Lesson Plan: Human Rights in an Age of Terrorism

Prepared by Lara Maupin, former social studies teacher and student government adviser at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Alexandria, VA

Overview:
In this lesson, students will examine how governments of nations such as the United States strive to protect their citizens in an age of terrorism while maintaining the rule of law and respect for human rights. This lesson takes approximately one - two class periods to complete. It is especially relevant in government/civics or international relations classes but may be used in any class in which current events are discussed.

Objectives:
At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Define and analyze the positions taken by administration officials and human rights activists regarding the treatment of suspected terrorists held by the United States government.
2. Understand key human rights issues for nations such as the United States that have the need to protect their populations from terrorism.
3. Identify United States and international laws that regulate the treatment of prisoners.

Resources / Materials Needed:
Students will need access to the “Human Rights” section of Great Decisions 2006 and computers with internet access or printed copies of relevant sources.

Activities / Procedures:
Background / Introduction / Warm-up:

Begin this lesson by asking your students what they think the U.S. should do with captured suspected terrorists. Discuss. Where should they be held? How long should they be held without being charged of crimes? What laws should govern their treatment? How should they be treated? What do they know about those being detained at Guantanamo?

Next, have your students read the remarks of Kenneth Roth and Condoleezza Rice in the “Human Rights” section of Great Decisions 2006 and/or review the following points with them. Ask your students what they know about these issues and what questions they have.
• Human rights activists maintain that torture and the cruel treatment of prisoners are unconditionally forbidden by international law and unacceptable methods of interrogation. They assert that prisoners being held outside of the United States or “rendered” to countries that use coercive interrogation have been abused and further that such treatment does not yield good information and undermines the role of the U.S. in the world.

• The Bush Administration claims that: the U.S. does not condone or practice torture; violations have been investigated and those responsible punished; and “renditions” are permitted under international law and never done for the purposes of torture. U.S. officials also argue that the war on terror is not a traditional war between nation-states, however, and that the government has the responsibility to protect American citizens from “effectively stateless” and presumably dangerous suspected terrorists. The Guantanamo detainees, for example, are not entitled to POW status, according to the president.

• Congress voted overwhelmingly in favor of the 2006 Defense Authorization Bill which included Senator McCain’s amendment banning cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment of detainees and establishing the Army Field Manual as the binding rules for all military interrogations. President Bush signed the bill on December 30, 2005.

Tell your students that they will now learn more about human rights in an age of terrorism.

1. Web Quest / Research:
Provide your students with computers with internet access and a list of the internet resources given below. (Alternatively, if your students do not have internet access, print and copy relevant articles and pages from the internet sources given below.) Have your students work alone, in pairs, or in small groups to answer the following questions, depending on the time and number of computers available to you. You may wish to have your students begin their research with the “Human Rights” section of Great Decisions and then search the internet. Once students have completed their research, discuss their findings.

• What does U.S. and international law say about torture and the treatment of prisoners? What specific treaties and agreements cover the treatment of prisoners? Has the U.S. signed these agreements?
• What are the specific claims of human rights activists and other interested parties with regard to U.S. treatment of prisoners and detainees?
• How have administration and other U.S. government officials responded to charges of prisoner abuse? Do they justify and/or deny such charges? On what grounds?
• How has Congress acted to protect the human rights of those detained by the U.S.? What legislation has been introduced? Passed? Signed into law?
2. **Group Activity / Debate:**
Have your students debate the human rights issues that have arisen from the government’s responsibility to maintain safety and security in an age of terrorism. Divide your students into five groups and assign each group one of the following topics/questions.
- **Non-citizens held outside U.S.:** Should it matter where prisoners are detained and whether or not they are U.S. citizens in terms of the treatment they receive?
- **Rendition:** Are renditions an acceptable policy option for the U.S. – even when the countries prisoners are sent to use torture?
- **A new kind of war:** Does it matter that the “war on terror” is not a traditional war between nation states in terms of the rights of captured combatants?
- **Role of the U.S.:** Is U.S. treatment of captured suspected terrorists damaging its image in the world and even helping terrorist organizations to recruit new members?
- **McCain amendment:** Is the U.S. now bound by law to never under any circumstances use coercive interrogation?

Give each group 10 minutes to brainstorm all they now know about their topic/question. Next, ask each group to divide into those that will take the administration viewpoint and those that will take the side of human rights activists on their given topic/question. (One side will answer YES to each question and the other will answer NO.) Give the students 10 more minutes to prepare to argue their sides of the issue. Finally, ask each group to debate by taking turns giving opening statements, follow-up statements, and closing statements. You may wish to limit each statement to one minute. One student may speak for each side or students may take turns, as desired. Follow-up each debate with comments and questions from the class.

3. **Homework / Follow-up:**
Conclude this activity by having your students write about their thoughts regarding the rights of suspected terrorists held by the U.S. government. Ask them to consider whether they think torture or coercive interrogation is ever justified. What impact do they think the September 11 terrorist attacks have had on the debate over the interrogation of prisoners thought to be linked to terrorist activities? What role would they like to see the U.S. have in the world when it comes to human rights? Students should support their views.

**Extension Activity:**
Have your students write to President Bush or a member of Congress to express their beliefs regarding U.S. treatment of prisoners and detainees suspected of terrorist activities. What would your students urge their elected officials to do? How would they like them to balance security and human rights? What policies would they like to see enacted or enforced? Why?
National Standards

National Council for the Social Studies Thematic Strands:
- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- Power, Authority, and Governance
- Global Connections
- Civic Ideals and Practices

McRel Compendium of K-12 Standards Addressed:

Civics Standard 3: Understands the sources, purposes, and functions of law, and the importance of the rule of law for the protection of individual rights and the common good
Benchmark 1: Knows alternative ideas about the sources of law (e.g., custom, Supreme Being, sovereigns, legislatures) and different varieties of law (e.g., divine law, natural law, common law, statute law, international law)
Benchmark 2: Knows alternative ideas about the purposes and functions of law (e.g., regulating relationships among people and between people and their government; providing order, predictability, security, and established procedures for the management of conflict; regulating social and economic relationships in civil society)

Civics Standard 4: Understands the concept of a constitution, the various purposes that constitutions serve, and the conditions that contribute to the establishment and maintenance of constitutional government
Benchmark 3: Understands how constitutions may limit government's power in order to protect individual rights and promote the common good

Civics Standard 15: Understands how the United States Constitution grants and distributes power and responsibilities to national and state government and how it seeks to prevent the abuse of power
Benchmark 7: Understands how specific features and the overall design of the Constitution results in tensions among the three branches (e.g., the power of the purse, the power of impeachment, advice and consent, veto power, judicial review), and comprehends the argument that the tensions resulting from separation of powers, checks and balances, and judicial review tend to slow down the process of making and enforcing laws, thus insuring better outcomes

Standard 18: Understands the role and importance of law in the American constitutional system and issues regarding the judicial protection of individual rights
Benchmark 5: Understands how the individual's rights to life, liberty, and property are protected by the trial and appellate levels of the judicial process and by the principal varieties of law (e.g., constitutional, criminal, and civil law)
Benchmark 8: Knows historical and contemporary instances in which judicial protections have not been extended to all persons and instances in which judicial protections have been extended to those deprived of them in the past
Benchmark 9: Understands why due process rights in administrative and legislative procedures are essential for protecting individual rights and maintaining limited government

Civics Standard 22: Understands how the world is organized politically into nation-states, how nation-states interact with one another, and issues surrounding U.S. foreign policy

Benchmark 8: Understands the influence of American constitutional values and principles on American foreign policy (e.g., a commitment to the self-determination of nations), and understands the tensions that might arise among American values, principles, and interests as the nation deals with the practical requirements of international politics (e.g., a commitment to human rights and the requirements of national security)