

Northwest History Consortium

Isolationism or Imperialism?

Kelley Edwards
9th – 12th Grade

National Standard

Era 7: The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930) / Standards 2 and 3

Standard 2: The changing roles of United States in world affairs through WWI

Standard 3: How the US changed from the end of WWI to the eve of the Great Depression

Montana Social Studies Content Standard

Standard 2: Students demonstrate an understanding of the effects of time, continuity, and change on historical and future perspective and relationships.

BACKGROUND

People of America have long been arguing over how much influence America should have over foreign countries. Some feel it was our duty to intervene and expand American influence and promote democracy. Others, known as isolationists, feel that America needs to concentrate on problems happening within the country and stay out of world affairs.

In 1914 tensions were rising in Europe due to increased imperialism, nationalism, and militarism within varying countries. Inevitable war loomed on the horizon, and a war of words was occurring in the United States about whether to be involved or not to be involved in foreign affairs.

SCENARIO

It is 1916, and the “Great War” is raging in Europe. America has chosen to remain neutral, and Woodrow Wilson has been re-elected as President, winning with the slogan: “He Kept Us Out of the War.” However, various events have occurred that have President Wilson very nervous. The Germans have sunk the Lusitania, a passenger ship, and 128 people have perished. The sinking occurs even after the Germans have agreed to the Sussex Pledge and promised to end unrestricted submarine warfare. Also, the Zimmerman Note has just been discovered, and the idea that Germany is persuading Mexico to invade the United States has left President Wilson and his advisors quite concerned. Wilson wants to remain neutral, but he fears that if the United States does not intervene the results could be devastating.

TASKS

President Wilson wants to bring in an elite panel consisting of America’s brightest, most innovative and critical thinkers to discuss the issue at hand. Naturally, you were on the top of the list to be included on such a top secret and prestigious group! The panel is to advise President Wilson on what actions the United States should take when dealing with the aggressive and imperialistic Central Powers.

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Here are some ideas to consider:

- What are the economic, political, and social ramifications if the United States were to be involved in a world affair that doesn't directly involve them?
- Will it set the precedent of continued involvement in foreign affairs if America fights?
- Is it possible to be isolationists in the 20th century?
- What problems were happening domestically that deserved the attention of the government?
- What could be done to resolve conflict without war?

RESOURCES

Book

US History textbook

Internet

Duffy, Michael. "Propaganda Posters – United States of America." First World War.Com. ©2000 – 2010. [location unknown]. 11 June 2010 <<http://www.firstworldwar.com/posters/usa.htm>>.

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"Foreign Relations of the United States." University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries (Digital Collections). ©University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents. Madison, WI. 11 June 2010 <<http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/>>.

"Newspaper Pictorials: World War I Rotogravures: 1913 – 1919." 19 Aug. 2005. The Library of Congress. 2010. Washington, DC. 11 June 2010 <<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/collections/rotog/langarts3.html>>.

"Woodrow Wilson: 1913-1921." The Whitehouse. 2010. Washington, DC. 11 June 2010 <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/woodrowwilson/>>.

"Woodrow Wilson – Twenty-Eighth President of the United States." About.Com (A New York Times Company). ©1996 – 2010 The New York Times Company. New York, NY. 11 June 2010 <<http://americanhistory.about.com/od/woodrowwilson/p/pwilson.htm>>.

"World War One (WWI) Posters." KJA Consulting (Rainfall.Com). ©1996 – 2010. Orlando, FL. 11 June 2010 <<http://www.rainfall.com/posters/wwi-world-war-one-posters.htm>>.

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ASSESSMENT

1. Groups will orally report their findings and concerns about American involvement in foreign affairs to President Wilson (the class and I). They must provide a report (visual aids: handouts, outlines, PowerPoint, etc.) to the committee outlining their main points as to why America should or should not be involved.
2. After debriefing President Wilson and awaiting his decision, the committees realize that in order to win a war there must be American citizen support. They will create a propaganda poster to persuade the American people regarding their stance, as propaganda was heavily used in WWI. (Example posters of authentic WWI posters and past students' projects will be available.)
3. Students will individually write a two-page paper discussing the complications of US involvement in foreign affairs, focusing on WWI to current times. This paper is a chance for the student to express their own opinion on America's involvement with foreign affairs and the pros and cons of having such a sphere of influence.

From this PBL activity:

- Students have a better understanding of the complications of foreign diplomacy.
- Students can trace back the beginnings of American imperialism and involvement in foreign countries.
- Students will gain an understanding of the concerns and opinions that isolationists took in the 20th century.
- Students will gain more knowledge on pre WWI America, how American mobilized for WWI, and how WWI affected America socially, economically, and politically.
- Students will make connections with past and current situations between America and other countries, specifically on American involvement in wars.

REFERENCES/CITATIONS

- Edwards, Kelley. "Isolationism or Imperialism?" NWESD Organization. 2008. Anacortes, WA. 11 June 2010 <http://www.nwesd.org/1510101216191755740/lib/1510101216191755740/7.2-3_Isolationism.Imperialism.Edwards.9-12.pdf>.
- "History Standards for Grades 5-12 United States." UCLA National Center for History in the Schools. 2005. Los Angeles, CA. 11 June 2010 <<http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/us-standards5-12.html>>.
- OPI. "Montana Standards for Social Studies." Montana Office of Public Instruction. 2009. Helena, MT. 11 June 2010 <<http://www.opi.state.mt.us/pdf/Standards/ContStds-SocSt.pdf>>.