Title of Lesson: The Militarization of Language  
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<th>Grade Level/ Subject Areas:</th>
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<td>High School/ Social Studies or Language Arts</td>
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Goals/ Objectives of Lesson:

- Students will be able to recognize militarized language in daily life.
- Students will form an opinion about Gandhi’s use of militarized language.
- Students will be able to support their opinion while simultaneously explaining a contrary opinion.

Lesson Abstract:
Students read an excerpt from a speech by Oscar Arias Sanchez, a Noble Peace Prize laureate and compare it to M.K. Gandhi’s use of words like “soldier”, “weapon”, and “fight”. Arias Sanchez advocates de-militarizing our language, such as using “build a team” instead of “round up the troops.” However, Gandhi uses language such as “soldiers of non-violence” when explaining Ahimsa (non-violence) and Satyagraha (soul-force).

Lesson Content:
M.K. Gandhi, the most well-known advocate of non-violence, used words like “weapon”, “soldier”, “fight”, and “army” to describe his non-violent, non-cooperation campaigns for social justice in South Africa and India. When describing his understanding of non-violent change, he made it clear this was an active movement that required courage and bravery. He thought that those who employ non-violent, non-cooperation should have similar qualities and training that soldiers in the military have. However, they would be trained to use their discipline and courage in a manner that would not harm their opponent. A soldier in the military is trained to take a life for a cause, whereas a soldier of non-violence would sooner die for a cause.

Oscar Arias Sanchez is a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and Prime Minster of Costa Rica, one of the few countries in the world to disband its military. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for his efforts to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the years of conflict and war in Central America. He is a great admirer of M.K. Gandhi. Coming from this non-violent perspective, he sees the use of military language in civilian situations as endangering peace and enabling war. It is in this context that he is advocating for the demilitarization of common language.

The main issue presented in this lesson is the militarization of language, or how violent vocabulary is often used to describe non-violent situations. Whether the situation is a “battle” with a disease, “fighting” for what you believe in, or using your “weapons”, these words refer to violence when a non-violent word could just as easily be used.
Oscar Arias Sanchez argues that:
“Using these words and phrases makes war part of everyday life. It makes the atrocious seem commonplace. When politicians actually argue that a nation should go to war, we are already familiar with the terminology, and war does not seem like such a strange course of action. Words have already pasted over the pain, already paved the path to destruction.”

I have isolated this section of Arias Sanchez’s speech, included in this lesson, to highlight what he sees as the danger of our militarized language. He fears that we have become desensitized to the violence inherent in words like “fight”, “weapon”, and “army.” He would rather have people use words like “struggle” instead of “battle” for instance.

This lesson asks you and your students to subject Arias Sanchez’s argument to Gandhi’s militarization of language when he wrote and spoke about non-violence in the first half of the Twentieth Century. Some may argue that Gandhi was attempting to reshape the meanings of these violent words, or that Arias Sanchez is not specifically speaking of Gandhi’s use of these terms. However true this may be, there is not an intended outcome of this conversation except to stimulate critical thinking and awareness about the phenomenon of militarized language. It is so prevalent that even Gandhi used traditional military terms to explain his philosophy of non-violence.

Students may leave the classroom supporting Arias Sanchez’s point, or they may support the use of violent words in non-violent situations. For example, Gandhi’s statement that “I have to raise an army of workers…” may be seen by some students as inoffensive and benign. While others may find some of his phrases inconsistent with his non-violence, such as “I am a soldier. I am speaking therefore with a grasp of the strategy of war.” The goal is not to choose sides, but to recognize how militaristic vocabulary has pervaded common language.

My strategy for this lesson is to stimulate a conversation about the hidden meaning of words and the power of language. Some students may choose to modify their own use of language or point it out to others. Some students may see no problem with the language, but they will at least recognize it when they hear it. Additionally, through discussion, this lesson may even include other dangerous expressions such as “that is gay” or other derogatory phrases that carry deeper consequences then some students realize.

In the end, M.K. Gandhi showed how non-violence is a powerful force for change in the world, and his use of militarized language in no way minimized the importance of his non-violent actions. Some may even argue that his militaristic language in fact aided his cause by attracting “recruits” who wanted to “kick” the British out of their homeland. The goal of this lesson is not to challenge Gandhi’s commitment to non-violence. The goal of this lesson is to point out that even M.K. Gandhi was susceptible to militarizing his language. He chose to use words that traditionally belong in a violent realm and possibly hoped to redefine their meaning. However, it is through an engaging class discussion that students will determine their personal opinions on Gandhi’s word choice and the use of militarized language in general.

On a side note, the digital story that is included with this lesson is aimed at provoking an
emotional response to the militarization of language. An expressed effort was made to only include images that truly fit the vocabulary of “fight”, “war”, “weapons”, and “soldiers”. The juxtaposition of Gandhi’s call for non-violence with violent images is intended to connect the militarized words Gandhi chose with visual representations of violence. Although Gandhi did not intend the audience to associate violence with his language, I chose images that literally match his words rather than images that match his philosophy. That is why there are no images that include “armies” of peaceful protesters and the like. These images of violence help to challenge the students’ personal definitions of these words, hopefully to the point of stimulating an engaging class discussion.

### Minnesota Content Standards:

- **Government and Citizenship:** The student will analyze various methods of civic engagement needed to fulfill responsibilities of a citizen of a republic, including civil disobedience.
- **Language Arts: Subp. 3. Speaking, listening, and viewing.** The student will speak clearly and effectively for a variety of purposes and audiences and actively listen to, view, and evaluate oral communication and media.
- **Language Arts: A. Speaking and listening.** The student will demonstrate understanding and communicate effectively through listening and speaking.

### Guiding Questions:

- Do words like “weapons”, “massacred”, and “soldier” used in non-violent situations make our society more violent and/or susceptible military solutions to our problems?
- Does Gandhi’s decision to use military language for his non-violent movement help him to gain followers who are looking to “fight” for independence?
- Whose use of language is more appealing, Oscar Arias Sanchez’s or M.K. Gandhi’s? Why is that?
- Does violent imagery in language effect your reactions to actual violence?
- Should we continue to use violent language in non-violent situations? Why or why not?

### Materials Needed:

- Materials needed include excerpts from Oscar Arias Sanchez’s speech and M.K. Gandhi’s statements about non-violence.
- Technology needed for screening a short streaming video, The Militarization of Language, from this site.

### Lesson Context:

This lesson is written in the context of a course on The Philosophies of Non-Violence, but could be included in a Social Studies or Language Arts class. One way the digital story could be included is to prompt the discussion after students have read the excerpts. This lesson may
work best after the students already have a good background about M.K. Gandhi, but it could also work on its own since the focus is more philosophical and historical.

**Teaching Activities:**

A good way to begin this lesson might be to show a few words to the students and ask them to connect them to non-military or non-violent situations. First ask students to create a sentence for each word. For example, write “fight” or “battle” on the board. A common sentence may come from a sport, class debate, or a military situation. Point out to students that it is common to see these words in both military and civilian contexts.

Next, have the students read M.K. Gandhi’s excerpts about non-violent non-cooperation. You may want to elicit brief reactions from the students about Gandhi’s statements. Then hand out the excerpt from Oscar Aria Sanchez’s speech.

This should prepare the students for a class conversation. You may want to use the “guiding questions” above to begin the conversation. If class discussions are not common in your classroom, it is important to spend time setting the ground rules as a class for what a good conversation looks and sounds like.

I strongly suggest the following:

- Arrange your seating in a circle.
- Encourage the students to do the majority of the speaking.
- The teacher should speak only as a moderator.
- Encourage students to build on each other’s comments before moving on to a new topic.

It can also be helpful to have students write a short journal of their reactions to an initial question you place to the group. This journal response can be used to help students who are not comfortable speaking off the cuff or in front of their peers.

- For larger classes:

  If you feel your class is too large, I suggest splitting the class in half by making an inner circle and an outer circle. This is known as a “fishbowl”. The students in the inner circle discuss while the outer circle listens. The outer circle can also assess the group or individual students on the quality and participation of the inner circle.

**Assessment/ Evaluation:**

- Students could write a two-part short-answer-essay with one section explaining why violent language should not be used in non-violent contexts and another section explaining why it is appropriate.
- Assessment can also come from teacher observations of the quality of questions asked and answered during the discussion.
### Extension Activities/ Enrichment:

- Have students re-write statements by Gandhi, de-militarizing his language.
- Have students keep a journal of words spoken by friends, in the media, or in entertainment that reflect the militarization of language. Share a few of their favorites and have a discussion of their reactions.

### Bibliography:


**PeaceJam.** [www.peacejam.org](http://www.peacejam.org)

**Watch Your Language.** [http://www.arias.or.cr/download/speechOAS-peacejamworkshop.pdf](http://www.arias.or.cr/download/speechOAS-peacejamworkshop.pdf)
Examples from Gandhi’s use of a militarized vocabulary

From SATYAGRAHA IN SOUTH AFRICA (Collected Works)

The position therefore was quite uncertain, and there was no knowing when the Government would arrest us. But at a crisis like this we could not await the reply of the Government for a number of days, but for one or two returns of the post. We therefore decided to leave Charlestown and enter the Transvaal at once if the Government did not put us under arrest. If we were not arrested on the way, the ‘army of peace’ was to march twenty to twenty-four miles a day for eight days together…

From GANDHI ON NONVIOLENCE, edited by Thomas Merton

A soldier of peace, unlike the one of the sword, has to give all his spare time to the promotion of peace alike in war time as in peace time. His work in peace time is both a measure of prevention of, as also that of preparation for, war time.

From “CAUTION ABOUT CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE” (Collected Works)

But aggressive civil disobedience whether mass or individual is a most dangerous weapon though also most effective among all the peaceful weapons at our disposal. I am myself satisfied that the country as a whole is not ready for this form of self-assertion.

From DISCUSSION WITH WORKERS AT POONA (Collected Works)

I am a soldier. I am speaking therefore with a grasp of the strategy of war.

I have to raise an army of workers spinning 2,000 yards of yarn a month.

I am not a saint; I am a politician. I am, however, a mild type of politician. Was I not a politician in South Africa?... I do want to fight; but my dear brother, let me whet my weapon.
The Language of Peace and the Language of War (excerpt)
Speech by President Oscar Arias in Denver, Colorado, 17 September 2006,

My friends, I tell you today that peace is fighting an uphill battle for language. Just think about that last sentence. How many times in our conversations have we had to “fight an uphill battle,” or “divide and conquer,” “use our secret weapon,” “round up the troops,” or “call for reinforcements”? Parents might call their child, “my little soldier” when he has to go to the dentist. An article in a computer magazine said that Google employs an “army of PhDs.” I don’t know about you, but images of fierce, fighting warriors are not the images that come to mind when I think of computer technicians.

How often have we called something a “war” that really is not? The “culture wars,” “price wars” between Wal-Mart and Target, the “soda wars” between Pepsi and Coke, a war with the neighbors or a war with a teacher over a grade on a test.

This use of the language of war may seem harmless, but here is the problem. Using these words and phrases makes war part of everyday life. It makes the atrocious seem commonplace. When politicians actually argue that a nation should go to war, we are already familiar with the terminology, and war does not seem like such a strange course of action. Words have already pasted over the pain, already paved the path to destruction.

After 9/11, the world was immediately told there was a “war” on terror, rather than an effort to prevent terror. The use of the word “war” was a subtle argument that what was necessary was military action rather than police action. The phrase, “War on Terror” changed the course of history.

Into the book of human history was written another chapter about bombs falling on children, the smoke and fire, the fear, the mothers of soldiers who will never come home, bands of vicious men taking advantage of the chaos to steal and kill, greedy spending on new weapons when disease and hunger pull millions into their graves, a new volcano of anger ready to erupt for generations. All because politicians did not just want to prevent terrorism; they wanted a war. “Prevention” just did not sound tough enough.

My friends, if I leave you with one message today, let it be this: our words have consequences. The more we talk about the world in terms of violent conflict, the more we see the world in those terms. The more we see the world in violent terms, the more violence we are likely to see in the world. And so, if we want to eliminate war itself from this earth, we must do our best to eliminate the words of war from our vocabulary.

There is just one way to change these definitions: through our own hard work. We must think of new phrases compatible with peace and then use them. Let’s not fight for things, let’s work for them. Let’s not “round up the troops,” let’s put together a team. When we talk about security let us talk about public health, when we mention “special forces” let us mention Doctors Without Borders, when we speak of defense contractors let us speak of the Red Cross. In order to win a struggle over weapons we must first win a struggle over words.