

“CELEBRATION” OR “PROTEST”

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn about the holy Shiah Mosque of Ali in Najaf
- Students will recognize the choices and resulting bias that go into constructing a TV news story.
- Students will discuss issues of credibility and accuracy and the best way to determine truth.
- Students will be encouraged to use diverse and multiple sources when following the news.

VOCABULARY & CONCEPTS

Ali Mosque	<i>Fedayeen</i>	Imam Hussein	martyr
<i>ayatollah</i>	holy cities	Karbala	Muhammad
caliphs	Imam Ali	Sunni and Shiah split	Najaf

MEDIUM

Video clips from Deutsche Welle (German) and CBS News news reports from April 4, 2003 (Total running time: 4 min, 41 sec)



MATERIALS NEEDED

- Unit 3, Lesson 6 video clips from DVD or Web site

TIME

40 minutes

LESSON STEPS

1. Present *Introduction to the Lesson* (pg. 2) to the class.
2. Play the first video clip from Deutsche Welle TV.
3. Pause the video to lead discussion using the *Questions, Suggested Answers and Evidence* (pg. 2-3) as a guide.
4. Play the second video clip from CBS News.
5. Pause the video and lead a discussion using the *Questions, Suggested Answers and Evidence* (pg. 3-5) as a guide.
6. Present *Additional Information* (pg. 6) about Najaf.
7. Lead a discussion about utilizing multiple media sources using *Further Questions* (pg. 5).

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

The Sunni and Shiah branches of Islam split in the 7th century over who would succeed Muhammad as the leader of all Muslims. The dominant branch of Islam, the Sunnis, looked to the appointed Caliphs, while the Shiah followed the descendents of Muhammad and Ali, Muhammad’s son-in-law. Imam Ali was killed in 661 and buried in Najaf, Iraq at the site of today’s Ali Mosque. The term *Shiah* comes from the Arabic word for Party (shi) of Ali. Ali’s son, Hussein, was also killed in Karbala, Iraq just 20 years after his father. Ali and Hussein are the most venerated Shiah martyrs, and Karbala and Najaf have become holy cities for Shiah worldwide. Islamic scholars, including the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Sistani of Iraq, lived in Najaf. Najaf, 100 miles south of Baghdad, is also the site of one of the world’s largest cemeteries, as many Shiah long to be buried near their prophets.

In late March of 2003, advancing U.S. troops approached Najaf on their way to the final assault on Baghdad. Understanding the sacred nature of the city, U.S. commanders had hoped to avoid military action there. Najaf was on a key supply route, however, and reports suggested that the cemetery near the Imam Ali Mosque was being used as a staging site for Iraqi troops. In addition, there had been a recent car bomb attack that killed five Marines on the road to Najaf by the *fedayeen*, paramilitary fighters loyal to Saddam Hussein (Bodansky 210). In early April, U.S. air strikes hit targets just a half-mile from the Ali Mosque (Purdum 183). The possibility for a tragic confrontation at the site of one of the holiest shrines of Islam was very real on April 4, 2003, the day of the news reports you are about to see.

Most people around the world learn about war from television coverage. That coverage differs from station to station and country to country. In Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, all TV news was controlled by the government and therefore reflected Saddam Hussein’s ideas about the world. This is not true in the U.S., where viewers with access to cable, satellite or Internet news can sample from many points of view. Some channels tend to support the U.S. government view, while others may be more critical.

You will now see two brief clips from televised news coverage of an incident in Najaf on April 4, 2003 during the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The first report is from a German news channel, Deutsche Welle. The second report, on the same incident, is from CBS News. Pay close attention to the words and images used by each reporter to convey information about the war.

→ **Play** the first video clip from Deutsche Welle.

→ **Pause** the video after the first clip and lead the class in decoding using the *Questions, Suggested Answers, and Evidence* below.

QUESTION	What does the coverage suggest about the truth of reports regarding the U.S. advance on Baghdad?
SUGGESTED ANSWER	The coverage suggests that it is impossible to know the truth of reports.
EVIDENCE	“Iraqi officials refute the Anglo-American claims of advances and it remains difficult to independently confirm any of the reports coming from Baghdad and where combat activity is located. That applies as well to conflicting claims regarding the battle in Najaf.”

QUESTION | **What impression do you get about how Iraqis feel about the presence of U.S. troops?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | The report suggests that the Iraqis are unhappy about the U.S. presence.

EVIDENCE | “These outraged Iraqis are not protesting for Saddam Hussein, they are demonstrating against U.S. soldiers approaching their holy temple,” with footage of angry Iraqis in the streets. The banner across the bottom of the screen reads “Eyewitnesses say dozens killed and injured by U.S. shelling,” suggesting more reasons for anger towards the U.S.

QUESTION | **How does the reporter explain the resolution to the confrontation in Najaf?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | The reporter explains that the imam calmed the angry protestors and that U.S. troops pulled out, fearing a revolt among the Shiite population.

EVIDENCE | “The situation calms somewhat after the imam intervenes,” with footage of an imam standing between angry protestors. “ U.S. troops decide to pull back, fearing a revolt among the town’s Shiites,” with footage of U.S. troops backing away.

→ **Play** the second video clip from [CBS News](#).

→ **Stop** the video after the second clip and lead the class in decoding using the *Questions, Answers, and Evidence* below.

QUESTION | **What does the coverage suggest about the truth of reports regarding the U.S. advance on Baghdad?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | The coverage suggests that this news is accurate and up to date.

EVIDENCE | Anchor says, “Now we take you to the battlefield. CBS News war reporter Jim Axelrod reports from the very tip of the spear.” Accompanying footage shows a map of Iraq with the reporter’s photo on top, suggesting that he is there. Axelrod says, “We can confirm the troops have taken at least part of the airport,” with his image in helmet and military clothing followed by images of tanks rolling along a road.

QUESTION | **What impression do you get about how Iraqis feel about the presence of U.S. troops?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | The report suggests that the Iraqis are glad for the U.S. presence.

EVIDENCE | “Look at how they were met...We heard people saying, ‘Welcome, hello Mr. Bush’ “Crowds celebrated outside the tomb of Ali Mosque.” Footage shows crowds waving and cheering and a U.S. vehicle throwing a frisbee into the crowd along the roadside and crowds cheering in Najaf.

QUESTION | **How does the reporter explain the resolution to the confrontation in Najaf?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | The report suggests that the U.S. commanding officer defuses the situation, which is described as an honest misunderstanding arising from the past actions of Sadaam Hussein’s fedayeen.

EVIDENCE | “Commander Chris Hughes now faced a volatile stand off...To defuse a crisis, Hughes orders his troops out.” Footage shows Hughes giving instructions to U.S. troops to withdraw peacefully. “The imam asked for U.S. protection...but the crowds mistook that as U.S. troops about to storm the Mosque or target the cleric...the idea of soldiers going into their holy place, that’s what the *fedayeen* had done all these years.” Footage shows U.S. troops marching peacefully on the street alongside Iraqis.

QUESTION	Which of these two reports is the truth?
SUGGESTED ANSWER	Neither are completely true, and both have elements of truth.
EVIDENCE	<p>Neither report contains “the whole truth,” since the information that the reporters offer is necessarily limited by whom they can interview about the incident. In addition, reporters and news editors have their own judgments about what to include and not to include in a report. Note that some of the same video clips are used in both reports, but with very different voiceover scripts that give difference impressions of the event. Someone – probably an editor – wrote the voiceover script from a particular point of view. Perhaps the German report is more skeptical of “Anglo-American claims of advances” because their reporters are not part of the reporting pool, or because the German government opposed the war.</p> <p>The U.S. report infers that this is a true report. This may be because their reporters are stationed in Iraq, though the information that they get comes with military restrictions as to what they can and cannot see and report on.</p> <p>Both reports may include portions of the truth. An imam probably did help to defuse the conflict, as did the U.S. commander. Both truths make up a part of a larger, much more complex series of judgments and reflections that, taken together, are a part of the “whole truth.”</p>

QUESTION	How could one discover the truth about what happened with the confrontation in Najaf?
SUGGESTED ANSWER	By searching for reports by eyewitnesses to the entire incident. Interviews with the imam, participants in the crowd, other observers, the U.S. commander or U.S. troops could help one to develop a broader picture of what happened. One way to find such information would be to look on the Internet for other news reports on this same incident, from additional sources elsewhere in the Middle East and beyond. In any such search, however, it is unlikely that many news channels would report on this relatively minor incident in the course of a war that had many battlefronts.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Why is it important to have multiple sources of information when trying to sort out what is true?

What additional sources are available if one chooses to look deeply into a particular news story about the Middle East? About the United States? About your own city or town?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Najaf has become a center of protest several times in recent history. In February 1977, Shiite demonstrations erupted there against Saddam Hussein’s rule during ceremonies commemorating the martyrdom of Ali’s son, Hussein. The army arrested thousands of demonstrators and killed and wounded many others during the fighting. Afterwards, a special court was set up by Saddam Hussein to try participants in the demonstrations, including several *ulama*, professional although unofficial clergy of Shiah Islam (Esposito 325). Saddam Hussein sentenced eight *ulama* to death and 15 to life imprisonment (Karsh and Rautsi 142). Similar demonstrations against Saddam occurred in Najaf in 1979, when Ayatollah Khomeini took power in Iran, and in 1991 during the Persian Gulf War.

Najaf became a center of protest against U.S. occupation beginning in August 2003, when a car bomb at the Imam Ali Shrine killed more than 80 people, including Shiah leader Ayatollah Muhammad Baker al-Haqim. Najaf was home to many Mehdi Army supporters of Moqtada al-Sadr, the son of revered Shiah imam Mohammed Sadiq Sadr, who was imprisoned and killed by Saddam Hussein. Moqtada al-Sadr’s opposition to foreign troops in Iraq led to a major confrontation with U.S. forces in Najaf in April 2004. The Iraqi President, Ghaze al-Yawar, arranged a ceasefire at that time, in order to protect the sacred city.

Shiites from around the world travel to Najaf to bury their dead in the huge “City of the Dead” cemetery so as to end life close to Imam Ali. During Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship, many Shiite dissidents in exile were prevented from returning to Iraq to bury their relatives (Braude 18).

CONNECTIONS

Compare how truth is determined in a U.S. presidential campaign by looking at these videos from Project Look Sharp’s Media Construction of Presidential Campaigns: George H.W. Bush’s view of Arkansas’ economy under Bill Clinton’s governorship with his 1992 campaign ad “Arkansas 2,” and Clinton’s response with “Steady.”

Compare Newsweek’s coverage of the Vietnam War with its coverage of the first Gulf War and the War in Iraq using Project Look Sharp’s Media Construction of War.

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