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Decision Making in U.S. History

Antebellum America

Kevin O'Reilly

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Think of this book, and the other books in this series, not as a text, but as a menu. As a teacher, you select lessons from the menu. It was never intended that you would have everything on the menu—that would be overeating. Take a look at the table of contents. When choosing a lesson, look first at the problems on the student handout(s), and then at the student handout describing these problems’ historical outcomes. If you like what you see, take a look at the lesson plan for ideas on using the handouts. You can teach all of the lessons by giving students a problem handout, having them discuss what they would do, and finally distributing the outcomes handout. You may also consult the “Quick Motivator” section of a lesson plan to use the handouts as a short introduction to class.

On the other hand, you can think of this book as a “how-to” guide for teaching specific decision-making skills while also covering significant events in United States history. The book posits a general guideline of ten distinct skills, organized under the acronym **P-A-G-E** to help students remember these skills. Take a look at the explanation of **P-A-G-E** in the introduction to this book, under the section titled “Guide to Thoughtful Decision Making.” This section explains each of the ten skills and includes examples.

Every lesson in this series analyzes the historical topic in terms of **P-A-G-E**. Each lesson targets specific skills, letting the content and the actual decision in history determine the skills emphasized in the lesson. Take a look at the skills grid for each lesson on page 1 of this book. Handouts are frequently used to focus students on using specific skills. For example, many lessons include a list of questions designed to provoke more questions from students, as well as to give them ideas of the types of questions to ask. Other lessons give students a list of assumptions and ask which they assumed in making their decisions. The other skills have similar handouts.

Whether you try the problem-discussion-outcome approach or concentrate more on specific decision-making skills, I hope these books will help make you a more effective teacher and help your students learn United States history in a way that will help prepare them to make more thoughtful decisions as citizens.

Kevin O’Reilly

INTRODUCTION

RATIONALE: Hindsight versus Foresight

When we study history, it is all too easy to sit in judgment of those who came before us. We read it after the fact; we see it in hindsight. Given the benefit of such 20/20 hindsight, some historical figures seem to have been very misguided or downright silly in their decisions. Why didn't they anticipate the consequences of their choices? How could they have been so shortsighted? Sports enthusiasts call this sort of analysis "Monday morning quarterbacking."

However, it's not so easy to laugh at the follies of past decision makers if we are confronted with decisions in history before we learn the actual results. In such a situation, we find ourselves making some of the same mistakes that historical characters made, and we sometimes commit new errors they did not make. This method of studying history, which we might call "foresight history," is far more challenging—and engaging—than the traditional retroactive method to which we are inured.

In short, when we learn history by hindsight we risk becoming more arrogant and complacent. If, on the other hand, we learn history by *foresight*, by casting ourselves in the role of those historical figures and making decisions as they did—without knowing the outcome—we can learn humility and gain a great deal of empathy for them. Students in my classes constantly exclaim, "This is hard!" as opposed to, "This is boring!"

Foresight history also helps students improve key decision-making skills they will use again and again as citizens. Schools of law, medicine, business, and nursing, along with the military and many other institutions, use case-study methods, where students are forced to make decisions about a particular case and then analyze their thinking. If each of these varied disciplines values decision making so much, shouldn't we be training all our future citizens how to make good decisions?

History provides many benefits for those who study it. Historical knowledge can be liberating all by itself, letting us draw back the veil of ignorance and see the present with eyes enlightened by the past. The more knowledge of history we possess, the better we understand our societies and ourselves. Study and evaluation of primary sources, discussions of motives, debates about significance, analyzing causes and effects, and many other strategies are vital to history courses. The lessons here on decision making are meant to support and enhance these other methods of studying history, not replace them with a more "practical" type of history.

ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

Introduction

OVERVIEW

This volume on antebellum America consists of eight lessons on reforms in the Jacksonian era, the Mexican War, and sectional conflicts leading to the Civil War. As in the other volumes, no effort is made to cover all the major topics in this time period. Rather, lessons were chosen around interesting decision-making problems.

SKILLS GRID FOR THIS VOLUME

X = part of lesson

E = emphasized in the lesson

Skill	Lessons							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Underlying problem	X	X		X	E	X	X	X
Point of view		X		X	X	X		X
Assumptions/emotions		X		X		X		X
Ask—context	X	E	X	X	X	X	X	E
Ask—sources	X		E			E		
Ask—analogies		X			X		X	
Goals? Realistic?	E	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Options. Ethical?		X		X		E	X	X
Unintended consequences		X		E	X	E	X	E
Play out options		X		X	X	X	E	X

LESSON 1: ELECTION OF 1828

Teacher Pages

OVERVIEW

The 1828 election really began with the disputed 1824 election, as Andrew Jackson charged there was a “corrupt bargain” to steal the election from him. There were distinct differences between Jackson and John Quincy Adams over the role of the national government, so voters had a clear choice. Who will students choose?

VOCABULARY

- Internal improvements—Roads and canals built with the help of the government
- Tariff—A tax on imports
- Bank of the United States—National bank to help the economy grow. The national government deposits 20% of the money in the bank.
- Bankruptcy—When a person cannot pay off his or her loans
- Debtors’ prison—A jail for people who do not repay their loans
- Monroe Doctrine—A United States policy stating that European countries could no longer colonize the Western Hemisphere
- Corrupt bargain—Accusation by Andrew Jackson that John Adams and Henry Clay had made a deal to cheat Jackson out of winning the 1824 election
- “Old Hickory”—Nickname for Andrew Jackson
- Andrew Jackson—Democrat who won the 1828 election
- John Quincy Adams—Won the 1824 election, but lost in 1828
- Spoils system—Replacing officeholders with loyal supporters
- Veto—When the president refuses to sign a bill. Congress can override the veto with a two-thirds vote.
- “Trail of Tears”—Thousands of Native Americans died when they were forced to move to Indian Territory (Oklahoma).
- King Andrew I—The opposition party argued that Andrew Jackson thought himself a king, and therefore called him King Andrew I

DECISION-MAKING SKILLS EMPHASIZED

- Identify underlying problems
- Ask about context
- Ask about reliability of sources
- Set realistic goals

LESSON PLAN

A. IN-DEPTH LESSON (one 40-minute class period)

Procedure:

Give students Handout 1, which will familiarize them with the candidates. Have the students vote and predict who won the actual election. Tell them who the candidates were and that Andrew Jackson (Candidate B) won, as noted in Handout 2. Ask students if they think he would be a good or bad president for the country based on the description in Handout 1. Distribute Handout 2 and ask students if any of these outcomes surprised them.

OPTIONAL: After the analysis of the election, you could ask students how many support Adams's various proposals—especially internal improvements, the protective tariff, and continuing the national bank.

Reflecting on Decision Making:

Ask students what they would have done differently, if anything, now that they know the outcomes. Which decision-making skills were especially important in making decisions about these issues? Which of the letters of **P-A-G-E** applied especially to this problem? (See the “Decision-Making Analysis” section below for ideas.) Ask students what they did well or on poorly in terms of the **P-A-G-E** analysis of decision making. Discuss their answers.

Putting the Actual Decisions Into Historical Context:

Ask students: Were they surprised that Candidate B won? Why or why not? Their answers will reveal the extent to which they see historical forces at work. For example, now white men who did not own land could vote. Would most of these new voters likely support Jackson or Adams? Suppose women, African Americans or Native Americans could have voted. How would that have changed the election?

Connecting to Today:

To what extent are the issues of government spending on internal improvements (roads, bridges, etc.) and the tariff still important? To what extent are candidates still subject to personal attacks? Should that be a part of elections?

Troubleshooting:

Some students may have difficulty understanding bankruptcy laws. Use an example from an economics book to illustrate how bankruptcy works.

B. QUICK MOTIVATOR (10–15 minutes)

Give Handout 1 for homework. In class, have students pair up and discuss their choices for three minutes or so. Ask for a show of hands for each candidate and briefly discuss their reasons.

TEACHER NOTES FOR EXPANDING DISCUSSION

(For outcomes for students, see Handout 2)

Many disagree on the success of John Quincy Adams's presidency. Most see him as a great failure, while historian Daniel Walker Howe argues that Adams's policies were actually best for the nation.

All historians agree that the 1828 election was one of the dirtiest elections in American history. The mudslinging is reflected in this lesson in the number of personal attacks launched against each candidate.

DECISION-MAKING ANALYSIS:

P = Problem

- * - **Identify any underlying problem(s)**
 - Consider other points of view
 - What are my assumptions? Emotions?

A = Ask for information (about)

- * - Historical context (history of this issue; context in the world)
- * - Reliability of sources
 - Historical analogies

G = Goals

- * - What are my main goals? Are they realistic?
 - Generate options to achieve these goals. Are they ethical?

E = Effects

- Predict unintended consequences.
- Play out the options. What could go wrong?

*Denotes topics emphasized in this lesson

- **Identify any underlying problem:** To what extent is Adams limited by his upper-class background? To what extent is Jackson limited by his background in fighting Native Americans? Are these important factors in the quality of a candidate? What underlying changes were taking place in American society that might make one candidate more suited to be president?
- **Ask about context:** Historical context is very important to this election, as non-landowning white males could now vote in many states. How did this affect the election? Students could ask if federal aid for internal improvements has led to corruption in the past. (Yes.) A major question is whether all these programs proposed by Adams are constitutional. The question was part of an ongoing debate about how much power the constitution gives the national government.

- **Ask about reliability of sources:** One issue is whether all these personal charges are true. The charges about Jackson's mother, about the public paying for Adams's billiard table, about a corrupt bargain, and about Adams getting a mistress for the tsar were not true. The charge about Jackson and his wife living together before her divorce was final was true. Jackson did gamble, drink, and get into duels. The other charges are not clearly true or false, or are open to interpretation. In each case, students should ask about the source for these charges. (In most cases, journalists made the claims based on incomplete evidence, so the sources are weak.)
- **Reflect on your goals:** Is the primary goal to elect someone with strong character, good decision-making skills, and the right positions on important issues? Each candidate differed in these qualities; the voters had a clear choice.

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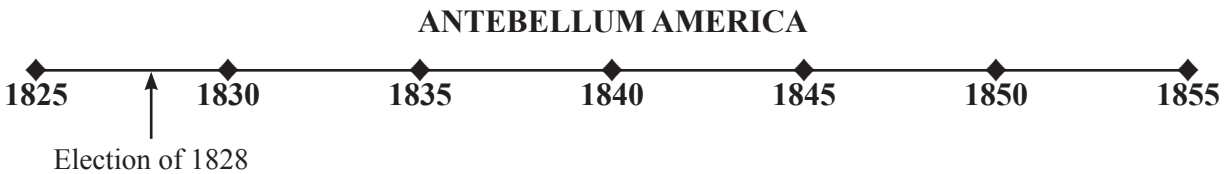
LESSON 1: ELECTION OF 1828

Vocabulary

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- Monroe Doctrine—A United States policy stating that European countries could no longer colonize the Western Hemisphere
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- Veto—When the president refuses to sign a bill. Congress can override the veto with a two-thirds vote.
- “Trail of Tears”—Thousands of Native Americans died when they were forced to move to Indian Territory (Oklahoma).
- King Andrew I—The opposition party argued that Andrew Jackson thought himself a king, and therefore called him King Andrew I

LESSON 1: ELECTION OF 1828

HANDOUT 1: PROBLEM



You are a voter in 1828, and you have to decide which of the major candidates to support.

Candidate A:

Positions on issues:

1. He supports federal (national) government spending for a coordinated network of internal improvements (roads and canals), the money to be raised from the sale of western lands. He claims that the roads and canals will tie the nation together, overcoming regional differences (North vs. South, East vs. West). Congress has allocated money for internal improvements, but not a coordinated pattern to connect the nation, and not this amount of money.
2. He supports a high tariff on some products to encourage and protect American manufacturing. He signed the Tariff of 1828, which increased import taxes on many farm and manufactured products. Leaders in the South hated the tariff, calling it the "Tariff of Abominations." Southern cotton needed no tariff protection, while the tariff increased the prices Southerners paid for other goods (cloth, for example) by \$100 million.
3. He wants to promote the arts and literature. He has proposed a national observatory for making discoveries about the stars and sky. He also wants a national university in Washington and uniform standards of weights and measures. The national observatory, national university, and uniform measures proposals were defeated in Congress, but he still supports them.
4. He supports continuing the Bank of the United States. This national bank helps promote investments in American business and keeps the supply of money stable.
5. He has supported a naval academy, similar to West Point for the army. Congress did not approve the academy.
6. He has supported a national bankruptcy law. People who can't pay their bills are often sent to jail (debtors' prison). This law would allow them to declare bankruptcy, after which they would pay lenders a portion of what they owe (determined by a judge based on what they could afford) and then their debts would be cleared. This proposal was defeated in Congress.
7. He supports stronger patent laws to help inventors make more money from their discoveries.
8. He has supported a new Department of the Interior to explore all areas of the country, especially the West. This proposal was defeated in Congress.