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Document-Based Activities on the Civil War

Using Primary Sources and the Internet

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DOCUMENT-BASED ACTIVITIES ON THE CIVIL WAR

TEACHER INTRODUCTION

Description:

In this unit, students recognize the events and effects of the Civil War (1861–1865) on America as a whole as well as on Americans of different social, economic, and cultural walks of life. They will investigate various events and themes of the war, and how the war affected American history. Primary sources (including diaries, military reports, and government documents) help students to develop a general concept of the importance of the Civil War and its impact upon America.

Unit Objectives:

Knowledge: students will

- understand the beginning of the Civil War as well as some of the major events and battles
- evaluate how the war affected various minority groups, including blacks and women
- recognize the effects of the Civil War on American history and American life

Skills: students will

- analyze, evaluate, and interpret primary source documents
- communicate effectively the results of their analysis in discussion and written argument
- use relevant and adequate evidence to draw conclusions

Prior Knowledge Required:

Students should have studied the Civil War period and the political, social, and economic conditions that preceded the war. They should know the causes of the war and be familiar with the major events of the period.

Lesson Format:

Each lesson consists of two parts: a teacher page containing an introduction, objectives, URL(s) used in the lesson, teaching strategies, Wrap-Up questions, and an extension activity; and a reproducible student page with a brief introduction which sets the context for the lesson, URL(s) used, and questions to be answered about the source.

Assessment:

Based on the time available, you may want to select which answers you want to assess in each activity. Most questions require short answers; others will require a response of anywhere from a paragraph to a full page (or longer if preferred).

Suggested rubrics are included in the Appendix.

Additional Sources:

The Appendix contains answer keys, primary source documents, an annotated list of Web sites on the Civil War period, rubrics, and supplementary materials available from www.socialstudies.com.

OVERVIEW: THE CIVIL WAR

“...That we here highly resolve that these honored dead shall not have died in vain... that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

—Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address

In April 1861, sectional conflict between the North and South exploded into Civil War when Confederate troops fired on Union-held Fort Sumter outside Charleston, South Carolina. While there were no casualties at Fort Sumter, the war that followed became the bloodiest in U.S. history. Over 600,000 Americans from the Union and Confederacy died, and nearly 500,000 were wounded.

After the fall of Fort Sumter to the Confederacy, President Abraham Lincoln called for volunteers to quell the rebellion. Hundreds of thousands took up arms. Southerners, wanting to preserve their way of life, did the same. The war divided not only the nation, but divided families as well. Lincoln’s brother-in-law died fighting for the Confederacy, while Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s nephew fought for the Union Navy. Several counties in the Western part of Virginia were anti-slavery; during the war, they seceded from Virginia and were admitted into the Union in 1863 as the state of West Virginia. In addition, several “border states” remained loyal to the Union, even though many of their residents were slaveholders.

Both the Union and Confederacy developed military strategies to subdue their foe. The Union’s was dubbed the “Anaconda Plan” because it was designed to strangle the Confederacy similar to how the anaconda snake suffocates its victims in its coils. The Union would blockade Southern ports, split the Confederacy in two along the Mississippi River, and seize the Confederate capital at Richmond, Virginia. The Confederate strategy was mostly defensive, although Confederate leaders, including President Jefferson Davis, encouraged their generals to attack or invade the North if the opportunity arose.

While the North had the larger share of industrial, economic, and political resources, the South could rely on their economic resource of “King Cotton,” as well as an abundance of great military leaders, including Robert E. Lee. Although often criticized, Abraham Lincoln proved to be a superior leader to Jefferson Davis, who found himself often unable to carry out policies needed to support the Confederate war effort.

Early in the war, Confederate victories were numerous. The opening battle of the war at Bull Run creek (near Manassas, Virginia) was won through the inspirational leadership of General Thomas J. Jackson, who earned the nickname “Stonewall.” In an effort to stem the tide of Southern victories, President Lincoln appointed a series of generals to command the Union army, including General George McClellan. However, McClellan proved to be overcautious and unable to successfully capitalize on the Union’s superior numbers and greater supplies to defeat the Confederates. However, Lincoln finally found a general who would take the battle to the Confederacy: General Ulysses S. Grant, who had become known as a tough, brave, and decisive commander in battles such as Shiloh and Fort Donelson and Fort Henry.

At Antietam (near Sharpsburg, Maryland) Lee's forces were defeated in the bloodiest one-day battle in American history. More than 26,000 died in the failed attempt by the South to invade the North. While the battle was not settled decisively in favor of the Union, it gave Lincoln enough of a victory so that he could issue the Emancipation Proclamation from a perceived position of strength, and thus prevent the measure from being seen as an act of desperation. Lincoln had known from the outset of the war that if he made ending slavery one of the Union's main goals, he might lose crucial support from the border states. The Proclamation was therefore portrayed as simply a war measure designed to unify the North and undermine the South. By signing the Proclamation, Lincoln announced his plan to free slaves, but only in "territories in rebellion," meaning that only slaves in the Confederacy, and not ones in border states, were free.

Later in 1863, the North and the South fought a historic battle at Gettysburg, in south central Pennsylvania. Names such as "Cemetery Ridge," "Little Round Top," "Devil's Den," and "Pickett's Charge" became known to millions as the two armies fought in what many view as the decisive battle of the war. When the Confederates retreated, over 40,000 were dead, and the South had suffered a defeat from which it would not recover. During the same few days in July 1863, Union troops captured Vicksburg and gained control of the Mississippi River. A few months after the battle, Lincoln was invited to add "a few appropriate remarks" at a ceremony dedicating the Gettysburg battlefield as a national cemetery. In the words of historian Garry Wills, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address "remade America."

After Gettysburg, the war turned into one of attrition, with the North wearing down the Confederacy. Grant lost nearly double the men Lee did during the Virginia Wilderness campaign, but unlike the Union the Confederacy didn't have reserves to replace those lost troops. General William Tecumseh Sherman marched through Georgia, carving a wide path of destruction, burning Atlanta, and finally reaching the sea at Savannah. The Union was able to capture the Confederate capital, Richmond, early in 1865.

Finally, in April 1865, Lee surrendered his army to Grant at Appomattox Court House. Terms of the surrender were generous, with Lee's men being allowed to keep horses, personal possessions, and food, as well as his officers being allowed to keep their sidearms. However, the bloodshed of the Civil War was not yet over. Less than a week after Lee surrendered, John Wilkes Booth, a Southern sympathizer, assassinated President Lincoln as he watched a play in Ford's Theater in Washington. Millions mourned the fallen Lincoln, who was seen as the "Great Emancipator" because of his work in ending slavery. Without the leadership of Lincoln, others would have to guide the nation through Reconstruction.

The Surrender of Fort Sumter

Teacher Page

Overview:

The primary sources for this lesson are written reports from General G.T. Beauregard to Confederate President Jefferson Davis on the Union surrender at Fort Sumter, and various correspondence from Major Robert Anderson, Union commander at Fort Sumter. Beauregard's report describes the bombardment and fall of Fort Sumter, while Anderson's account also includes correspondence with Beauregard.

Objectives:

Students will:

- understand an account of the first action of the Civil War
- compare two sources from the opposing sides in the conflict
- analyze the author's views and perception of the event
- make conclusions about the author's report

Web Sites Used in this Lesson:

All Web links for this lesson can be found at: <http://www.socialstudies.com/uslinks.html>

Send students directly to http://www.socialstudies.com/article.html?article@beauregard_ftsumter, which is the Beauregard account, but does not include further information about the firing on Fort Sumter, why the war began with this event, etc.

Students should also go to http://www.socialstudies.com/article.html?article@anderson_ftsumter, which includes Anderson's account as well as correspondence he made with General Beauregard.

Strategies:

Introduce the lesson with a brief discussion about the events that led to the firing on Fort Sumter, the geographic location of the fort, and the major persons involved in the event (Beauregard, Major Robert Anderson, Edmund Ruffin).

Distribute the handout to students. Students will answer questions based on the Beauregard account.

Student answers for questions one through six may be 2–3 sentences. Responses to question 7 can range from a single paragraph to a maximum of one page, depending on time available.

Wrap-Up:

After students have answered questions, have a discussion regarding the historical accuracy of General Beauregard's account of the fall of Fort Sumter as compared to other historical sources, such as their history textbook, or some of the links in the <http://www.awod.com/gallery/probono/cwchas/sumter.html> resource.

Extension Activity:

Have students research Northern accounts of the fall of the fort, and write newspaper stories about the fall of Fort Sumter based on the accounts of Northern and Southern participants.

The Surrender of Fort Sumter

Student Worksheet

Introduction:

After the secession of several southern states, including South Carolina, Confederate forces began to take over federal installations in their states, especially forts. One of the most important federal forts in the South was Fort Sumter, located in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. When Robert Anderson, the commander of the fort, asked newly inaugurated President Lincoln to send supplies to the men stationed at Sumter, Lincoln had a difficult decision to make. If he sent supplies, the Confederates might see it as an act of war and fire on the fort. Ultimately, Lincoln decided to resupply the fort, the Confederates opened fire on Sumter, the federal troops surrendered, and the Civil War began.

All Web links for this lesson can be found at: <http://www.socialstudies.com/uslinks.html>

Directions:

Reports of the Surrender of Fort Sumter

Go to http://www.socialstudies.com/article.html?article@beauregard_ftsumter and http://www.socialstudies.com/article.html?article@anderson_ftsumter

Answer the following questions about these sources:

1. Who was the author of the report noted in http://www.socialstudies.com/article.html?article@beauregard_ftsumter? What qualifications did he have to make this report? To whom was the report being made?
2. Who was the author of the reports in http://www.socialstudies.com/article.html?article@anderson_ftsumter? What qualifications did he have to make this report? To whom was the report being made?
3. According to Major Anderson, what effect did the Confederate guns have on Fort Sumter?

4. Next, look at the correspondence contained in Anderson's statement from General Beauregard. What sort of tone does Beauregard use in his various requests for Anderson to surrender the fort? Why do you think he chose to demand Anderson's surrender in this manner?

5. In Beauregard's account, he notes, "our guns were served with skill and energy." What evidence does he give to substantiate that claim?

6. Beauregard notes that he "dispatched an offer of assistance" to Major Anderson during the bombardment. For what reason did he do so?

7. In your opinion, does General Beauregard's account or Major Anderson's account represent a more unbiased view of the events which occurred at Fort Sumter? Give reasons for your answer.