

## The United States in Afghanistan

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By Kelly McKee

It is essential for today's youth to acquire a broad set of skills to be active participants in the democratic process, yet teachers are often challenged to find quality teaching materials to facilitate classroom dialogue focused around current global issues. So how can educators teach their students to engage in civic learning activities to develop effective skills for participation in the twenty-first century? As the geopolitical climate continues to shift to Asia now more than ever, there is a pressing need for our youth to work cooperatively with others, develop effective communication skills, and be accepting of multiple points of view to cultivate a democratic mindset. Teaching controversial issues, such as the role of the US in Afghanistan, human rights, or genocide, can present numerous challenges in the classroom. The Choices curriculum, published by the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University, offers educators a practical approach to examine authentic current topics while promoting skills to foster critical thinking, geographic literacy, and global awareness for civic engagement.

The most recent curriculum guide developed by Choices is titled *The United States in Afghanistan*. This resource offers a comprehensive look at the historical development, as well as present-day issues, within this region

of Southwest Asia. Teaching Afghanistan presents numerous problems for educators, mostly because of the lack of content available in traditional textbooks at the secondary school level. Teachers should take into consideration what students in the twenty-first century should learn about Afghanistan. What critical factors are necessary to understand this region of Asia? Many educators would concur that it is necessary to teach their students about Afghanistan for a few basic reasons. One, South and Southwest Asia are important geopolitical locations of both the past and present, relating to the globalization of ideas, culture, and people. Second, the US has been at war in Afghanistan for the past ten years, and it is important to recognize the causes and long-term outcomes of this conflict. Third, the geographic location of Afghanistan is critical in understanding the balance of global security in the near future. Afghanistan borders two nuclear nations, China and Pakistan, and Iran sits on the eastern border. Thus Afghanistan, if for geographical reasons alone, is geopolitically important. There are many other reasons to teach Afghanistan, and this Choices unit offers a range of learning opportunities for students to develop skills and content competencies to be active participants in the global community.


The format of *The United States in Afghanistan* is easily adaptable for both high school and middle school students. Background readings include content about the region from the mid-1500s to the present day. There is a comprehensive section on the physical and cultural geography of Afghanistan that is fundamental for students to grasp to be able to analyze how the history of this region has changed over time. In addition to material on Afghanistan since 9/11, the curriculum readings offer students a breadth of content focused on cultural demographics, pre-twentieth-century history, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Primary source documents are also a vital component of this resource. Students can engage in reading 1979 correspondences between Leonid Brezhnev and Jimmy Carter, in addition to memoirs written by native Afghans when the Taliban claimed rule in the mid-1990s. The Choices website also hosts a series of online video clips, titled "Scholars Online." Professors from Brown, Georgetown, Dartmouth, and Williams answer important questions relating to US policy in Afghanistan today. These questions are often difficult for classroom teachers to address with students; therefore, the "Scholars Online" link of the unit allows for online media to serve as an effective teaching tool when discussing issues of conflict, providing students with multiple perspectives of current issues.

All of the Choices units facilitate the development of teaching deliberation skills to students. *The United States in Afghanistan* unit presents four options to students, who will be called upon to appear before the Committee on Foreign Relations of the US Senate and persuade members that their chosen option is the best policy to address the current role of the US in Afghanistan. The four options for this unit are "Fight and Defeat the Taliban," "Target al-Qaeda," "Promote Security by Supporting Democracy," and "Withdraw Our Troops." Students can actively participate in deliberation activities to share one point of view while being mindful and having a better understanding of the other three options as potential policies. This part of the curriculum is the most fundamental for students because it allows them to engage in authentic discourse focusing on realistic alternatives for promoting democratic values in our changing world. The Choices units engage students in genuine learning opportunities to help them actively participate in the democratic process. ■

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