



# Teaching about 9/11 and Terrorism and Against Islamophobia

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Jeremy Stoddard

I am a Professor in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Wisconsin – Madison and also serve as the Faculty Chair of the secondary teacher preparation MS program. My research career has been focused primarily on trying to answer questions that emerged when I was a middle school teacher – to better understand how interactions with different forms of media help young people to understand (or not) difficult and controversial historical events and contemporary issues. My interest in these questions has led me to develop my own understanding from fields such as media and cultural studies, film studies, learning science, and human-computer interaction. This research also informs my work with teachers and pre-service teachers in our program. Outside of my university life I am usually accompanied by one or both of our rescued pups either outside doing a wide range of activities or in the kitchen.



Published Spring 2021

DOI [10.29173/assert15](https://doi.org/10.29173/assert15)

Pages: 40-47

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## OPEN ACCESS

**Keywords** 9/11, War on Terror, secondary teaching, terrorism, Islamophobia, US Schools

## THE RESEARCH

The research presented here focuses on how the terrorist attacks that occurred in the U.S. on September 11, 2001 (9/11) and the resulting War on Terror (WoT) are included in US social studies curricula and classrooms. The findings here are primarily drawn from a survey of 1047 US secondary school social studies teachers conducted in November 2018 (Stoddard, 2019). These teachers were part of a national random sample of middle and high school teachers who were emailed an invitation to participate in the online survey in November,



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2018. We also conducted follow-up phone interviews with a sub-sample of 30 teachers who participated in the survey. In addition to the data generated in the survey, I also draw here from previous studies conducted with Diana Hess and graduate students from the University of Wisconsin—Madison and William and Mary. This series of studies began in 2003 and has focused on answering questions such as “what is 9/11?” “what is terrorism?” and “what was the US response to 9/11?” (Hess & Stoddard, 2007; Stoddard & Hess, 2016; Stoddard et al., 2011). We asked these questions of curriculum developed for teaching on the first anniversary of the attacks, the first two editions of popular US social studies textbooks published after 2001, and of state social studies academic standards. The 2018 survey represented an opportunity to go beyond analysis of curriculum to attempt to answer the question: What are teachers teaching about 9/11 and the WoT?

The findings presented below utilize both descriptive quantitative analysis from our survey data and the review of standards, as well as qualitative analysis of data from our studies of curriculum and of data collected as part of the survey and follow-up interviews. I use the term “we” throughout these summaries as the survey was informed by the earlier collaborative studies.

## FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our analysis of U.S. curricula, textbooks, and state academic standards identified a number of consistent themes in how 9/11 and the WoT are included (Stoddard & Hess, 2016). These materials consistently include a focus on memorialization, heroism, and the shock of the 9/11 events in the U.S. and world. However, we often found these materials lacking in their inclusion of specific details, context, and the events leading up to and resulting from the attacks (e.g., War on Terror, USA Patriot Act).

Another theme that emerged was that there was little focus on controversies related to pre- or post-9/11 related issues and events. This includes a lack of focus on the evidence justifying the invasion of Iraq, holding combatants at Guantanamo Bay (Cuba), and the role of the U.S. in the Middle East among other areas that may have contributed to the attacks. Other topics, such as the surveillance provisions in the USA Patriot Act are acknowledged in later editions of textbooks and standards – after the Bush administration left office in 2009.

Finally, we found conceptual confusion between the various sources as to what or whom were identified as terrorism or as terrorists—with an almost exclusive use of Middle Eastern or Arab examples of terrorism after 9/11. Prior to 9/11, there was a greater focus on other groups labeled as terrorists (e.g., IRA, Shining Path) as well as US domestic terrorism (e.g., Oklahoma City Bombing). Examples specific to the focus on Muslim-Americans and Islamophobia related to teaching and learning about 9/11 and the War on Terror in these studies are included below.

Our survey was an attempt to understand how teachers engaged their students in these topics. What we found was not surprising: most US teachers we surveyed focused primarily on the 9/11 events on the anniversary of the attacks each year. Their primary goal was to



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memorialize the attacks and share the horrors of the day with their students—students who do not have direct memory of the attacks themselves as they were born after 2001. The most frequently identified strategy was the use of news footage or documentary film footage from the day of the attacks in an attempt to help students understand the shock and horror people in the U.S. and the world felt. Themes such as memorialization, heroism, and nationalism were common.

The emphasis on the victims, heroes, and events of the day meant that the more nuanced aspects of the attacks, and the resulting U.S. and global response (both domestic and foreign) were largely absent. For example, 50% of U.S. history teachers and 40% of teachers from other social studies classes reported teaching some aspect of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim attitudes in the U.S. By comparison, 86% of U.S. history teachers reported teaching about terrorism and 75% about Osama bin Laden. Only five percent of the U.S. History teachers, and nine percent of World History teachers, we surveyed reported perceiving the value of teaching about 9/11 and WoT as useful for “developing student religious and social tolerance.” So, while they see Islamophobia as a significant topic to teach about—they did not report using 9/11 related issues to try to combat these attitudes.

In fact, when asked about challenges to their teaching about 9/11, the “other” category was the second highest reported for all three subject areas. In addition to a lack of time and inclusion in the curriculum, three of the most commonly identified “other” responses related to a student lack of information on the events ( $\approx 32\%$ ), the challenge of misinformation or conspiracy theories ( $\approx 13\%$ ), and lack of understanding of Islam or active anti-Muslim sentiments shared in class ( $\approx 7\%$ ). These three challenges are very much related and are exacerbated by the choice to teach about 9/11 on the anniversary as a memory event, reliant on video footage that reinforces a narrative of a shocking attack by Muslim terrorists. This narrative was very much alive and well in 2018 as it aligned with the Trump administration’s attempt to ban travelers from predominantly Muslim countries to the U.S.

Our research suggests a major issue in how the majority of secondary school social studies teachers in the U.S. teach about the events of 9/11 and WoT. There is little historical context or depth in their engagements with students. Further, by continuing to focus on 9/11 as a memorial event and emphasis on heroes and Muslim villains, with the U.S. as victim, teachers have likely reinforced rather than challenged the endemic anti-Muslim sentiment within much of U.S. society and political rhetoric. The Texas academic standards even use the polarizing language of “radical Islamic fundamentalism” to teach their students about the “development and impact of radical Islamic fundamentalism...in the second half of the twentieth century.” This focus on terrorism being largely associated with Muslim countries and individuals has helped to create spaces for misinformation, conspiracy theories, and Islamophobia in the current populist and nationalist context in the U.S. and Europe.

Interestingly, the teachers we surveyed also provided examples for how they attempt to address these issues in class and also work to support their Muslim students. Some avoid these issues for fear of a discussion that could be harmful to their Muslim students. Others focused explicitly on teaching about Islam and examining more closely who terrorists are and what they represent. The teachers in our survey also reported wanting class materials



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that would help them bring in different and varied perspectives into their class (e.g., veterans, refugees, Muslim Americans). Below we present three examples to help teach about 9/11 in context and in ways that challenge Islamophobia.

## PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

**Historical Context:** Teachers who we found were effective in teaching about the 9/11 attacks and WoT were simply doing a better job of teaching them as a significant historical event that has impacted the globe, the US, and their lives instead of as collective memory. World history teachers in particular focused on the context of 9/11, the long history of U.S. and European intervention, colonization, or exploitation of Middle Eastern nations to further their own capitalist or foreign policy goals. This includes the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 to Cold War era examples such as the arming of Mujahedeen in Afghanistan as an effort to stop the USSR. Teachers also focused on more recent events leading up to the 9/11 attacks and failures on the part of the U.S. to stop the attacks. Finally, they examined the US response – and in particular the more controversial aspects of the U.S. response (e.g. invasion of Iraq). Sources that humanize and personalize these perspectives may also be particularly powerful – including recordings or documentaries that include veterans talking about their experiences with Iraqis and Afghans, like *The Interpreters* (Caballero & Khan, 2018).

**Support for Muslim Americans:** A second focus is to engage students in better contextualizing and considering the experiences of Muslim Americans initially following the attacks as well as the outpouring of support at that time. For example, students could read (or listen to) then-President Bush's (2001) speech given on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2001 at the Islamic Center in Washington, DC. They could also examine the outpouring of support as well as anger received in the form of emails by the Arab American Journal (2001). Storycorps (Sodhi & Sodhi, 2018; Storycorps, 2015), a series of recorded conversations, are available and capture the experiences of two Sikh brothers who discuss their brother who was killed for appearing to be Muslim, and one by two men in Dearborn, MI, who capture the reactions of other Muslim-Americans in that heavily Muslim and Arab community.

**Who is a terrorist? What is terrorism?** In order to challenge the ongoing narrative that all Muslims are terrorists and threats to the U.S. and other Western nations in particular, students could be engaged in examining in more depth what terrorism is and who engages in it, worldwide and domestically. This is particularly urgent in the U.S. and other Western countries with the rise of domestic White nationalist groups engaging in terrorist acts. Students could be engaged first in identifying key characteristics in how terrorism is defined and then engage in classifying different historic and contemporary examples according to whether they meet the definition of terrorism or should be classified as some other form of violence. Taking a more critical historical approach to studying 9/11, the events and causes leading to it and the response after, would help students to both understand the historical context of the event as well as its connections to today.



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## Q & A WITH JEREMY STODDARD

### Question #1

#### *Teacher's Question:*

You mentioned in your article that most curriculum materials are "lacking in their inclusion of specific details, context, and the events leading up to and resulting from the attacks." Would it be possible to direct teachers toward a few informative sources about the historical context of 9/11?

#### *Jeremy Stoddard's Response:*

Many of the materials for teaching about 9/11 were created with the assumption that students would have some memory of the events, and so often lack detail. Teachers recognize that their students today do not have this same memory or knowledge, so they rely on several source in particular for this information that also aligns with the goal of engaging students in primary sources. Sources that provide these details and are regularly used in classes according to our survey respondents include:

September 12, 2001 edition of The New York Times, for example the front page article "US attacked: President vows to exact punishment for evil" includes a great level of detail about the attacks as well serving as a primary source for understanding the emotional and nationalistic response to the attacks: <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/12/us/us-attacked-president-vows-to-exact-punishment-for-evil.html>

One of the most widely noted sources is the online timeline developed by the National September 11 Memorial & Museum. This timeline includes specific details, context, and primary sources related to different aspects of the attacks and aftermath: <https://timeline.911memorial.org>

Finally, for those that want to go into more depth about both the attacks and the events leading into them, and in particular on the intelligence related to the events, The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation (2006) by Sid Jacobson presents the depth of the report in an accessible form.

### Question #2

#### *Teacher's Question*

Are you recommending that teachers discontinue the memorialization of 9/11? Can teachers simultaneously engage with collective memory and history, or are they mutually exclusive?

#### *Jeremy Stoddard's Response*

I would not necessarily discontinue memorializing 9/11 entirely, but I would recommend at the least historicizing it so that young people understand why we memorialize these events but don't still do so with Pearl Harbor or similar collective memory events. Given the desire to continue to honor those killed on 9/11 and those who took part in the War on Terror,



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I argue that this also supports the need to examine this as a significant historical event that has had global impacts as well as domestic. Collective memory tends to be generational, and especially among those who remember “where they were” or have similar kinds of memories about that day. Beyond those areas directly impacted by the attacks (e.g., Arlington, VA, New York City), it is important to ask why this memorialization continues, does it serve a purpose beyond honoring those who were killed on 9/11? And if so for whom and why?

### **Question #3**

#### ***Teacher's Question***

Are there classroom resources that you’ve found to be particularly helpful both for teaching about 9/11 and also against Islamophobia?

#### ***Jeremy Stoddard's Response***

Unfortunately, not many. There are some primary sources that could lead to discussions of why and how Islamophobia emerged and why it continues. This includes the set of emails sent to the Arab American Journal, which are archived at the US Library of Congress. Among these emails are those with xenophobic, racist, and Islamophobic messages as well as those from across the country in support of the Arab communities in the US. Other stories that have been useful are those focused on the killing or violence against Sikh communities in the US, often mistaken to be Arab or Muslim because of their traditional turban headdress. A particularly powerful story is part of the StoryCorps program, which is also in the Library of Congress. This episode tells the story of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh man who was killed in what is believed to be the first post 9/11 hate crime. His brothers talk about the love Balbir had for the US and the pride in the business he owned, where he was killed in an act of revenge for the 9/11 attacks by a man who believed he was Muslim.

These sources, among others, could be used alongside documents exploring the teaching of Islam and then compared to the actions of the terrorists. Sources that humanize Muslims, and those believed inaccurately to be Muslims, as well as those in other US communities who have shown their support for Muslim communities can help to dispel the misinformation and xenophobic rhetoric—but need to be addressed explicitly.

### **Question #4:**

#### ***Teacher's Question***

Did your research uncover ways that some teachers found helpful to counter Islamophobia, misinformation, and/or conspiracy theories?

#### ***Jeremy Stoddard's Response***

We have several case studies from the teachers we surveyed and interviewed who gave examples from their classes. Some found strategies that directly question students and their sources of information / disinformation to be effective when disinformation or ignorance



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about Islam enters the classroom. Others described how teaching about the concept of conspiracy theories and why people believe them to be an effective way to help inoculate young people against falling for these false narratives. Still others found that strategies that ask students to critically analyze the representations of Islam in popular culture and media sources as an effective way to dispel misinformation and begin to challenge beliefs about Islam and its relationship with terrorism.

## **Question #5**

### ***Teacher's Question***

I might be nervous to approach this in my very conservative classroom. Are there specific approaches you've found to be most helpful in challenging political environments?

### ***Jeremy Stoddard's Response***

Teachers who worked in conservative areas found that focusing on facts—and using inquiry into commonly held narratives—can be effective in these contexts. This is especially true for teachers who worked to build trust with all of their students and created spaces where ideas could be challenged. For example, teachers discussed having students evaluate claims made by the Trump administration related to the proposed Muslim travel ban using other historic sources. For example, claims by then Vice President Pence on Iran's relationship to 9/11 could be challenged by news stories about Iran's role in assisting the US with intelligence after 9/11. This example helped in opening the discussion for how Muslims are not a monolithic or homogeneous group, especially politically.

Similarly, claims made about why countries on the Muslim ban were included could be challenged by looking at who have been involved in terrorist attacks historically and their national origins. This kind of investigation can also be used to look at terrorism more generally and to look at the number of domestic terrorist attacks led primarily by white supremacist and anti-government groups as well as other groups world-wide. Teachers in conservative communities who appeared to be successful in addressing this topic focused on relationship building, had clear goals, used historical evidence without using polarizing language, and relied on supportive administrators and colleagues.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Funding for the survey study was provided by the September 11<sup>th</sup> Education Trust. The following faculty and graduate students have worked on some aspect of this study: Diana Hess, Paul Fitchett, Brian Gibbs, Catherine Mason Hammer, Brooks Henne, Taehan Kim, Amy Kuenker, Shannon Murto. Dan Berman and Leila Walker are currently working on a project developing curated primary sources for use in teaching about 9/11 and the WoT funded by the Library of Congress.



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