

FREEDOM FIGHTERS OR TERRORISTS

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will review Afghanistan's history from 1978-2003.
- Students will understand the shifting historical contexts for the U.S. views of the mujahidin, during the Cold War and after 9/11.
- Students will recognize the power of words to bias impressions.
- Students will analyze credibility, bias and truth in documentary film.

VOCABULARY & CONCEPTS

9/11	covert operation	Mullah Omar	Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
al-Qaeda	historical context	Osama bin Laden	Taliban
blowback	jihad	Operation Enduring Freedom	stingers
CIA	madrassas	Pushtun	war on terrorism
Cold War	mujahidin		

MEDIUM

Video clips from two documentary films: The Battle for Afghanistan and Operation Enduring Freedom: America Fights Back (Total running time: 9 min, 37 sec)



MATERIALS NEEDED

- Unit 4, Lesson 4 documentary video clips from DVD or Web site
- *Student Worksheet* (pg. 6-7) for analyzing clips (one per student)
- *Teacher Answer Sheet* (pg. 8-10) for decoding web pages

TIME

40 minutes

LESSON STEPS

1. Present *Introduction to the Lesson* (pg. 2-3) to the class.
2. Distribute *Student Worksheet* for logging the clips.
3. Play the video clips while students log their answers.
4. Lead students through a decoding of the video clips using *Teacher Answer Sheet*.
5. Discuss bias in documentary films using *Further Questions* (pg. 3) and *Additional Information* (pg. 3-4).

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

Who are your country's enemies? Who are your country's friends? The answers to these questions can shift dramatically over time. Former enemies can become friends and former friends can become enemies. In this lesson you will see how superpower politics have caused a shift in alliances between the United States and Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan between the time of the Cold War and the time of the "War on Terror."

In 1979 Islamic fundamentalist students in Iran were holding United States' citizens hostage. At the same time the U.S.'s superpower enemy, the Soviet Union, had invaded its southern neighbor, Afghanistan, in order to prevent the fall of the Afghan communist government. The Mujahidin, Afghan Muslim fighters engaged in a jihad, or holy struggle, waged a ten-year war against Soviet occupation. The Mujahidin's resistance led to the withdrawal of Soviet troops in February. During the ten years of the Soviet War in Afghanistan the U.S. CIA sent military aid to the Mujahidin who President Carter named "freedom fighters" against Soviet aggression. At first the U.S. aid funded covert operations but later, under President Reagan, the aid became official and the U.S. began to sell anti-aircraft Stinger missiles that were used to shoot down Soviet warplanes.

There were many far-reaching repercussions of the Soviet War in Afghanistan and the U.S. support for the Mujahidin, the enemy of its enemy. Over 1.3 million Afghans died in the war, as did over 13,000 Soviet soldiers. One third of Afghanistan's population, about 5.5 million people, were forced to flee the country and another 2 million to leave their homes (Jalali and Grau xviii). In addition, the arms and training that the U.S. gave to the Muslim militants who were fighting the Soviets eventually were used to enable subsequent attacks on the U.S. by al-Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda is an international organization of Islamic fundamentalist fighters led by Osama Bin Laden. Its intention is to disrupt the U.S. and other Western nations through terrorist attacks on civilian populations such as the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and the Madrid and London bombings. In the late 1990s and early years of the new century al-Qaeda was given shelter by the Taliban, the government of Afghanistan.

The Taliban, which means "students," grew out of the Afghanistan madrassas or Islamic religious schools. They began in the years after the Soviet withdrawal, when the various factions of the Mujahidin fought for control of Afghanistan. Pakistan helped to support the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban led by Mullah Omar who had fought against the Soviets as had bin Laden. After the 9/11 attacks President George W Bush initiated the "War on Terror" which began with "Operation Enduring Freedom," the October 2001 attack on the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the Afghanistan hills along the Pakistani border.

In this lesson you will see excerpts from two documentary films about Muslim fighters in Afghanistan. The first film, made by independent filmmaker Mike Hoover, was broadcast in 1987 as a CBS Special Report called "The Battle For Afghanistan." It was narrated by CBS news anchor, Dan Rather. It focuses on the Mujahidin war against Soviet occupation. The second film was made fifteen years later, after 9/11. It is introduced by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and is marketed as "Produced with the cooperation of the United States Department of Defense." It is entitled "Operation Enduring Freedom: America Fights Back" and it focuses on the rise of al-Qaeda and the Taliban and the US "War on Terror" in Afghanistan.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION (CONTINUED)

Please remember that these brief excerpts are not meant to show the full story as told in the much longer documentaries from which they are taken. The sections used in this lesson are for the purpose of examining how the media portrays strategic alliances which changed over time between the United States and the militant Muslim fighters of Afghanistan. The second film excerpt is composed of two brief sections from the early part of the documentary. The separate sections are marked by a dark screen in between.

- **Distribute** the *Student Worksheets* - one per student.
- **Play** the film clips, pausing in between for students to write their answers. Have students work individually or in pairs to log each film.
- **Lead** discussion of the clips using the *Teacher Answer Sheet*.
- **Have** students give specific evidence from each clip to back up their answers.
- **Follow** decoding with a more open-ended discussion of credibility and bias in documentary films using *Further Questions* and *Additional Information*.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Do you think the Mujahidin were freedom fighters or terrorists in their fight against the Soviets? Give reasons to justify your answers.

Some critics charged Dan Rather and CBS as being biased in favor of the Mujahidin cause. How can you know whether a news source might be biased in favor of a particular government or organizational point of view?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

According to Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, CIA aid to the Mujahidin began in July 1979, nearly six months before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In 1998 he told a French interviewer, "We didn't push the Russians to intervene, but we consciously increased the probability that they would do so....This secret operation was an excellent idea. Its effect was to draw the Russians into the Afghan trap. You want me to regret that?" (Cooley 19).

John Cooley, author of *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism*, suggests that the CIA regarded Osama bin Laden as a valuable ally in the 1980s. He writes:

Delighted by his impeccable Saudi credentials, the CIA gave Usama (sic) free rein in Afghanistan, as did Pakistan's intelligence generals. They looked with a benign eye on a buildup of Sunni Muslim sectarian power in South Asia to counter the influence of Iranian Shi'ism of the Khomeini variety. Bin Laden proved himself a brave foot soldier by joining in fighting, in which he was wounded, against the Russians near Jalalabad. (Cooley 222)

Cooley then explains: "The CIA seems to have definitively turned against its former partner in 1995 and 1996, after the attacks on American personnel at Riyadh and Khobar" (224).

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION (continued)

Ahmed Rashid in his book Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia suggests: Between 1994 and 1996 the USA supported the Taliban politically through its allies Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, essentially because Washington viewed the Taliban as anti-Iranian, anti-Shia (sic) and pro-Western. The USA conveniently ignored the Taliban's own fundamentalist agenda, its suppression of women and the consternation they created in Central Asia largely because Washington was not interested in the larger picture. (176)

It was during this period that Under-Secretary of State Robin Rachel held friendly meetings with the Taliban while the U.S. oil company UNOCAL was negotiating to build an oil pipeline through Afghanistan to Pakistan (Ewans 184). By 1998 and 1999 the U.S. government had begun to view the Taliban as a problem due to feminist concerns about the Taliban's mistreatment of women, its refusal to endorse the UNOCAL pipeline and its continued support for bin Laden (Rashid 176).

Mike Hoover's filming for the documentary "The Battle For Afghanistan" helped CBS to win the prestigious Columbia/duPont Silver Award for its coverage of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Shortly thereafter, however, Mike Hoover, Dan Rather and CBS were charged with major ethical violations in a New York Post story entitled "Dan Rather Aired Fake Afghan Footage" (Lohbeck 219). The story claimed that Hoover staged fake battle scenes with actors in Pakistan, that a Pakistani Air Force jet on a training mission was said to be "a Soviet jet bombing Afghan villages" and that Hoover encouraged the Mujahidin to exaggerate their victories (Fair. Extra!

<http://www.fair.org/extra/8910/cbs-afghan.html>). Both Mike Hoover and Dan Rather denied these charges. Kurt Lohbeck, another filmmaker providing Afghanistan war footage for CBS in his book, Holy War, Unholy Victory: Eyewitness to the CIA's Secret War in Afghanistan claimed that the charges against Hoover were "dredged up (by) several people with axes to grind" (Lohbeck 219).

The criticism of CBS's coverage of the Soviet war in Afghanistan went deeper than particular concerns about the credibility of Hoover's story. Richard Cohen, a former senior foreign news producer at CBS, claimed that "Afghanistan was Rather's obsession." Providing evidence of this allegation a Congressional Research Service report found that CBS devoted far more coverage to Afghanistan than the other networks in 1986, with CBS devoting 55.2 minutes, to NBC's 28.8 and ABC's 19.7.

The organization FAIR charged the following:

CBS coverage often resembled partisan war propaganda more than reporting. Rather's role appeared to be more that of a cheerleader than a journalist. Issues behind the conflict (such as Islamic fundamentalism and the role of woman) were secondary to the 'shoot-em-up' war footage. Was CBS so hungry for footage of mujahedeen battle successes that it failed to closely scrutinize it? Did CBS make itself a tool of the guerrillas' propaganda? (Fair. Extra! <http://www.fair.org/extra/8910/cbs-afghan.html>)

Arthur Unger writing for the Christian Science Monitor explored the larger issues of "blowback" in this way: "The documentary tends to gloss over the fact that, if victorious, this holy war could result in another revolutionary fundamentalist Islamic state, perhaps even aligned with Iran...The strength of the documentary lies in the 'entertainment value' of its unique guerrilla battle footage rather than any insightful analysis" (Fair. Extra! <http://www.fair.org/extra/8910/cbs-afghan.html>).

CONNECTIONS

Compare how two U.S. presidential candidates explore the same issue from different perspectives with Project Look Sharp's Media Construction of Presidential Campaigns: George H.W. Bush's "Arkansas 2" TV commercial and Bill Clinton's "Steady" commercial.

Teach the history of the War in Afghanistan using Project Look Sharp's Media Construction of War. Through comparing Newsweek's coverage of Afghanistan with coverage of the 1991 Gulf War and the War in Vietnam, students analyze the historical context of media coverage.

REFERENCES

The Battle for Afghanistan. Documentary. Nar. Dan Rather. Dir. Mike Hoover. CBS. August 29, 1987.

Cooley, John. Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism. Sterling: Pluto Press, 1999.

Ewans, Martin. Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics. New York: Harper Collins, 2002.

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Jalali, Ali Ahmad and Lester W. Grau. Afghan Guerrilla Warfare : In the Words of the Mujahideen Fighters. St. Paul: MBI Publishing Co., 2001.

Lohbeck, Kurt. Holy War, Unholy Victory: Eyewitness to the CIA's Secret War in Afghanistan. Washington DC: Wegnery Gateway, 1993.

Operation Enduring Freedom: America Fights Back. Documentary. Intro. By Donald Rumsfeld. Prod. with cooperation of United States Department of Defense. 2002.

Rashid, Ahmed. Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

NAME

DATE

DIRECTIONS

Read over these questions below before watching the short video clips. You should take notes during the video clips, and you will be given a brief time to write your answers after the clips.



The Battle for Afghanistan (1987)

1. What is the main message about the Islamic fundamentalist fighters and the Mujahidin? Give evidence to support your answer.

2. What are the messages about the U.S. government relationship to the Mujahidin?

3. What techniques do the filmmakers use to suggest that their message is credible?



**Operation Enduring Freedom:
American Fights Back (2002)**

1. What is the main message about the Islamic fundamentalist fighters, the Taliban and al-Qaeda? Give evidence to support your answer.

2. What is the message about the U.S. government relationship to the Taliban and al-Qaeda?

3. What techniques do the filmmakers use to suggest that their message is credible?

Explain how the historical context of the two films (The Battle of Afghanistan was created during the Cold War and Operation Enduring Freedom was created after 9/11) influenced the point of view of each film.



The Battle for Afghanistan (1987)

1. What is the main message about the Islamic fundamentalist fighters and the Mujahidin? Give evidence to support your answer.

They are devoted Islamic believers who are involved in a noble fight for freedom against Soviet domination.

Evidence: The Afghani doctor says “We are fighting for our freedom...We are fighting for the right cause...God is on our side, that is why we have been able to continue the war for eight years against the Soviets.” The narrator describes the fighters as “like barons or earls,” English titles of honor. The images show the Mujahidin in prayer, marching triumphantly with a flag, men smiling and embracing and meeting peacefully together.

2. What are the messages about the U.S. government relationship to the Mujahidin?

1) The U.S. has provided military aid to the Mujahidin for years, including half a billion dollars of foreign aid from the U.S. congress. 2) The Soviets claim that U.S. aid has funneled aid through China, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. 3) The U.S. hesitated to send anti-aircraft Stinger missiles for fear that they might be used against commercial U.S. aircraft.

3. What techniques do the filmmakers use to suggest that their message is credible?

The film is shot on location from behind the front lines in Afghanistan with the Mujahidin. It includes an interview with a Mujahidin doctor. The narrator is CBS anchorman Dan Rather, whose voice will be associated with “credible news.”



Operation Enduring Freedom: American Fights Back (2002)

1. What is the main message about the Islamic fundamentalist fighters, the Taliban and al-Qaeda? Give evidence to support your answer.

They are terrorists devoted to attacking the West. They are brutal tyrants. They are fundamentalist zealots.

Evidence:

Terrorists: Narrator describes al-Qaeda as “architects of the global war on America,” “trained for dispatch to enemy countries on missions of terror.” Images show al-Qaeda training camps with armed recruits shooting guns, jumping through flaming hoops and firing rocket launchers.

Tyrants: Narrator describes the Taliban as a “brutal tyranny” which outlawed music, destroyed museums and religious sites, and imposed “inhuman restrictions on women who were prohibited from schooling.” Images show Taliban leaders emerging from behind closed doors, women in full-length veils and giant Buddha statues being dynamited.

Fundamentalist zealots: Narrator refers to “Islamic radicalism,” “religious fanaticism,” “ultra-conservative Islamic theocracy,” “Islamic Puritanism,” “extreme fundamentalist ideology,” “blinded by hatred,” “terrorist mission in keeping with God’s will.” Images show mullahs in religious garb with guns, Muslims in prayer, students in religious schools pumping fists and chanting.

2. What is the message about the U.S. government relationship to the Taliban and al-Qaeda?

The U.S.’ enemies at the time of the film are the Taliban and al-Qaeda, whose leaders once fought the Soviets, as had the U.S.

Evidence: The U.S. supported the Mujahidin against the Soviets which resulted in blowback, the U.S. becoming “victim to the religious fanaticism it had unleashed.”

The Taliban is “led by Mullar Omar, a one-eyed former fighter against the Soviets” who is shown in profile between the cross hairs of a rifle scope. Osama bin Laden, leader of al-Qaeda, is said to have “found a cause recruiting young Arabs to fight communism in Afghanistan.” He then “established al-Qaeda as a global network of revolutionaries dedicated to fighting Muslim, pro-West governments and the Western world led by America.” Bin Laden is shown joyfully recounting his leadership role in planning the 9/11 attacks.

3. What techniques do the filmmakers use to suggest that their message is credible?

They show Bin Laden and Taliban leaders and footage of al-Qaeda training camps and schools. This suggests that the filmmakers are using the enemy’s own words and actions to affirm their narrative. The film is introduced by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and is said to be produced with the cooperation of the United States Department of Defense, suggesting that the U.S. government endorses the film’s contents.

Explain how the historical context of the two films (The Battle of Afghanistan was created during the Cold War and Operation Enduring Freedom was created after 9/11) influenced the point of view of each film.

The Battle for Afghanistan (1987) takes a much more positive view of the mujahidin as religiously inspired freedom fighters waging a holy war against the Soviets. The images and interview are supportive of the mujahidin cause. The narrator (Dan Rather) acknowledges fears that the mujahidin could turn against their U.S. benefactors but the primary focus in the film (and in the U.S. government at the time) was defeating the Soviets. After all, this was the Cold War.

Operation Enduring Freedom, likewise, mentions that the U.S. aided the mujahidin during the anti-Soviet war, but the primary focus here is the fanatical, oppressive, anti-American nature of the Jihadists. The narration and imagery stresses the craziness, brutality and immorality of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. With the end of the Cold war, but particularly after the attacks of September 11th, al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and militant Muslim fundamentalists became the new evil.

It is not at all surprising that the two films would present the mujahidin's struggle against the Soviets and Osama bin Laden's brand of Islamic holy war in very different light. Our view of history shifts as history shifts our perspectives. These two clips show how "freedom fighters" can become "terrorists" depending upon one's historical point of view.