

We would never take your land... (do you want to sell it?): Analyzing Jefferson's language, intent, and policies toward American Indians

General

Grade Level

Middle School

Author Info

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Type of Lesson

Document Analysis

Duration

50-90 minutes

Interdisciplinary Connections

Language Arts/Reading in the Content Area: close reading, document analysis, synthesis of multiple texts

Objectives

Overview

In this lesson students will compare two letters written by President Thomas Jefferson around the same

time, specifically addressing the issue of acquisition of Native lands by white settlers. Students will consider the message and audience of each letter and try to come to a consensus on Jefferson's true motives regarding the land and the treatment of the Indians.

This lesson can stand alone, or it can be the second in a series of lessons where students will come to know Jefferson's ideas and policies toward American Indians,* and how this laid the groundwork for Indian Removal and ongoing Resettlement and "Civilization" programs. Ideally it will follow lessons on Enlightenment ideals and how they were embodied by Jefferson, but this is not absolutely necessary for this lesson. It also may be followed by additional background material from secondary sources (provided) on Jefferson's attitudes and policies toward American Indians, but again, this is not absolutely necessary for the lesson itself to be worthwhile.

**I usually use the terms "American Indians" or "Indians" instead of "Native Americans," because they are most recently the preferred terminology. In fact, my Indian friends have told me that they prefer "Indian" unless you can name the tribe, in which case that is the best option.*

Prior Knowledge

Students should have at least a basic background knowledge of Thomas Jefferson as author of the Declaration of Independence, colonial governor, statesman, and President, during which time he was responsible for the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition. They should also have at least a general understanding of issues of Native Territory loss and conflict with white settlers since the beginning of the Colonial period, and hopefully, some knowledge of various treaties made with the Indians over the years, as well as the effects of the Treaty of Paris of 1763 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 on Indian land use and ownership.

State Standards

California Standards for History/Social Science:

- 8.4.1 Describe the country's physical landscapes, political divisions, and territorial expansion during the terms of the first four presidents.
- 8.5.3 Outline the major treaties with American Indian nations during the administrations of the first four presidents and the varying outcomes of those treaties.
- 8.8.2 Describe the purpose, challenges, and economic incentives associated with westward expansion, including the concept of Manifest Destiny (e.g., the Lewis and Clark expedition, accounts of the removal of Indians, the Cherokees' "Trail of Tears," settlement of the Great Plains) and the territorial acquisitions that spanned numerous decades

Common Core Standards:

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1](#) Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2](#) Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.9](#) Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source

on the same topic.

Objectives/Learning Outcomes

1. Students will use "close reading" to analyze a variety of primary sources written by Thomas Jefferson regarding American Indians, with a particular focus on purpose/audience.
2. Students will compare and contrast the language and intent in two documents in an attempt to determine the true intent.
3. (Depending on the class/teacher's goals,) Students will investigate further using scholarly secondary sources to better understand Jefferson's policies regarding Indians.
4. Students will make predictions about how these attitudes and policies would impact those of later administrations.

Additional Learning Outcomes

1. Students will write and be able to describe Jefferson's attitudes and policies toward American Indians.
2. Students will be able to explain how these attitudes were reflected in Jefferson's policies regarding the acquisition of American Indian land.
3. Students will make predictions regarding the results of these policies.

Procedures

1. *5-10 minutes*

Quick-write:

Give students 5 minutes to write about the following prompt. (Alternative: have students discuss with a partner.)

Think about what you know already about Thomas Jefferson and his attitudes toward American Indians. Based on this knowledge, what kind of policies do you think he made regarding the Indians and the lands in the West? Why do you think this?

After students have written/discussed, invite a few to share out their thinking. Be sure to ask them to provide rationale for their thoughts.

2. *5-7 minutes*

Introduction/Instructions: Tell students, *Today you will read two letters written by President Jefferson regarding his policy toward the Indians and their land. You and your partner will compare the language and message in the two letters, and then consider two questions:*

1. What were Jefferson's real motives toward the Indians and the western territories?
2. What impact do you think this will have on later policies and relations between the Indians and the United States? (Project these questions on the board.)

Background: *Handsome Lake was a Seneca Indian, which was part of the Iroquois nation. The Iroquois mostly supported the British during the War for Independence. During the War, General*

Washington had ordered the destruction of 40 Indian villages, crops, food stores, and fruit trees. Many Iroquois fled to Canada, but those who remained lost the majority of their land. Submerged in poverty and depression, many became alcoholics, which in turn made them poorer and more dependent. Handsome Lake quit drinking and prohibited the sale and consumption of alcohol among the Indians where he lived. President Jefferson respected this decision, and thought he could negotiate with this Indian, whom he believed to be more reasonable than others.

William Henry Harrison was a member of the Army and an aide to General Wayne during the Battle of Fallen Timbers. He was governor of the Indiana Territory, and Indian Commissioner under President Jefferson. Jefferson gave Harrison the assignment of the acquisition of Indian lands, by any means, promoting peace but authorizing the use of force. Harrison was amazingly successful at his job.

Sources:

<http://www.philtar.ac.uk/encyclopedia/nam/handsome.html>

<http://ezinearticles.com/?An-Interesting-Letter-From-Thomas-Jefferson-to-Handsome-Lake&id=1153407>

<http://www.nps.gov/jeff/historyculture/upload/owens.pdf>

3. 30-40 minutes

Independent/Partner Work: Pass out copies or

have students log onto computers to read the documents online. In the latter case, it's easiest if one student opens the document they are reading together and the other student opens the graphic organizer and types the responses. Here they will need to save it as their own document and upload it or print it for the teacher.

Students should practice sourcing and close-reading as they read each document, analyze the author's purpose and language use, and complete the graphic organizer. It is a good idea to highlight and/or take notes in the margins.

If some students finish earlier than others, have them write a synthesis paragraph (independently or in partners) to explain their interpretation of Jefferson's opinions regarding the Indians.

4. 5-10 minutes

Synthesis/Summary: Bring the students back as a whole group to discuss their findings. So *what did Jefferson really think about the Indians? How do you know? What did Jefferson really want for and from the Indians?*

Students are likely to have similar responses, but **must back up their response with concrete evidence from the texts.** Encourage discussion.

You may wish to collect in-class work at end of lesson, or have them take it to help them write a paragraph titled, "President's Jefferson's Indian Policies".

Related Assets

Handouts and Downloads

- [Two letters from President Jefferson about American Indians](#)

Materials

Materials Needed

Print two letters linked above, or have students access.

Complete transcriptions can be found below:

[President Jefferson's letter to Brother Handsome Lake](#), 1802

Jefferson, Thomas. "Jefferson's Letter to Brother Handsome Lake." *Jefferson's Indian Addresses*. Avalon Project/Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Library, 2008. Web. 29 July 2013. Originally written November 3, 1802. Washington, D.C.

[President Jefferson's letter to William Henry Harrison, 1803](#)

Jefferson, Thomas. "President Thomas Jefferson to William Henry Harrison, Governor of the Indiana Territory, 1803." *Digital History*. Digital History, n.d. Web. 29 July 2013.

Technology Needs

Teacher computer with internet to access document linked above, printer, copier; OR

Individual or shared student computers with internet

Assessment

Homework

(Optional) Students use completed graphic organizer to write paragraph titled, "Jefferson's Indian Policies". NOTE: If partners only completed one copy of the graphic organizer, one will need to send it to the other for use in writing the paragraph.

Assessment

Option 1: Completed graphic organizer with individual paragraph completed as homework.

Option 2: Students write independent paragraph, "President Jefferson's Indian Policies" the next day in class.

A proficient paragraph will:

1. Clearly describe what Jefferson wanted for and from the Indians.
2. Cite clear and logical evidence from the text to support #1.
3. Describe conflict between policies and language in letter to Handsome Lake (and others.)

An ADVANCED paragraph will include all of the above, AND:

1. Extend predictions/opinions regarding how these policies and discrepancies would affect the future for everyone.

Accommodations

Accommodations – Students with Special Needs

The following accommodations may help struggling students:

1. Pair a struggling reader or English Learner with a stronger reader.
2. Have a stronger reader read text aloud to struggling reader.
3. Provide extended time by giving documents to struggling student in advance, or accepting work later.
4. Accept less writing, but require highlighting/note-taking and a shorter synthesis paragraph.

If you have a class of many struggling students, or if this is the first time they have done this type of assignment, read and analyze the first document together as a whole class to model the work for them. (You may have to do more than one, depending on the class.)

If this seems accessible, but too long, jigsaw the readings in a way that each set of partners analyze only one of the texts, then re-mix the class so different partners can share their responses.

Accommodations – Advanced Learners

Encourage advanced learners to dig deeper:

1. Have students write a longer, more formal synthesis of their findings, and include their own opinion or reaction to their findings. (Were they surprised? Why or why not?)
2. Have students use the Internet to research this topic further and share new findings.

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