

The Forever War

A Study Guide



Reading the Book

We suggest exploring this text through **discussion based inquiry**. A few guidelines:

- Students will read the books and prepare their own questions, or explore the reading beginning with questions introduced for the class.
- Possible points for discussion are outlined in the chapter breakdown below, but students should guide the discussion during Socratic seminars.
- Students should be marked on participation in the discussion, respect for differing opinions, and evidence that they've read the book.
- If using Socratic seminars, periodic journals on class discussions should be kept by students for evaluation.
- Teaching material for the classes leading up to Socratic seminars and in line with the points for discussion outlined below follow the chapter-by-chapter breakdown. (Bookmark links will take you between the chapter breakdown and the suggested lessons.)
- As the material in this study guide is based on student-led discussion questions, it may be necessary to experiment with different formats for the discussions. Literature Circles can work quite well, for example. Also worth considering: timed debates, Think/Pair/Share, Word Walls or role playing.

Private Mandella, Chapters 1 – 15

Discussion questions:

- Why do you think the military is willing to incur such high casualties in training?
- Do you think that the fact that the military doesn't know about Taurans should affect how many casualties they're willing to cause in training?
- Do the veterans of war seem more in favour of the war with the Taurans than the conscripts?
- Do you think Mandella and the other soldiers become used to death even before the battle?
- Do you think the military in the book encourages or discourages close relationships? Do you think they're successful?
- How do you think Cortez can justify saying the Taurans wouldn't hurt the platoon, after telling them to slaughter them all? Is this at odds with what they came to do?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 2: “Twelve years before, when I was ten years old... the most elite conscripted army in the history of warfare.”

Chapter 3: “He studied the clipboard in his hand... They had spent all that money on us just to kill us in training?”

Chapter 5: “The suit was fairly comfortable, but it gave you the odd feeling of simultaneously... Except that the rock is *already* dead.”

Chapter 10: “I have some idea what you just went through, training on Charon... He looked at Cortez mildly. ‘No one can say for sure.’”

Chapter 11: “I was in Platoon Seven, the ‘command group’... showed a remarkable aptitude for making money, and also had a consistently high Rhine potential.”

Chapter 12: “Two dozen people whispered out of the grass to join us... I wasn't a soldier nor ever wanted to be nor ever would want —”

Chapter 14: “‘Mandella here.’ I said. ‘Isn't there a spaceport of some kind... ‘All right, Sergeant.’ The relief in her voice was unmistakable.”

Chapter 14: “*They* are responsible for the lives of all of your comrades... plus three teddy bears, milling around, getting in the way.”

Chapter 15: “I knew it was all purest soyashit, and I hated the men who had taken such obscene liberties with my mind... but I guess Cortez was thinking about the prisoner.”

Chapter 15: “It was slaughter, even though our flank was outnumbered five to one... ‘We’ve *got* our prisoner,’ Cortez shouted, ‘*Kill!*’”

Chapter 15: “After we’d combed every last square centimeter of the base... we would be more evenly matched. And I was right.”

Exercises

The challenge of trauma:

Choose and share some of the resources on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca on post-traumatic stress disorder with your students.

- How many traumatic experiences do you think the soldiers face during their training?
- How many traumatic experiences do you think the soldiers face before the battle with the Taurans, but after training?
- How many traumatic experiences do you think the soldiers face during and after their first battle?
- Which of these experiences do you think are realistic in a real-world war experience?
- If you do not think the experiences are realistic, what do you think Haldeman is trying to illustrate by including them?

Conscription

Share with your students the article on conscription from The Canadian Encyclopedia (available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca).

- What do you think about the idea of conscription?
- What do you think of the idea of “elite” conscription?
- How do you think conscription in Canada was different from conscription in The Forever War?

Sergeant Mandella, Chapters 16 – 26

Discussion questions:

- How do you think the differences between the way the soldiers see the war and the way the officers see the war affects the lives of the soldiers? The officers?
- Why do you think the way the soldiers and the officers see the war is so different?
- Do you think the military expects the soldiers to re-enlist? Why or why not?
- What do you think the government controls on Earth? In the military?
- Do you think Mandella and Marygay feel safer on Earth or at war?
- Do you think Mandella's plan for spending his retirement pay is prudent? Do you think it's justifiable?
- Think about the population of Earth in these chapters. Is it higher or lower than the real population today? Why do you think we don't have the problems they do in the book?
- Why do you think Mandella feels like they're "going home" when they are sent back into active service?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 16: "We talk it out, sir.' 'And have you arrived at any cogent conclusion?'... 'And then they'll probably be just as impatient to get back on.'"

Chapter 17: "This is the first manifestation of a very important effect that has heretofore been of interest only to theorists... Went up to the NCO room for some company and maybe some information."

Chapter 18: "While I was lying there being squeezed, a silly thought... They don't do that anymore."

Chapter 20: "Halfway to the assembly area I realized what a mess I was... I understood, but I didn't know that I believed her."

Chapter 20: "'One cannot make command decisions simply by assessing... nothing so primitive and unmilitary as a will to live.'"

Chapter 21: "Ten long months in space and it was army... We went planetside in two scout ships."

Chapter 22: “He sat down at the head of the table and looked at nobody... I’m going to turn you over to Captain Siri, who just arrived from Earth. Captain?””

Chapter 22: ““I don’t know where to begin.” He sucked in his upper lip... They keep saying it’s a temporary situation, but it’s been going on for over a decade.””

Chapter 23: “‘Everybody works for the government?’ ‘No, that’s not it,’... I still had over three million, but planned to run through most of it in a short time. Hell, I’d earned it.”

Chapter 24: “We checked off the things that bothered us: violence, high cost of living, too many people... if it ended suddenly, Earth’s economy would collapse.”

Exercises

Are people ‘programmable’?

Share the full version of this quote from chapter 18 with your students: “While I was lying there being squeezed, a silly thought took hold... They don’t do that anymore.” and the Excerpt from *The Righteous Mind* by Jonathan Haidt (available at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) with your students. If Jonathan Haidt is right about the behaviours he’s identified,

- How similar do you think the conditioning that boot camp creates is to the UVA football rituals?
- How similar do you think the ‘hive’ behaviours Haidt talks about are to the military hypnosis the soldiers in *The Forever War* were subject to?
- Do you think that the ‘hive’ behaviours could help explain why the military in the books believes that soldiers are better fighters without hypnosis, or do you think it’s unrelated? Why or why not?
- Do you think that Haidt is correct about the behaviour he identified? Why or why not?

Reintegration after war:

Share with your students some of the resources available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca about reintegration of soldiers after war.

- What storytelling devices does Joe Haldeman use to express the difficulty of soldiers’ readjustment after war?
- What do you think would be the hardest thing to adjust to when returning after Mandella’s campaign?
- Do you think it would be possible for Mandella and Marygay to ever re-integrate?
- Do you think that the system is “rigged” against them?

Lieutenant Mandella and Major Mandella, Chapters 27 – 36

Discussion questions:

- What do you think about Mandella's reaction to his gay counterparts? What about their reaction to him?
- Do you think the war is getting more impersonal? What is some evidence of this? Was the war ever really "personal"?
- The aide on Heaven says he was "Born, raised and drafted." What effect would this pattern have on the civilian population? Do you think there is much of a civilian population anymore?
- What do you think of the idea of uploading battle experiences into a soldier? Is it a more or a less ethical way to have them gain battle experience?
- What do you think of the revelation that Mandella is a pacifist? What do you think "failed pacifist" means?
- What do you think of soldiers being raised in a "creche"? Do you think the war is having an effect on families, or do you think that these changes would be happening anyway?
- What is "eugenics"? Why would UNEF be using it, and why only on Earth?
- Why do you think Mandella and Charlie have such different opinions on executing Graubard?
- Do you think it would be easier, harder, or the same for Mandella to adjust to life on Earth in 3138 than it was in 2024?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 27: "I stripped and backed into the clamshelled suit... I wasn't worried, of course. Abstractedly, I wished I hadn't taken the pill."

Chapter 27: "Finally I woke up in the regular bay. I was strapped... Just don't kid yourselves if it doesn't work out."

Chapter 27: "They took the severely wounded first, so... live a whole year for every year that went by."

Chapter 27: “Most of our stay at Threshold, once the therapy became bearable... even that could be taken from us.”

Chapter 27: “Marygay had been bumped to captain, and I to major... Not in terms of people.”

Chapter 28: “Kynock took a drink and watched the colors... ‘I’m no expert in military history.’
‘Forget it.’”

Chapter 29: “These are our combat orders for the Sade-138 campaign... another person alive who meant anything to me.”

Chapter 31: “For obvious reasons, no weapons were allowed... I mumbled, and to the troops:
‘Dismissed.’”

Chapter 32: “For a while I let Diana feed me mood-altering drugs... we had a good time arguing with each other. Cure me, he didn’t.”

Chapter 35: “Seven centuries could have brought us a decisive advantage... and wish I could say that it was for a good cause, but as you will read, it was not.”

Exercises

Language and time:

Share the translation worksheets of the excerpts from *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *Henry V*, as well as the essay, **The Pronunciation of Chaucer’s Middle English** by John Gardner, and the YouTube video of *Beowulf* read in Old English, with text on-screen.

- Can you find any patterns in how English has evolved?
- Think back to the changes in pronouns in chapter 22. Do you think this is a likely change in how we talk about people? Do you think we’re good at predicting how language will change?
- What changes in language, if any, have you experienced?
- Do you think language would change faster in space (at war) or on Earth? Why?
- How would a change in language affect the soldiers’ return home?
- Is there a parallel between how the soldiers are losing the ability to speak to each other, and the language barrier between the Taurans and humans? If so, what is it, and if not, why not?

You may also wish to share with your students the resource **Use it or Lose It: Why Language Changes Over Time** and the TED Talk Playlist on changing language (available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca).

Reintegration after war:

Revisit or share some resources available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca about reintegration of soldiers after war.

- What storytelling devices does Joe Haldeman use to express the difficulty of soldiers' readjustment after war?
- What do you think would be the hardest things to adjust to at the end of the Forever War?
- Do you think it would be possible for Mandella and Marygay to ever re-integrate?
- How do you think the challenges faced by modern soldiers compare to the ones faced by Mandella and Marygay in *The Forever War*?

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A Study Guide

Liberal Studies Guides help teachers engage their students when discussing literature through study guides and cross-curricular resources made freely available for classroom use. We also offer free workshops on using the Socratic method with secondary students of all levels.

Our study guides break down novels into lessons with ideas for discussion, exercises, and assignments. We tie our guides together with additional resources on our website, LiberalStudiesGuides.ca, including ready-to-use worksheets, to encourage the discussion of current events, history, music, philosophy, and economics to help tie the lessons to the real world.

Although our guides are aimed at English classrooms, the supplementary resources may be useful for history, music, drama, communications studies, economics, philosophy, and social studies.

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