Foreign Policy Research Institute

FOOTNOTES

Vol. 16, No. 11 | *The Newsletter of FPRI's Wachman Center* | December 2011

WHAT OUR STUDENTS – AND OUR POLITICAL LEADERS – DON'T KNOW ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST

By Adam Garfinkle

Adam Garfinkle is Editor of The American Interest magazine and a member of FPRI's Board of Advisors. This essay is based on his talk to FPRI's History Institute for Teachers on "Teaching the Middle East: Between Authoritarianism and Reform," held October 15-16, 2011. Videofiles from the conference can be accessed here: http://www.fpri.org/education/1110middleeast/

My topic tonight is how we should teach our children, here in the United States, about the Middle East. I was asked to give this little talk in part because I wrote two pieces for FPRI in the wake of September 11, 2001. The first, written just a few days after the event, was a kind of summation of what had just happened that focused on President Bush's plea for moral clarity, which featured in the President's first major address after the attacks. I had to point out that achieving moral clarity, at least so far as policy was concerned, was not going to be easy because at least two and probably three countries with which the United States was technically allied—namely Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Egypt—were the countries whose policies were most responsible for what happened on September 11. Yet of course we had to go to war not with any of them, but with Afghanistan, or rather the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, because that was the prudent thing to do at the time.

The other piece I wrote just short of a year later, dated September 2002, and it was called "What Our Children Should Learn about 9/11." In that piece, I made just four simple points. I tried to keep it simple because I was under the influence of George Orwell, who once said, in the fall of 1939 to be specific, that in certain destabilized times it is the duty of honest men to simply restate the obvious. That's all I tried to do.

My first point was that our children should know the facts. My second point was that, once they had a grounding in the facts, our children should not abjure moral judgment. My third point was that our children should learn to make both analytical and moral distinctions. And last, my fourth point was that our children must learn to live with uncertainty, and specifically to understand the difference between living *in* fear and living *with* fear. That's a subtle distinction in language, but a huge distinction in reality, and in regard to the implications for policy.

Ten years have passed since 9/11 and more than nine years have passed since I wrote that piece. I would not change a word had I to write it over again, but I have learned plenty over the past decade. I have therefore found the exercise of reflecting on this short essay quite illuminating, if also a little disheartening. Without repeating that little essay to you now, I want to go back over each of the four points, especially the first one, in order to reflect on what the past decade has wrought.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BASIC FACTS

How have we done in this country over the past decade in teaching our children the facts, not just about 9/11 but about the Middle East as a whole? I don't know the answer to that question, which might actually be a subject open to empirical research. But my anecdotal experience is that we have done terribly. Not only have we not taught our children very much factually about this region—and by that I mean basic geographical, ethno-linguistic, historical, anthropological and political facts—but our political class in this country seems to demonstrate a learning curve that is virtually flat, as well.

It is not that difficult to find young people who do not know, for example, that Iran is not an Arab country, what an Arab is, or even what kind of term the word "Arab" is. A common error is to assert that an Arab is a Muslim, but a person who asserts that has not been taught, or has failed to learn, the difference between a linguistic category, an ethnographic description, and a

religion. If you can't distinguish these elemental differences in the Middle East, you cannot understand anything about the place. You could not even make hide nor hair out of a serious newspaper article about the Middle East.

As I said earlier, the learning curve of the American political class doesn't show a better result, but I don't think there is a direct connection between what our students don't know and what our leaders don't know. Indeed, I think the connection is inverse, if there can be such a thing. I think our students don't care enough, while our leaders have cared too much and in all the wrong ways. But the result, ironically enough, is pretty similar.

As far as our political class goes, I think one reason tracks closely with what I wrote in September 2002, which was merely to point out that emotionally evocative events inevitably produce energetic expression, but such expression in the absence of basic information is, aside from the catharsis it may provide, not helpful or edifying. When we get emotional, we think—if we may call it that—with different parts of our brain than we use when we are not emotional. I find it very difficult to otherwise explain how the Bush administration could bestir itself to invade Iraq without giving even remotely serious thought to what the geostrategic implications for the region would be of displacing a relatively strong, Sunni-led government with a weakened Shiite-led one. You don't have to be the strategic studies equivalent of a proverbial rocket scientist to have anticipated that Iran might stand to be the big winner from the collapse and reorientation of the Iraqi state. As far as I know, and I was in this administration at a middling level, no one among America's senior decision-makers even asked this question.

No one asked, either, what the broader regional effects would be of a Shiite-dominated government—and a fairly religious one, at that—in Baghdad in place of a Sunni one. Even before the war began anyone who understood Middle Eastern history could have told you that this would not be a second- or third-order consequence of the war, but a first-order one. Again, as far as I know, this question never even once came up before March 2003.

And now we learn that the current Iraqi government is helping the Assad regime in Damascus, which is not exactly our understanding of gratitude for our having freed Iraq from the bloody hand of the Baath Party. But the Shiite government in Baghdad fears Sunni encirclement just as Sunnis have feared Shiite encirclement, and so there is a natural tendency, all else equal, for the Shia who dominate the government in Baghdad to see the Alawis running Syria as preferable to possibly religiously intense Sunnis who might take their place. Not that the upheavals in Syria were predictable four or five years ago, but had someone posited those upheavals it would have been easy to predict the attitude of a Shiite dominated government in Baghdad toward Syria.

Some of you may remember that a clever journalist (Jeff Stein, a *Congressional Quarterly* reporter) in Washington went around two or three years ago asking mid-to high-level officials to tell him the difference between a Sunni and a Shia—this more than a half-dozen years after 9/11. Anyway, not a single person could accurately tell him the difference, and some of the attempts were truly frightening in what they implied about the subject's factual knowledge of the region. A completely flat learning curve a half-dozen years after one of the most epochal events in modern American history: How do we explain that?

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW ABOUT AMERICA, AND WHY IT MATTERS

I think the overarching explanation has a lot more to do with what Americans don't know about America, and about American history, than it does with anything having to do with the Middle East. Americans tend to think that the universalisms we believe in are manifestly and obviously truly best for everyone. The American exceptionalist belief in representative democracy and market capitalism as the basis for the only good society is precisely that—a belief, and it more resembles a matter of faith than a matter of social science or history. How many presidents and other senior officials have you heard say something to the effect that people are the same all over the world, and everyone wants the same things for their children, and other politically ecumenical nonsense like that?

Of course there is a common humanity, and of course we are not fools or primitives to think that there are unshakable moral truths about the world. But we are wrong if we think that these truths are really self-evident to everyone, no matter their culture and background, and we are fools if we believe that our political values are really the default "best practice" of the rest of the planet, whose historical experiences have in the main been very different from our own. Because of this innocent, matter-of-fact Enlightenment universalism, we are demobilized before the task of learning other languages and learning about other cultures. We never bothered to learn anything about the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. Our knowledge at the highest level about Afghanistan today is extremely limited and very late in coming. The same may be said about Iraq. We are just not curious about other cultures because we don't credit the significance, and the dignity, of their differences from us.

Closely related, I think, Americans, like most people, take for granted their own social and cultural predicates and tend to project them onto others without realizing that they are doing so. But Middle Eastern societies and cultures, for historical reasons if not others, really are quite different from our own. For one thing, Middle Easterners certainly do not reflect back toward us our Enlightenment universalisms about the basis sameness of all cultures. So the first thing you need to do, it seems to me, to teach children about a place like the Middle East is to get them to understand, to be self-aware, of the social and cultural predicates they are taking for granted about America.

At some point, there is just no way around describing what patrimonial forms of political organization and authority look like as compared to Weberian forms, because much of the Middle East is organized that way still, and much of the rest of it is at most a generation or two removed. But you can't teach them how Middle Eastern societies are different from American or other Western societies unless you can get them to focus on how American and Western society works first.

However difficult this may be to do, it is part, and not an insignificant part, of the factual architecture that students need in order to understand what goes on in this part of the world. I can just imagine how frustrating it can be to someone trying to teach students about the Middle East when the very vocabulary one needs to distinguish those societies and cultures from our own does not yet exist in the mind of the student. Again, you have to be aware of how your own society works to have a basis for understanding how different societies work, and by and large it's fair to say, I think, that American students when they enter high school are not remotely self- aware of how their own society and culture operate.

ONE GOOD QUESTION IS WORTH MORE THAN 100 MEDIOCRE ANSWERS

This does not exhaust the panoply of reasons for why neither our students nor our political class nor most Americans in general still know practically nothing factual about the Middle East. One of those other reasons concerns basic motivation.

Before you can teach a student anything significant, the student has to be persuaded that there is some good reason to learn it. Unless their curiosity is stimulated, unless they can conceive of some use for what they are learning, you have a serious uphill climb before you. As the late anthropologist Mary Douglas once said, "Information is just not going to rub off on someone who cannot conceive any use for it," and as in most things, she was right. So there you are, trying to take teach kids about the difference between the regions of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania and Fezzan in Libya, because if you don't know those things and you don't know the tribal structures in those areas you can't make any sense at all of what has been going on in Libya over the past six months, but some kid in the third row is asking himself, now how is all of this strange business going to help get me a job, going to help me figure out how to pay for that repair to my carburetor, or going to get me a date with Suzy Q. for the prom, or going to help me persuade my parents that I'm actually learning something useful in high school in these frightening hard economic times because they don't give a damn about Libya either—and like, really, why should they?

So, if it were up to me, my method in trying to excite some interest in the Middle East among your students would be to try to figure out a way to get them to ask questions. The process of formulating and then asking a question presumes a great deal, which is why one good question is worth more than a hundred mediocre answers. Besides, finding a way to get students to express questions helps the teacher know where they are, in their heads. And unless you know that, you cannot bring them closer to what we perhaps are too quick to call knowledge.

OBSTACLES TO LEARNING IN THE CYBER AGE

The question that comes before how we teach our children about the Middle East is how we teach them about anything at a time when they are immersed in a burgeoning cybernetic culture that, whatever its benefits and attractions—and there certainly are plenty—has the potential to disorganize our stock of knowledge in three ways: to imbalance the relationship between information and knowledge; to fragment and discount the uses of time; and to so speed up everything as to make what we like to call thought virtually impossible.

Information is not knowledge, and too much information poured out of a firehose in the absence of any cultivation of a sense of context, or grasp of purpose, does not promote knowledge but frustrates its attainment. The speed with which children move in what one analyst has called continuous semi-attentive multitasking is not conducive to actually thinking about anything. The apparent fear that so many young people have of ever being quiet enough to listen to the narrator in their heads and hear what it is saying, is thoroughly dysfunctional. We have plenty of people in this world who can teach our children, and who can teach us, to be eloquent; but who these days will teach our children to be still?

You are teachers; so you know that native intelligence is not nearly as important to success and intellectual endeavors as the nature of the students' orientation to the subject matter. If a student does not respect the subject matter, does not respect the difficulty of mastering knowledge, has no feel for internal standards of excellence so that a student knows when something is or is not understood up to the level of their maturity, that student will not succeed despite strong and intense native intelligence. I wonder whether the technological environment in which our students are now immersed mitigates against the development of the proper character for learning, and I wonder whether this factor more than balances against the advantages that the new technological environment provides.

I ask my undergraduate students almost every semester to tell me how many times a day they check their e-mail, with those little bells and whistles going off telling you that you have a new e-mail. I ask how many times a day they check Facebook and twitter and the other social networking technologies. And if they are honest, they will answer with fairly large numbers—

forty, fifty, a hundred. And then I tell them that they are involved in a classical Pavlovian conditioning experiment, except that they are the dogs, and the technology is harvesting them. I explain that if you use five hours in a concentrated stretch, it is worth vastly more than five hours chopped into 30 small segments.

I believe that there are significant behavioral consequences, and even some literal neurophysiological consequences, to the immersion we are seeing in mediated images that are all part of the cybernetic revolution. I don't think we understand these very well yet, but in my view there is a more than even chance that this technology, unless its uses are taught carefully, is actually imbecilizing us. People think they're smarter because they can look up facts faster, and have all kinds of information at their fingertips—but I wonder whether the very processes they are coming to depend on are instead making them dumber by the day.

So it may be that your problems as teachers in our high schools are far more basic, and frightening, than teaching kids about the Middle East. But it just goes to show that if children don't understand the difference between information and knowledge, let alone between knowledge and wisdom, that in the face of a challenge, like teaching the Middle East, in which explaining difference, and nuance, and context is absolutely essential, it seems to me that you start at a huge and growing disadvantage, if anything I have said about the technology challenge is even remotely true.

CHILDREN SHOULD NOT BE DISCOURAGED FROM MAKING MORAL JUDGMENTS

Let me move quickly now to the other three points. My second point was about not abjuring judgment. I wrote that "once the facts are in hand, it is possible for children to make moral judgments appropriate to their level of intellectual development." I also said that we are wise to resist the judgmental relativism embedded in anti-foundational postmodernism. And I pointed out that the best analysts of a child's psychological life, people like Robert Coles, tell us that children as young as five or six years old have an understanding of basic fairness, of right and wrong, which show that we are moral beings by nature. And I wrote, "if sophisticated adults don't squelch that understanding, our children might ask to grow into responsible adults in a democratic civilization", and I use the example of the word terrorists or terrorism. It is possible to define those terms objectively and it is possible to bring moral judgment about them, and we should.

If we refute the enormously self-serving conceit embedded in the phrase that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," we can define terrorism the way that both the State Department and the United Nations define it, as the use by non-accountable non-state actors of violence deliberately aimed at civilians. If we take that very sound and consensual definition of terrorism to heart, then we cannot at the same time describe the attack on the USS Cole, or the attack on the Marine barracks in Lebanon back in October 1983, as acts of terrorism. Attacks on uniformed soldiers on the territory of foreign states are not by any definition attacks on innocent civilians. These are acts of war, irregular or guerrilla war, which doesn't mean that they are very nice or fair or anything of the sort—but they are not acts of terrorism.

I am not against trying to train our children in ethics, which, contrary to common usage these days is not a synonym for morality. Ethics is the study of moral behavior, not a synonym for it. It is a branch of philosophy, not religion. But I have to admit that I'm now a little bit leery of unleashing the power of moral judgment in the absence of a sound factual base. I have to admit, too, that I did not think it would be so hard to teach the factual basics of the Middle East when I wrote my little piece nine years ago. Evidently, it is excruciatingly hard.

STUDENTS NEED TO MAKE DISTINCTIONS

Now third, we need to make distinctions, and we need to teach our children how to do that. Given the way the world is, our bias when we teach introductory subjects should be to lean toward distinctions rather than similarities. It is the search for and the awareness of distinctions that best sharpen the mind. But again, if the facts have not been established, then we have to ask ourselves, distinctions between and among what?

Let me give you a fairly simple example what I mean, something that is actually a pre-example for teaching students about the Middle East.

Americans tend to use the word country, the word nation, the word state and the hyphenated term nation-state as though they were synonyms. Of course they aren't. A country is a place, a physical territory, these days usually marked off by political boundaries. A nation is a group of people who for one reason or another think they have enough in common to manage their affairs as though they have a common destiny. And a state is the political apparatus that rules the nation in the country.

A nation–state is a normative term that dates from sometime in the nineteenth century that, anti-imperialist in essence, held that the nation and the state that ruled it should be coterminous. Borders should align with ethnographic occupancies insofar as possible, so that Finns should rule Finns rather than Russians, and Czechs should rule Czechs instead of German-speaking Habsburgs, and so on and on and on.

So last month a student came up to me after class and, with a certain amount of youthful enthusiasm, told me that he had had a terrific summer, that he had driven clear across the nation from coast-to-coast. I told him that he had just confessed to multiple vehicular homicide. He had no idea what I was talking about. He did not get the joke.

If nineteen and twenty-year-old American college students don't know the difference between a country, a nation and a state, how on earth are they, let alone high school students, going to get—assuming for a moment that they even remotely care about it—the difference between a Sunni, a Shia and an Alawi (never mind a Sufi, a Druze and an Ismaili); or the difference between an Arab, a Persian, a Turk, a Berber, or a Pashtun; or the difference between Umayyad, Abbasid, Moghul, Fatimid, Mamluke, Almoravid, Safavid and so on?

Worse, I think that ignorance naturally tends toward conflation. So not knowing basic facts makes discernment and distinctions that much harder to get across. I think we have seen two very disheartening examples of this from the onset of the so-called Arab Spring. The American mass media, especially the electronic media, was both responsible for and a victim of a level of basic ignorance about the Middle East so huge that we still have not repaired it or even much gotten it under control, except by dint of a still unfurling reality that contradicts initial conflations.

Conflation number one: the exit of Hosni Mubarak from the pinnacle of power in Egypt meant that the Egyptian regime had fallen. It did no such thing. It has not fallen yet. What happened was that a dynasty ended because the Egyptian military–bureaucratic regime came to conclude that Mubarak was a net debit to their power and prerogatives.

The truth is that the army in Egypt is more powerful today than it was during the last few years of the Mubarak era because Mubarak's son, Gamal, with his MBA US educated cronies, actually put a charge into the Egyptian economy, threatening the control of the military over very lucrative chunks of it. The opening up of the Egyptian economy also created opportunities for vast corruption, because the Egyptian state had never been institutionalized in terms of rule of law to handle a private market economy, but the Army, having gotten rid of the father, wasted no time getting rid of the son, so that its control today over the economy is greater than ever.

The difference between the Egyptian regime before the end of Mubarak and today is twofold: that the upheavals in *Midan al-Tahrir* have changed expectations on the part of every constituency in Egyptian society as to what government can and ought to do, and so there's a great deal of jockeying around and a certain degree of uncertainty; and that while before Egyptian military officers did not wear their uniforms in public, today they mostly do. The other difference, of course, is that the economy is collapsing.

So it is easy to understand the confusion of Americans as to why there is still violence in Egypt, and why the Army—in the person of Field Marshal Tantawi—gets to make all the important decisions along with the other old cronies like Said Ahmed and Omar Suleiman and the rest. People thought that there had been a revolution, but they didn't know what a revolution actually was. People thought the old regime was gone, but they could not have defined the word regime if their life depended on it. People thought that democracy was right around the corner now that the bad guy had gone away.

Speaking of democracy, we come to the second of the two main conflations. When people saw in this country on their television screens hordes of Egyptians on the street in Cairo and elsewhere demanding the end of the Mubarak era, they naturally assumed that what the crowd wanted most was democracy—procedural democracy, rule of law democracy, just like people in the West have had now for many decades. Many people compared what was happening in Cairo back in January and February with the people power phenomenon in the Philippines some years ago against Ferdinand Marcos, his wife Imelda and all those shoes she had.

Now it is true that among the twittering crowd in the square there were some young people who had such ideals in mind, and that is a real change, largely thanks to the social networking technology that is spreading over the globe. But the vast majority of people in the Square, not to mention those beyond it, just wanted to get rid of the government that had been humiliating them, harassing them, exploiting them, alienating them year after year after year. Egyptians and other Arabs had plenty of reasons to be angry at their governments, very good reasons, for the most part. But to assume that people took to the streets in anger because they wanted a form of democracy they have never experienced, and which few even understand for good historical reasons, is to assume something groundless. Thus did Americans project their own frames of reference onto other people because they did not credit the reality of their cultural and historical differences.

It all comes back to teaching the facts. If you can't find some way to do that, which starts with motivating students want to know these things, you can't expect sound judgment or any real capacity to make distinctions. As I put it in my piece more than nine years ago, "our children should learn that the easy way out is the hardest way in to genuine achievement or wisdom, about 9/11, about the Middle East, or about anything else." That's still true.

STUDENTS NEED TO LEARN TO LIVE WITH FEAR BUT NOT IN FEAR

Finally, the point about learning to live with uncertainty. Nine years ago it was not yet clear that what happened on 9/11 would turn out to have been a sucker punch, a one off, rather than the advent of a world in which "everything had changed." The main point I made back then about uncertainty is that there is a big difference between living in fear and living with fear. I said that our uncertainties, justified at the time, must not demobilize us. If they do, I said, if we succumb to fear, then the terrorists win because the strategy of terrorism is to cause its target to be untrue to its own values and to distort its normal way of life. I wrote that if we do not learn to cope with uncertainty we will do our enemies' work for them.

My greatest disappointment in looking back over the past decade, my greatest sadness, is that we as a government and we as a nation failed to heed this warning. We have stepped in it, big time. We have done our enemies' work for them here at home, even as we have gone around fairly effectively beating them on the head and neck abroad, to the point where Al Qaeda is on life support these days.

We bureaucratized our paranoia. You can see it in how TSA works. You can see it in the ponderous mess that is the Department of Homeland Security. You can see it in the nonsensical and demobilizing announcements you hear on the Washington Metro system on a regular basis. You can see it on the overhead displays around the Washington Beltway and elsewhere that no longer just alert motorists to detours and traffic jams but rather ask them to report suspicious activities.

These manifestations of bureaucratized paranoia do not make us safer. They actually function as a goad to would-be terrorists to attack us because they tell the bad guys just how easy it is to discombobulate and bankrupt the Americans, who don't have the sense to be stoic in the face of terrorist tactics. The fact that we have not been attacked at the level of 9/11 or anything near to it in the past ten years *despite* these incentives just shows how much we exaggerated the threat.

That doesn't mean that there has been anything wrong with going after the bad guys all this time. We'll probably never know the balance between the weakness of our terrorist adversaries and the effectiveness of our efforts, public and otherwise, over the past ten years in the absence of significant follow-on attacks. But it is prudent to err on the side of safety, and, as long as one's efforts are not counterproductive on their own terms, it would have been irresponsible for US government officials not to have pursued them. So I really like the new U.S. Navy bumper sticker I saw the other day, which read, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of all who threaten them." Go Navy.

Finally, one thing I could not have predicted nine or ten years ago is how costly our nearly obsessive focus on terrorism and the wars in the Middle East that followed 9/11 have been in terms of their power of distraction. While all this stuff was going on with terrorism and homeland security and the wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq, and at lower levels of intensity in peripheral regions below the line of political sight most of the time, in places like Yemen, Somalia, and all the way to Mindanao, we—most of us anyway, and here I include myself—were not paying close enough attention to what was going so wrong in our own society and in our own economy. I don't think that the literal money costs of the wars played the main role or anything near to it in our financial and economic meltdown, but the psychic opportunity costs I think have been enormous. That is an observation that still requires more thought, as well as more attention in general.

So, teach our kids the facts, encourage them to exercise their innate moral character, guide them toward making distinctions as opposed to pushing disparate concepts together, and teach them the difference between living in fear and living with fear. All that advice stands up well even after all this time. But in the face of the accumulated evidence, I see now that it's just obviously much harder to do than I used to think.

OF RELATED INTEREST
September 11: Before and After, by Adam Garfinkle, FPRI Wire, October 2001
http://www.fpri.org/fpriwire/0908.200110.garfinkle.sept11.html

What Our Children Should Learn about 9/11/2001, by Adam Garfinkle, FPRI Footnotes, September 2002
http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/0705.200209.garfinkle.childrenlearnabout9112001.html

How We Misunderstand Terrorism, by Adam Garfinkle, FPRI E-Notes, September 11, 2008
http://www.fpri.org/enotes/20080911.garfinkle.wemisunderstandterrorism.html

Teaching about the Middle East at the High School Level, by Adam Garfinkle, FPRI Footnotes, December 1999
http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/0510.199912.garfinkle.teachingmiddleeasthighschool.html

Teaching about Jihadism and the War on Terror, by Barak Mendelsohn, FPRI Footnotes, October 2010
http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/1507.201010.mendelsohn.jihadism.html

Ten Things Students Need to Know about the Origins of Israel and Palestine, by Alan Luxenberg, FPRI Footnotes, 4/08
http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/1304.200804.luxenberg.originsisraelpalestine.html

Notes on Teaching 9/11, by Alan Luxenberg, FPRI Footnotes, September 2011
http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/1609.201109.luxenberg.teaching911.html

Be sure to review the 10-volume series of books for middle and high school students produced by Mason Crest Publishers in cooperation with FPRI on "The Making of the Modern Middle East."
http://www.masoncrest.com/catalog_series.asp?sid=15709391-0DF7

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684
For information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105 or email fpri@fpri.org or visit us at www.fpri.org.