

Media, TFA, and the Vietnam War "body counts"

September 25, 2013

During the war in Vietnam, I heard Frank Bardacke (honored recently for his wonderful book on union democracy in the Farmworkers), give a short speech at a rally laying out how all three national TV networks and major newspapers had carried exactly the same analysis of a battle. The coverage publicized the Defense Department's "body count" - numbers of combatants and civilians slain on both sides. In doing so the media had propagated the government's narrative, contested by the anti-war movement, that the US was winning the war without harming civilians. Fairly simple math showed the numbers couldn't be accurate, and yet all of the media had reported the figures, without questioning them. Frank observed that the unanimity in coverage couldn't be explained by lazy reporting. An ideological struggle was occurring and the media had taken the side of those pursuing the war.

I was reminded of Frank's speech and the "body count" phenomenon when I read media coverage of a new study purportedly proving that Teach For America (TFA) recruits do a superior job in boosting students' math scores on standardized tests. Media, online and print, have jumped to publicize the US Dept. of Ed. claim that the research is "rigorous" without providing any substantiation of this claim, nor doing what a journalist (as opposed to a PR agent) does, seeking at least one opposing viewpoint.

Meanwhile, researchers who are independent of neoliberal and corporate think tanks, as well as the astounding number of foundations and "centers" they fund, have pointed out the study's deficiencies as well as its "minuscule" positive effects. More solid research now disputes TFA's grandiose claims, and more personal narratives are appearing by TFA members who explain why the model is flawed. We should note and take heart at the appearance of a small but growing critique of TFA and corporate ed reform. Space for this counter-narrative has been created by grassroots agitation among teachers, students, and parents opposed to testing and school closings, seen in its most courageous and consistent form in struggle in Chicago, supported by the Chicago Teachers Union and union reformers, now in their second term as union leaders.

At the same time, critical voices are being heard more because damage to children and education is becoming so evident. While forces and voices of resistance are growing globally, (teacher strikes this past week in Spain's Balearic Islands, Mexico, and Greece) so is the audacity of our opponents, who are showing in Philadelphia and Detroit (as they did in New Orleans) their real goal is to dismantle public education and disempower (arguably destroy) communities of color.

I think the movement is at a new juncture, with promise and danger. In my forthcoming Jacobin review of Diane Ravitch's book "Reign of Error" I'll discuss her solutions and mine.

Note: I invite reader comments, either on this website or to me directly at drweinerlo@gmail.com. Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. And you can follow my thoughts on teaching, schools, and education on twitter , Facebook, as well as my blog here at New Politics.