

Jefferson and the Press

General

Grade Level

High School

Author Info

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Type of Lesson

Document Analysis

Objectives

Overview

In this lesson students will examine the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Philip Freneau, a notable member of the press in Philadelphia. In 1791, Freneau started a newspaper in Philadelphia called the National Gazette. Over the course of its publication, the National Gazette consistently espoused Republican, Jeffersonian principles and was openly critical of the Federalist party. Also in Philadelphia was the similarly titled Gazette of the United States published by John Fenno, which tended to be supportive of Federalist policy and critical of Republicans. Prior to the starting of his newspaper, Freneau had been hired by Thomas Jefferson as a government translator, leading to accusations of corruption by Jefferson's political opponent, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton.

The correspondence that will be examined in this lesson plan includes a public criticism of Jefferson by Hamilton, Jefferson defending himself in a letter to George Washington, and a series of letters written about the hiring of Freneau prior to his arrival in Philadelphia.

Prior Knowledge

For this lesson to have the most impact on students, they should be familiar with the politics of the early years of the Republic. They should specifically be familiar with the development of the party system as well as key members and beliefs of each political party.

In addition, as this lesson is meant to be an examination of the relationship between the government and the press at America's founding, students would benefit from having an awareness of the relationship between the government and the press that exists in our nation today, and the role the press in general plays in our political world.

State Standards

Massachusetts

USI.22

Summarize the major policies and developments that took place during the presidencies of George Washington (1789-1797), John Adams (1797-1801), and Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809).

- A. The origins of the Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties in the 1790s.
- B. The conflicting ideas of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton.

USG5.3

Describe how citizens can monitor and influence local, state, and national government as individuals and members of interest groups.

Objectives/Learning Outcomes

Students will be able to demonstrate their ability to analyze and evaluate primary source documents.

Students will develop an understanding of the relationship between the government and the press during early American history.

Students will recognize that the press played and continues to play a key role in promoting disagreement between political parties.

Procedures

1. *30 minutes*

Class Discussion

This lesson should begin with a class discussion about the role the media plays in our political system today. The teacher should lead the class in a conversation, posing questions such as:

Do you think that the media today promotes political conflict?

Do you think that politicians attempt to manipulate the way they are covered in the press? (Think about “leaks” from government sources, “unnamed sources close to candidates,” etc.)

Are there media outlets that have bias? (Discuss examples, Fox News vs. MSNBC, etc.)

Is the media a vital component of our political system?

Does the 24 hour news cycle benefit or hurt the nation?

The teacher might consider searching for current events news articles that have cover political stories and ask students to look for evidence of bias.

2. 10 minutes

Provide Background

After having the class discussion, the instructor should provide the general background information that is present in the overview section of this lesson. A short explanation of who Philip Freneau and John Fenno were and what newspapers they started should provide the appropriate context.

3. 45 minutes

Source Analysis

All students should be provided with the set of documents in the document packet (available as a pdf in this lesson plan's materials section). The teacher can choose to have students analyze these documents in whatever fashion they wish. Below are a few recommendations.

Option 1: Remove the dates from each of the documents. Students, either working individually or in small groups, should then be asked to read and examine the documents closely and then attempt to put them in chronological order. This should force students to find important details from each document so that they can piece together the story of Jefferson's relationship with Freneau and the political consequences of that relationship.

Option 2: Ask students to complete a primary source analysis guide for each of the documents provided. The Library of Congress provides [primary source guides](https://www.loc.gov/primary-source-guides/) for students to use (loc.gov).

Option 3: Ask students to read through each of the documents and then answer the questions provided in the Document Questions sheet (available as a pdf in the materials section).

4. 45 minutes

Processing Activity

After completing one or more of the source analysis activities, the teacher should endeavor to get students to interact with the material in greater depth. One or more of the following activities could be used to encourage higher level thinking.

Option 1: Performance/Skit

In small groups, students should create a skit with Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, and Freneau as characters. Larger groups could also include Washington and Randolph as characters. Instruct students to come up with a fictional scene or scenes in which these characters interact. Students should use information from the documents to tell a story.

Option 2: Letter to the Editor

Write a letter to the editor of either John Fenno's Gazette of the United States or Philip Freneau's National Gazette that responds to Hamilton's critique of Jefferson (Document 1). Students can choose to write this letter from the perspective of a Republican or a Federalist, either criticizing or agreeing with Hamilton's accusation.

Option 3: Discussion Questions

Either engage the class in a discussion of the documents that is teacher led, or encourage students to come up with their own list of questions and allow them to lead the discussion. Possible teacher led discussion questions could include:

Do you think that Jefferson lied to President Washington when he said with regards to Freneau's paper: "But as to any other direction or indication of my wish how his press should be conducted, what sort of intelligence he should give, what essays encourage, I can protest, in the presence of heaven, that I never did by myself, or any other, or indirectly, say a syllable, nor attempt any kind of influence. "

Do you think that there is a conflict of interest if a publisher of a widely read newspaper also receives a salary from the United States Government? Why or why not?

Does Hamilton stoop to low levels of petty bickering by engaging the public in this issue?

Do you find it surprising that members of the same Presidential administration would be engaged in a public feud? Would you be surprised if something like this occurred today? Why or why not?

Do these letters change your opinion of Jefferson? Of Hamilton?

What do these letters tell us about the relationship with Jefferson and Madison?

Materials

Materials Needed

[Document Packet](#)

[Document Questions](#)

Assessment

Formative:

As the students are working on analyzing the sources, the teacher should check in with them individually to assess understanding and comprehension.

The teacher should also be able to formatively assess student learning and comprehension during class discussions.

Summative:

The instructor can choose to assess this lesson in a variety of ways. This will depend on which of the activities that were chosen for source analysis and processing. The skit performance or letter to the editor can be collected as a homework assignment or as a graded assignment. In addition, the teacher could choose to collect responses to document questions to check for completion and accuracy.

Accommodations

Accommodations – Students with Special Needs

In order to meet the needs of a diverse set of learners, this lesson can be modified in a variety of ways:

The documents could be reduced in length. In particular the first two documents (Hamilton's essay and Jefferson's letter to Washington) are particularly lengthy. The instructor could reduce the length of these documents significantly.

The number of documents could be reduced.

The teacher could model document analysis.

Additional context could be provided regarding who Freneau was and what type of relationship he had with Jefferson.

The teacher could provide students with specific scenarios for the creation of a skit (for example: *Jefferson and Freneau are at a coffee shop discussing plans for a newspaper*)

Accommodations – Advanced Learners

In order to meet the needs of more advanced learners, the document questions or document analysis form could be eliminated. In addition, the teacher could provide less context, allowing the students to embrace the role of a historian who is attempting to research a topic without all of the context neatly provided.