or Web site
- *Student Worksheet* (pg. 5)

TIME

30 minutes

LESSON STEPS

1. Present *Introduction to the Lesson* (pg. 2) to the class.
2. Distribute the *Student Worksheet*.
3. Play the clip and lead a discussion using the *Questions, Suggested Answers and Evidence* (pg. 3-4) as a guide.
4. Present *Additional Information* (pg. 4) (optional).
5. Lead a discussion about propaganda using *Further Questions* (pg. 4).

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

The Iraqi economy was in a terrible state following the Iran-Iraq War. Saddam Hussein, with one of the world's largest armies, may have felt that an invasion of a small, oil-rich country would solve his financial problems. On August 2, 1990, the Iraqi army invaded Kuwait, its much smaller neighbor to the southeast. One week later, Saddam Hussein announced that Iraq had annexed Kuwait, calling it the 19th province of Iraq.

President George H.W. Bush proceeded to build a coalition of Arab and Western countries that were willing to send troops to force Iraq out of Kuwait. On November 29, 1990, the U.N. Security Council approved the use of force against Saddam Hussein if he failed to retreat from Kuwait. On January 17, 1991, Operation Desert Storm began with an intensive bombing campaign against Iraqi targets. This was followed by a ground attack that lasted for only 100 hours before Saddam Hussein agreed to the U.N. terms. One hundred forty-eight U.S. troops were killed during the fighting while tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers lost their lives.

During Desert Storm, the Kurds in the north of Iraq and Shiites in the south rebelled against Saddam Hussein. They had hoped for support from the U.S. and Coalition forces, but such support did not come. Saddam Hussein withdrew his forces from Kuwait, ending the brief occupation. In doing so he helped to maintain his hold on power, since the Coalition's goal was simply to expel Iraq from Kuwait and not to remove Saddam Hussein from power.

The U.S. government was highly aware of the public relations (PR) aspects of waging war in the 1990s. The Pentagon took steps to control coverage of the Gulf War in ways that provided a distinct change from television coverage of the Vietnam War. A limited number of journalists were allowed to visit the front in "press pools" that were reserved for reporters only from Coalition countries. Pool reporters had to be accompanied by troops who would decide what a journalist could see or photograph. Censorship was defended by the government as security against giving information to the enemy. Polls showed that most U.S. citizens accepted the need for such censorship. Journalists who challenged the pool restrictions were threatened with losing their accreditation or being deported.

You will see a four-minute segment from a larger documentary, [Lines in the Sand](#). It was written and produced in 1992 by Ed Griffin-Nolan, a peace activist who is the former media director for Witness for Peace. Griffin-Nolan shot some of the footage in Baghdad himself and obtained permission to use other footage from media sources. This short video was made for distribution to schools (junior high through college), libraries, religious organizations and community groups.

- **Distribute the *Student Worksheet*.**
- **Project** the clip. Use the *Questions, Suggested Answers and Evidence* to focus the decoding.
- **Use** the *Additional Information* and *Further Questions* to discuss media influence and propaganda.

QUESTION | **According to the filmmakers, what strategies did the U.S. government and military use to influence media coverage during the Gulf War of 1991?**

- SUGGESTED ANSWERS
- managing timed release of positive images and information
 - “limiting reporters’ access to combat situations”
 - “military PR experts selected, drilled and rehearsed their briefers carefully before every appearance”
 - “press officers only allowed interviews with selected troops and hovered nearby throughout”
 - “reports were censored before they reached us”
 - “hometown reporters inclined to write human interest stories were flown free to Saudi Arabia while journalists critical of the war were left out of press pools”
 - “networks turned endless hours of air time over to Pentagon briefings and commentary by former government officials”
 - “we never saw the people on the other side of the bombing runs”

QUESTION | **What is the main message of the video?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | TV coverage was controlled by the government to manipulate public opinion and rally support for the war.

QUESTION | **What techniques did the filmmaker use to convince viewers of this message?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | The film shows many patriotic clips of U.S. soldiers and military briefers contrasted with commentary about government manipulation of the media. In the final segment, emotional music, photos and an interview highlight the death of an Iraqi family killed by U.S. bombs.

QUESTION | **Who made this video and for what purpose?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | The video was written and produced by peace activist Ed Griffin-Nolan to educate and influence public opinion.

QUESTION | **What important information is left out of the video?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | The reasons behind the war, U.N. support for the war, Saddam Hussein's cruelty, government arguments as to the reasons for censoring the press.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

“Propaganda” is defined as biased or one-sided communication intended to manipulate public opinion towards a certain point of view. Do you think this video is propaganda? Why or why not?

Is it true that the government was trying to persuade the public to support the war? Why do you think so?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Immediately after the war, the Center for the Study of Communication at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst released a study titled “The Gulf War: A Study of the Media, Public Opinion and Public Knowledge.” The study concluded that “the more TV people watched, the less they knew...Despite months of coverage, most people do not know basic facts about the political situation in the Middle East, or about recent U.S. policy toward Iraq... People who generally watch a lot of television were substantially more likely to ‘strongly’ support the use of force against Iraq...Our study revealed a strong correlation between knowledge and opposition to the war. The more people know, in other words, the less likely they were to support the war policy” (Rampton and Stauber 175).

CONNECTIONS

Teach students the history of the Gulf War (and the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan) through media decoding of Newsweek covers using Project Look Sharp’s Media Construction of War, which includes the complete video Lines in the Sand.

REFERENCES

Griffin-Nolan, Ed, Laura Marini, and Peter Wirth. Lines in the Sand. Griffin-Wirth Associates. 1991.

Rampton, Sheldon and John Stauber. Weapons of Mass Deception. New York: Penguin, 2003.

NAME

DATE

DIRECTIONS

Answer the questions below while watching the video. Give evidence for your answers.

What strategies did the U.S. government and military use to influence media coverage during the Gulf War of 1991?

What primary messages are the filmmakers trying to convey about media coverage of the war?

What techniques do the filmmakers use to communicate that message?