

Merciless savages or eminent orators: What did Jefferson really think about the Indians?

General

Grade Level

Middle School

Author Info

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Type of Lesson

Document Analysis

Duration

1-2 class periods

Interdisciplinary Connections

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

Objectives

Overview

In this lesson students will explore a wide range of primary sources written by Thomas Jefferson regarding American Indians,* in an attempt to determine his true feelings and opinions about them and their place in society.

This will be the first 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. It will follow lessons on Enlightenment ideals and how they were embodied by Jefferson.

**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 already have a good background on Enlightenment ideals and how Jefferson embodied them. They should be familiar with the ideas of natural law and rights, such as life, liberty, and property; with the importance of the Scientific Revolution and rapid advances in scientific thinking and methodology; with the Enlightenment emphasis on education, and with "natural history" in science. In this series of lessons they will begin to apply concepts of natural history to social structures, thereby understanding how Enlightenment thinkers legitimized class and racial dominance.

For more background on Jefferson and the Enlightenment, click [here](#).

State Standards

California History/Social Science Standards:

- 7.11.5 Describe how democratic thought and institutions were influenced by Enlightenment thinkers (e.g., John Locke, Charles-Louis Montesquieu, American founders).
- 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, including date and audience.
2. Students will apply their understanding of Enlightenment ideals to understanding Jefferson's varied opinions on American Indians.
3. Students will attempt to synthesize these varied opinions to determine Jefferson's true feelings toward American Indians, and predict how this will affect future policies.

Technology Connections/outcomes

In California, this lesson connects to and reviews 7th grade standards on the Enlightenment.

Additional Learning Outcomes

1. Students will understand that Thomas Jefferson expressed divergent opinions regarding Native Americans, and form a hypothesis as to what may have influenced these apparent discrepancies.
2. Students will make connections between Enlightenment thinking and Jefferson's reasoning/rationalization of his attitude toward Native Americans.
3. Students will write and be able to express their own determination of Jefferson's true attitude toward Native Americans, and make predictions as to how this will affect later policies.

Procedures

1. *5-10 minutes*

Depending on background students have already, teacher may wish to include a mini-lesson or provide background or review of the Enlightenment.

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. Based on this knowledge, what do you think he thought about the American Indians (Native Americans)? 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. *3-5 minutes*

Introduction/Instructions: Tell students, *"Today we will read several different documents, all written by Thomas Jefferson at different points in his life, which discuss or mention the Indians. From these documents, you and your partner need to determine what you think his real feelings were toward the Indians. At the end of the lesson you will consider and form predictions as to how you think these ideas might have affected his policies as a political leader."*

Be sure to source your documents carefully— look at the kind of document, date it was written, and to whom. You will have a few questions to answer for each document."

3. 30-40 minutes

Independent/Partner Work: Either show images and pass out copies, or have students log onto computers to view the images and 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 *questions* and types the answers. 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 answer the Guiding Questions. 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 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? How do these writings reflect Jefferson's Enlightenment ideals?*

Students are likely to have varied responses, but **must back up their response with concrete evidence from the texts.** Encourage discussion of different interpretations. Collect in-class work at end of lesson. You will probably need to assign the essay response as homework.

Materials

Materials Needed

Images:

[Portrait of Young Chief](#)

[Reproduction of Mandan Buffalo Robe](#)

[Entrance Hall with Indian Artifacts](#)

All documents below are also hyperlinked above. This is in case hyperlink doesn't work.

(Documents A-C are images)

Document D

Extract from the Declaration of Independence, 1776

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare, is undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

Read full original or transcription of Declaration [here](#).

Document E

Extract from Thomas Jefferson to Jean Baptiste Ducoigne

June 1781

I have joined with you sincerely in smoking the pipe of peace... It is a good old custom handed down by your ancestors, and as such I respect and join in it with reverence. I hope we shall long continue to smoke in friendship together... We like you, are Americans, born in the same land, and having the same interests.

Source: Jefferson speech to Jean Baptiste Ducoigne, a Kaskaskia (Indian) leader. Jefferson made this speech shortly before ending his term as governor of Virginia. This was three years after General George Rogers Clark destroyed the old French settlement at Kaskaskia, killing many Indians and extending Virginia's borders into Illinois.

Full document [here](#)

Document F

From *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1784

The Indians, with no advantages of this kind, will often carve figures on their pipes not destitute of design and merit. They will crayon out an animal, a plant, or a country, so as to prove the existence of a germ in their minds which only wants cultivation. They astonish you with strokes of the most sublime oratory; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated. But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture.

Source: This is one of two published sources written by Jefferson, this being the only full/length book. It was written in 1784 to inform the French government about the American states, so as to encourage

France to support the cause of American independence.

Full text of this section [here](#).

Document G

Extract from Thomas Jefferson to Marquis de Chastellux

Paris June 7. 1785.

I believe the Indian then to be in body & mind equal to the whiteman. I have supposed the black man, in his present state, might not be so. but it would be hazardous to affirm that, equally cultivated for a few generations, he would not become so.

Source: Jefferson wrote this letter to Chastellux while serving as American representative in Paris. Jefferson and Chastellux met in America when Chastellux served as an important member of the French alliance during the Revolution. PrC (DLC). Published in PTJ, 8:184–86.

Document H

Extract from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison

Paris Jan. 30. 1787.

[...]societies exist under three forms sufficiently distinguishable. 1. without government, as among our Indians. 2. under governments wherein the will of every one has a just influence, as is the case in England in a slight degree, and in our states in a great one. 3. under governments of force: as is the case in all other monarchies and in most of the other republics. to have an idea of the curse of existence under these last, they must be seen. it is a government of wolves over sheep. it is a problem, not clear in my mind, that the 1st. condition is not the best. but I believe it to be inconsistent with any great degree of population. the second state has a great deal of good in it. the mass of mankind under that enjoys a precious degree of liberty and happiness. it has its evils too: the principal of which is the turbulence to which it is subject. but weigh this against the oppressions of monarchy, and it becomes nothing.

Source: Jefferson wrote this letter to James Madison while serving as the American representative in Paris, to advise Madison on the formation of the new government as Madison prepared to draft the Constitution. Here Jefferson is describing the positive and negative aspects of different types of government. RC (DLC: Madison Papers). Published in PTJ, 11:92–7.

Full document [here](#).

Document I

Extract from Thomas Jefferson's Instructions to Lewis and Clark, 1803

In all your intercourse [contact; dealings] with the natives, treat them in the most friendly & conciliatory manner which their own conduct will admit; allay all jealousies as to the object of your journey, satisfy them of its innocence, make them acquainted with the position, extent, character, peaceable & commercial dispositions of the U.S. of our wish to be neighborly, friendly & useful to them, & of our dispositions to a commercial intercourse with them; confer with them on the points most convenient as mutual emporiums, and the articles of most desirable interchange for them & us. If a few of their influential chiefs, within practicable distance, wish to visit us, arrange such a visit with them, and furnish them with authority to call on our officers, on their entering the U.S to have them conveyed to this place at the public expense. If any of them should wish to have some of their young people brought up with us, & taught such arts as may be useful to them, we will receive, instruct & take care of them. Such a mission, whether of influential chiefs or of young people, would give some security to your own party. Carry with you some matter of the kinepox; inform those of them with whom you may be, of it'[s] efficacy as a preservative from the small-pox; & instruct & encourage them in the use of it. This may be especially done wherever you winter.

Source: This letter from Thomas Jefferson to explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark included detailed instructions to them to be carried out on their upcoming journey west.

Full document [here](#).

Document J

Extract from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams

Monticello June 11. 1812.

Before the revolution they were in the habit of coming often, and in great numbers to the seat of our government, where I was very much with them. I knew much the great Outassete [i.e., Outacity], the warrior and orator of the Cherokees. He was always the guest of my father, on his journeys to and from Williamsburg. I was in his camp when he made his great farewell oration to his people, the evening before his departure for England. The moon was in full splendor, and to her he seemed to address himself in his prayers for his own safety on the voyage, and that of his people during his absence. His sounding voice, distinct articulation, animated actions, and the solemn silence of his people at their several fires, filled me with awe and veneration, altho' I did not understand a word he uttered. That nation, consisting now of about 2000. warriors, and the Creeks of about 3000. are far advanced in civilisation. They have good Cabins, inclosed fields, large herds of cattle and hogs, spin and weave their own clothes of cotton, have smiths and other of the most necessary tradesmen, write and read, are on the increase in numbers, and a branch of the Cherokees is now instituting a regular representative government. Some other tribes were advancing in the same line. On those who have made any progress, English seductions will have no effect. But the backward will yeild, and be thrown further back. These will relapse into barbarism and misery, lose numbers by war and want, and we shall be obliged to

drive them, with the beasts of the forest into the Stony mountains. They will be conquered however in Canada. The possession of that country secures our women and children for ever from the tomahawk and scalping knife, by removing those who excite them: and for this possession, orders I presume are issued by this time...

Source: This is one of the many letters written by Thomas Jefferson to John Adams in their retirement. (Note this version has been edited for more standard spelling and punctuation.) RC (MHi). PoC (DLC). Published in *PTJ:RS*, 5:122–5.

Full text [here](#).

Assessment

Homework

Option 1: Students complete synthesis/summary and prediction essay at home.

Option 2 (If #1 was completed in class): Students take the position of one of the recipients of one of Jefferson's letters studied in class, and write a response.

Assessment

Option 1: Synthesis/summary demonstrates clear understanding of different perspectives expressed in different documents, makes a clear statement of which is the "real" opinion and why, and cites specific textual evidence.

If this is too much for your students, keep it to only one paragraph to answer the first question, and discuss the Enlightenment ideals and predictions for policy in class the next day.

Option 2: Reply letter demonstrates clear understanding opinion(s) expressed in letter and responds accordingly and appropriately, showing an additional understanding of the likely point of view of the recipient. (This will demonstrate an understanding of the Enlightenment ideals prevalent in Jefferson's circle of influence.)

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 3-4 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.

Resources

Guiding Questions

Documents A-C

1. What do these images show?
2. What do these images tell you about Jefferson, as their owner?
3. Who was the intended audience? (Who would see them?)
4. Based on these images, what did Jefferson think about the Indians? How do you know?

Document D

5. What year was this document written, and who was its audience?

6. What was the purpose of this document? How do you know?

7. Based on this document, what was Jefferson's opinion of the Indians? Explain your answer by citing specific evidence from the text.

Document E

8. What year was this document written, and who was its audience?

9. What was the purpose of this document? How do you know?

10. Based on this document, what was Jefferson's opinion of the Indians? Explain your answer by citing specific evidence from the text.

Documents F and G

11. What year were these documents written, and who was their audience?

12. What was the purpose of these documents? How do you know?

13. Based on these documents, what was Jefferson's opinion of the Indians? Explain your answer by citing specific evidence from the text.

Document H

14. What year was this document written, and who was its audience?

15. What was the purpose of this document? How do you know?

16. Based on this document, what was Jefferson's opinion of the Indians? Explain your answer by citing specific evidence from the text.

Document I

17. What year was this document written, and who was its audience?

18. What was the purpose of this document? How do you know?

19. Based on this document, what was Jefferson's opinion of the Indians? Explain your answer by citing specific evidence from the text.

Document J

20. What year was this document written, and who was its audience?

21. What was the purpose of this document? How do you know?

22. Based on this document, what was Jefferson's opinion of the Indians? Explain your answer by citing specific evidence from the text.

The logo for The Jefferson MONTICELLO. It features the name "The Jefferson" in a cursive script font, with "MONTICELLO" in a bold, uppercase, sans-serif font below it.

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