

An EAA Interview with 2012 Franklin R. Buchanan Co-Prize Winners for *The United States in Afghanistan*

The Choices Program



Tanya Waldburger, Andy Blackadar, Sarah Massey (L to R).

*This is our sixteenth consecutive interview with recipients of the AAS Franklin Buchanan Prize. Normally, we publish the interview and accompanying curriculum materials review in the winter issue, but because of our special section, we moved this segment to the fall issue. The 2012 Buchanan Prize winners were Andy Blackadar, Sarah Massey, and Tanya Waldburger, who, along with colleagues at the “The Choices for the 21st Century Education Program,” a national education initiative developed at Brown University’s Watson Institute for International Studies, developed *The United States in Afghanistan*.*

Andy Blackadar is Curriculum Development Director for The Choices Program and a Research Associate at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University. Prior to coming to Choices, Andy taught high school in the US and Brazil. He holds a BA in English from Bates College and an MA in International Affairs from Columbia University. Sarah Massey is a Curriculum Writer with the Choices Program. She holds a BA in Sociology and Economics from Wesleyan University and an MA cum laude in Development Studies from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, South Africa. Tanya Waldburger is the Video and New Media Producer for The Choices Program. Prior to joining Choices, Tanya worked as an Editor and Producer with a New York commercial production house. She holds a BA in Modern Culture and Media from Brown University, and has done additional work at the New York Film Academy.

Lucien: Congratulations on winning the Buchanan Prize for the Choices Afghanistan curriculum unit, and thank you for agreeing to this interview. What are some of the most important things you learned about Afghanistan from creating this unit?

Andy Blackadar: Thanks very much. We are all very pleased with the honor. One of the things I learned from working on this project is that most of us could be better informed about Afghanistan. In early December 2011, there was an interesting article on the *Foreign Policy* website called “Graveyard of Empiricism.” The title is a word play on the oft-repeated trope “The Graveyard of Empires” that has helped shape public discourse on the US role in Afghanistan. The article pointed to the limited knowledge and scholarship about Afghanistan when there is a strong need for informed decision-making and an educated US public.

There are some great scholars doing good work about Afghanistan, and we were fortunate to have guidance from them as we produced the curriculum resources. One of the first scholars to push us to write about Afghanistan was Michael Bhatia, who worked with us here at Brown in 2007. He was deeply passionate about the people and place, and he was committed to furthering his understanding of it. Mike was killed there in March 2008. I often thought of Mike when working on this project.

Sarah Massey: Mike’s work in particular really got us thinking about Taliban fighters as individuals, making choices for themselves within the realities of their own lives. I think that’s a perspective that’s often overlooked—it’s so much easier to view our enemies as ideologues. Understanding why some Afghans have become Taliban fighters and supporters gives a much more nuanced view of this conflict and the Afghans’ needs, desires, concerns, and hopes for the future. It’s an understanding that’s crucial, not only for policymakers, but also for us as a public as we consider the effects of US policy and the way forward from here.

Andy Blackadar: One goal in all of our work is to make high-quality and current scholarship, usually found at the college level, available and accessible to high school teachers and students. We believe that consideration and debate about public policy should be informed by the best information that is available. These curriculum materials reflect this. In addition to the print edition, there are more than forty short videos that answer fundamental questions about Afghanistan available for free on our website. We put an emphasis on the political history and evolution of Afghanistan—the everyday experiences of Afghans. We wanted to avoid characterizing Afghanistan as a “problem to be solved” and to portray it as a modern country with a rich history, filled with people trying to live their daily lives.

Tanya Waldburger: For me, one of the most important things I learned as I was editing the curriculum videos was an understanding of Afghanistan’s history and its impact on the country today. I think many people look at Afghanistan and see a broken, war-torn country and don’t realize that it used to be one of the richest and most influential players in the region. In his videos, Benjamin Hopkins does a wonderful job of taking us through its history and explaining how various external forces—from the British and Russian Empires to the US and Soviet Union during the Cold War—have shaped the Afghanistan of today. This historical context is a vital part of studying modern-day Afghanistan and something that all students and teachers should understand.

Lucien: *The Afghanistan War is, as you know, a controversial international and US political issue; what steps did you take in developing the unit to describe and represent differing points of view about the conflict, both in the US and globally?*

Andy Blackadar: All curriculum units from The Choices Program deal with controversial issues. In general, we try to identify these contested issues in the student readings and then present the arguments that all sides



Screen capture from "Afghanistan's People and History," *The United States in Afghanistan*, chapter 1, Ebook edition, <http://bit.ly/QK3raZ>.

are making. In addition, a central activity in this unit (and all of the materials we produce) is an "Options" role-play activity. Students are asked to present and discuss four options for US policy in Afghanistan. Each of the options is laid out in detail and represents a broad strand of current thought, yet takes a different view on the following questions:

- What role should military force play in Afghanistan?
- What should be the top US policy priority regarding Afghanistan?
- Should the United States negotiate with the Taliban?
- Should the United States use unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or drones to target militants?
- What kind of partnership should the United States have with Pakistan?
- What is the significance of the death of Osama bin Laden?

Students are asked not only what they have learned about Afghanistan's history and peoples but also the implications of their policy positions on the US, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Our goal is to get high school students to consider multiple perspectives on what US policy toward Afghanistan should be.

I think the "Options" role play is a useful pedagogical device that helps students consider the advantages, disadvantages, and trade-offs of different policy positions. Inevitably, teachers assign students to present an option that they might not agree with, but in doing so, the student learns to consider the logic of new points of view. After students finish the role-play activity, they are asked to articulate their own policy positions on Afghanistan.

Sarah Massey: In this curriculum, as in all the materials we produce, we were very careful to make sure that we did not advocate a particular perspective or position. Our goal is to help students make thoughtful, well-informed decisions for themselves. To achieve this, we not only present students with unbiased content but also help equip them with the skills they'll need to be well-informed and engaged citizens, no matter what the topic. These skills include things like recognizing bias in the media, being critical of information they're presented with, being aware and considerate of the views of others, and knowing the kinds of questions to ask and places to look to get the information they need.

Lucien: *If you have received feedback from teachers about your unit, what specific components of the unit are most appealing to educators or students? What components or features of the unit are more difficult to implement in the classroom?*

Andy Blackadar: We've received lots of feedback from teachers. Prior to publication last summer, we had twenty-five teachers come to Brown for a conference on Afghanistan, and we introduced this curriculum unit to them. Teachers have appreciated the "Looking at Afghanistan" activity in particular—in this lesson, students look at forty photographs of present-day Afghanistan. I have also heard many positive comments about "Voices from Afghanistan," a lesson that examines three essays from the Afghan Women Writers Project.

One great challenge that all teachers face is the lack of time. It is challenging to cover all of the material and do all of the activities that we include

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Professor Jennifer Fluri of Dartmouth College addresses high school teachers at the Brown University Choices Program's summer institute on Afghanistan. Source: Tanya Waldburger.



U.S. Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) speaks to high school teachers from around the United States at Brown University Choices Program's summer institute on Afghanistan. Source: Tanya Waldburger.

with our curriculum units. We know that, and we hope that teachers take what is useful to them and use it with their students, whether it be the full panoply of what we provide or a small piece of an activity or reading.

Lucien: *Since the large majority of our readers are American, and many educators will have students whose siblings might be veterans of the Afghanistan conflict, did you consider including differing perspectives of US veterans in the unit? If they are included, how did you configure this content into a lesson or lessons? If you did not include veterans' perspectives on Afghanistan, what factors led you to make this particular decision?*

Andy Blackadar: The experience of US soldiers, contractors, and aid workers in Afghanistan is an important part of the story and will be a critical part of the history of the US role in Afghanistan. In our *Teacher Resource Book*, we remind teachers how important it is to be sensitive to this dynamic when teaching about Afghanistan.

One of the activities in this curriculum unit, "The Costs of War," asks students to consider the many effects of the war. We also produced a great video clip (available on our website) of US Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) talking about the challenges faced by US soldiers who have served in Afghanistan. In addition, we have raised the issue of the experiences of US soldiers in a free lesson we provide on our website and dealt with it extensively in our curriculum on the Iraq War, *A Global Controversy: The US Invasion of Iraq*.

Ultimately, we chose to make the experience of Afghans and Afghan history the focus in the readings. This was done deliberately for a few primary reasons. One is that our curriculum units follow a five-day format, and there is a lack of space. We are forced to make decisions about what to include.

Sarah Massey: In this particular case, we felt that the greatest gap in US knowledge about this topic was in understanding Afghanistan from the perspective of Afghans. For US high school teachers, this is the perspective that they will struggle most to find information about because it is not what is reflected in the national media or in the national dialogue. Knowing that, we decided that was the perspective we should privilege.

Tanya Waldburger: We wanted this diversity of perspectives to come across in the *Scholars Online* videos as well, so we interviewed scholars who had expertise in different aspects of Afghan life. For example, David


Edwards talks about the Taliban in his videos, and Jennifer Fluri gives us insight into the daily lives of ordinary Afghans.

Andy Blackadar: In addition, right now there are about sixty memoirs written by US soldiers who have been in Afghanistan. Good teachers are going to include this kind of information in their classes. ■

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ISBN 978-0-924304-64-4, Pb: 98 pages.
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