

The Declaration of Independence and the “merciless Indian Savages”

Fast Facts

Curriculum Area: Social Studies
Grade Level: Middle/High School
Suggested Duration: Two 50-minute class periods.

Stage 1 Desired Results

Montana Content Standards

SS.CG.6-8.3 Explain how global and American Indian civilizations and governments have contributed to foundational documents of the United States.

SS.H.6-8.6 Understand that there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of historical events.

SS.H.6-8.7 Analyze how people's perspectives shaped the historical narratives they created.

SS.H.6-8.8 Identify limitations and biases in primary and secondary sources, specifically regarding misinformation and stereotypes.

SS.CG.9-12.1 Analyze and evaluate the ideas and principles contained in the foundational documents of the United States and explain how they establish a system of government that has powers, responsibilities, and limits.

SS.H.9-12.7 Analyze how historical, cultural, social, political, ideological, and economic contexts shape people's perspectives.

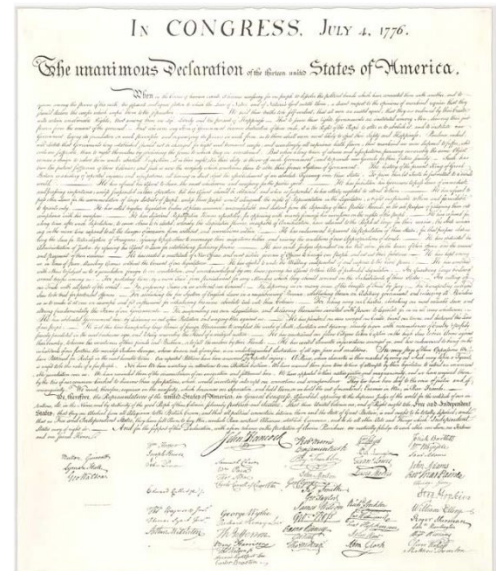
SS.H.9-12.11 Evaluate the limitations, biases, and credibility of various sources, especially regarding misinformation and stereotypes.

Understandings

- History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised.
- History told from American Indian perspectives frequently conflicts with the stories mainstream historians tell. (EU 6)

Essential Questions

- Why is it important to examine historical events from multiple perspectives?
- Why would the authors of the Declaration intentionally include biased and inaccurate statements about American Indians?



- Why are primary sources important and how can primary sources help us discover missing pieces of our history?
- To what extent do myths or lies about American Indians get perpetuated in history textbooks?

Students will be able to...

- identify and analyze key concepts regarding early colonization and falsehoods about American Indians.
- evaluate information about American Indians from historical documents.

Students will know...

- about the multiple viewpoints regarding events and issues associated with colonization and historically inaccurate information put forth about American Indians.

Stage 2 Assessment Evidence

1. Participate in class discussion and read and react to information describing how American Indians have been portrayed in the Declaration of Independence.
2. Review Key Concepts from the *Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians*.
3. Evaluate and analyze their own textbook for biased information about American Indians.
4. Evaluate and analyze a letter written by George Washington in 1779.

Stage 3 Learning Plan

This lesson would work well when studying about the American Revolution. The upcoming 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence also provides an excellent opportunity to revisit this historic document and examine how American Indians were inaccurately portrayed.

Day 1

Display the following quote, ask a student to read it aloud, and facilitate a brief discussion:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Pose this question "Who was not represented by this statement?"

Now display this quote and ask a student to read it aloud.

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

Facilitate another discussion and compare it with the first quote.

Define the term "savage" and discuss the meaning and implications for labeling all American Indians as "savage". Share the [definition of "savage" from Meriam Webster](#):

1 old-fashioned + offensive: a person belonging to a primitive society

2 : a brutal person

3 : a rude or unmannerly person

: to attack or treat brutally

Pose this question to the class:

Why would the authors of the Declaration intentionally include biased and inaccurate statements about American Indians?

Throughout American history there are many examples of how American Indians were dehumanized to serve a political purpose, in this case, lumping them all into one category as merciless savages to justify killing and removal from their homelands.

Next, have students read what their US history textbook says about the Declaration of Independence.

- Are Native American perspectives included?
- Is there any coverage of the complex interactions with tribes and their dealings with the Colonists, the British or the French? (Remind students that some tribes sided with the British and some tribes remained neutral.)
- Is there any mention of the merciless Indian savages statement?

If time permits, close out the class period by having students listen to this NPR broadcast: [Examining A Racist Passage In The Declaration Of Independence: NPR](#) (6 min)

Day 2

Have students do a close analytical reading of the Declaration. Ask them to take notes and highlight words or phrases that resonate with them. Have copies of the Declaration for each student printed out prior to class and allow time in class for students to read through the entire document. An audio version of the Declaration can be found [here](#).

Ask students to read the Declaration and highlight key concepts and ideas regarding freedom and the portrayal of the British and American Indians. You could also provide students with a copy of the Historical and Primary Document Analysis Worksheet to use as they do their analysis.

Next, utilize the Analysis Worksheet and ask students to review the following letter written by George Washington in 1779. Discuss bias and perspective in the context of the Revolutionary War.

[George Washington to Major John Sullivan, 31 May 1779](#) – Letter to Sullivan with directions to attack “hostile” tribes of the six nations. Possible quotes to share with the students for discussion:

“The immediate objects are the total destruction and devastation of their settlements and the capture of as many prisoners of every age and sex as possible. It will be essential to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent their planting more.”

“I would recommend that some post in the center of the Indian Country should be occupied with all expedition, with a sufficient quantity of provision, whence parties should be detached to lay waste all the settlements around with instructions to do it in the most effectual manner, that the country may not be merely overrun but destroyed.”

“But you will not by any means listen to (any) overture of peace before the total ruin of their settlements is effected”

Compare/contrast these statements with the biased language from the Declaration and discuss.

Close out the class by showing this brief video from the History Channel and ask for student reactions. [America the Story of Us: Declaration of Independence – Video from the History Channel](#) Refer back to essential understanding six before they watch the clip.

Ask students if this clip includes multiple perspectives on the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution. Then ask them what perspectives could be added to it to make it more accurate and inclusive.

Display the Essential Questions and ask students to share their thoughts regarding them (verbally and/or in writing).

- Why is it important to examine historical events from multiple perspectives?
- Why would the authors of the Declaration intentionally include biased and inaccurate statements about American Indians?
- Why are primary sources important and how can primary sources help us discover missing pieces of our history?
- To what extent do myths or lies about American Indians get perpetuated in history textbooks?

Teacher background

[Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians](#). Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2024.

[Essential Understandings Key Concepts](#). Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2019.

[Evaluating American Indian Materials and Resources for the Classroom](#). Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2015.

[Declaration of Independence](#), maintained by the National Archives, accessed March 1, 2024.

[Dylan Huisken MT Teacher of the Year \(2019\)](#). Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2020.

- This is a discussion of the importance of IEFA and teaching a lesson on biases within texts.

[Monticello and the Thomas Jefferson Foundation](#), accessed March 1, 2024.

This website provides good background information regarding Thomas Jefferson's interactions with and perceptions of Native Americans.

These following lesson plans contain some good activities for teaching about the Declaration of Independence, but both failed to bring up any mention of the statement about Native Americans.

[Declare the Causes: The Declaration of Independence](#), maintained by the National Endowment for the Humanities, accessed March 1, 2024.

Larson, Mike and Doug Hyde. [The Declaration of Independence: Created Equal?](#) Washington, DC: Library of Congress

[George Washington to Major John Sullivan, 31 May 1779](#) – Letter to Sullivan with directions to attack “hostile” tribes of the six nations.

Historical and Primary Document Analysis Worksheet

Student's Name: _____ Date: _____

Title of Document: _____

Date of Document: _____ Location (published or created): _____

Author/Illustrator/Creator: _____

Document Type (letter, newspaper article, treaty, political cartoon, drawing, etc.):

Who was the intended audience for this document? _____

How is this document related to events that were happening when and where it was created?

What is the main topic of the document? _____

Does the creator of the document use words, phrases, or images to influence the viewer's opinion on this topic? _____ If so, what words, phrases, or images did the creator use to influence the viewer's opinion?

Does the creator of this document try to persuade the reader/viewer to take action? _____ If so, what action? _____ What words, phrases, or images suggest this action? _____

List any words, phrases, or visual imagery from this document that you interpreted as being value judgments: _____
stereotypes: _____
distortion: _____
ethnocentrism: _____
other forms of bias: _____

When you read this document, how did it make you feel or what did it make you think? Why?

