

Sedition in WWI Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
Were critics of the First World War anti-American?

Materials:

- United Streaming Video Segment: Fighting for Freedom (from Freedom: A History of US: Safe for Democracy?)
<http://player.discoveryeducation.com/index.cfm?guidAssetId=B910298B-5162-4C5A-BA60-1245F35E34B6&blnFromSearch=1&productcode=US>
- Copies of Sedition in WWI Documents A-D
- Copies of Sedition in WWI Graphic Organizer and Guiding Questions

Plan of Instruction:

1. Do now: Free-write in response to the following question:

What does patriotism mean to you? Do you think it's important for people to be patriotic? Why or why not? Is it patriotic or anti-American to criticize the United States government?

Elicit student responses. Introduce lesson: *Today we are going to think about these questions in the historical context of World War I by exploring the question: Were critics of the First World War anti-American?*

2. Play United Streaming Video Segment: Fighting for Freedom (from Freedom: A History of US: Safe for Democracy?)
<http://player.discoveryeducation.com/index.cfm?guidAssetId=B910298B-5162-4C5A-BA60-1245F35E34B6&blnFromSearch=1&productcode=US>

Follow up questions for brief discussion:

- What did President Wilson do to promote patriotism and restrict dissent during WWI?
 - Do you think these were necessary decisions?
3. TRANSITION: Draw students' attention to segment of video on opposition to the war.
 - Re-iterate that many socialists and labor unions opposed the war.
 - These "radicals" claimed that big business was controlling the government's decision to enter the war; and that the government was entering the war not to "make the world safe for democracy," but rather to make money on building war materials.

4. Hand out Documents A and B (Debs and Schenck) along with Graphic Organizer. In pairs, students read documents and answer questions.
5. Share Out/Discussion: Do you think Debs and Schenck were anti-American? Why or why not?
6. Pass out Document C (Sedition Act). Note that to counter opposition to the war, the United States government passed the Espionage and Sedition Acts, which limited the rights of Americans.

Instruct students to read and answer the Guiding Questions. Point out to students that the purpose for their reading is to consider whether or not Debs and Schenck were guilty of breaking this law.

7. Debrief:
 - Let students know that both Debs and Schenk were arrested for breaking the law, found guilty, and sentenced to jail.
 - Debs served 32 months in prison until President Harding released him in 1921; Schenk spent 6 months in prison.

Discussion question: *Do you think Debs and Schenck broke the law?*

8. Hand out Document D (Oliver Wendell Holmes). Read together as class. Ask students:
 - What does this ruling say?
 - Do you agree with the ruling? (Remind students to consider this ruling within its historical context when answering this question).
9. Homework: Write a paragraph addressing the question: *Were critics of WWI anti-American?* Include evidence drawn from at least 3 of today's documents.

Citations:

Eugene V. Debs, The Canton Ohio Antiwar Speech, June 16, 1918.
http://www.socialistviewpoint.org/march_03/mar_03_26.html

Schenck's Pamphlet.

<http://facultyweb.at.northwestern.edu/commstud/freespeech/cont/cases/schenck/pamphlet.html>

The U.S. Sedition Act, United States, *Statutes at Large*, Washington, D.C., 1918, Vol. XL, pp 553 ff.

SCHENCK V. UNITED STATES, 249 U. S. 47 (1919).
<http://supreme.justia.com/us/249/47/case.html>

Document A: Eugene Debs Speech (Modified)

Comrades, friends and fellow-workers, thank you for this very cordial greeting, this very hearty reception. Three of our most loyal comrades are paying the penalty for their devotion to the cause of the working class. They have come to realize, as many of us have, that it is extremely dangerous to exercise the constitutional right of free speech in a country fighting to make democracy safe in the world.

Every one of these Wall Street conspirators and would-be murderers claims to be an arch-patriot; every one of them insists that the war is being waged to make the world safe for democracy. What humbug! What rot! What false pretense! These autocrats, these tyrants, these red-handed robbers and murderers, the “patriots,” while the men who have the courage to stand face to face with them, speak the truth, and fight for their exploited victims—they are the disloyalists and traitors. If this be true, I want to take my place side by side with the traitors in this fight.

I suggest that we stop a moment to think about the term “landlord.” “LANDLORD!” Lord of the Land! The lord of the land is indeed a superpatriot...who owns the earth and tells you that we are fighting this war to make the world safe for democracy—he who profiteers at the expense of the people who have been slain [killed in the war]...It is he, this patriot who is in fact the archenemy of the people; it is he that you need to wipe from power. It is he who is a far greater menace to your liberty and your well-being than the Prussian Junkers [Germans] on the other side of the Atlantic ocean.

Yes, in good time we are going to destroy all enslaving and degrading capitalist institutions and re-create them as free and humanizing institutions. The world is daily changing before our eyes. The sun of capitalism is setting; the sun of socialism is rising.

Vocabulary

conspirators: criminals

autocrats: dictators

Source: Socialist leader Eugene Debs delivered this speech in June 1918. He visited three Socialists who were in prison for opposing the draft, and then spoke across the street from the jail, for two hours. The excerpt above is only a small segment of a much longer speech.

Document B: Schenk Pamphlet (Modified)

Assert Your Rights

The Socialist Party says that any officers of the law entrusted with the administration of conscription regulations violate the provisions of the United States Constitution when they refuse to recognize your right to assert your opposition to the draft.

No power was delegated to send our citizens away to foreign shores to shoot up the people of other lands, no matter what may be their internal or international disputes.

To draw this country into the horrors of the present war in Europe, to force the youth of our land into the shambles and bloody trenches of war crazy nations, would be a crime the magnitude of which defies description. Words could not express the condemnation such cold-blooded ruthlessness deserves.

No specious or plausible pleas about a "war for democracy" can cloud the issue. Democracy can not be shot into a nation. It must come spontaneously and purely from within.

To advocate the persecution of other peoples through the fighting of a war is an insult to every good and wholesome American tradition.

You are responsible. You must do your share to maintain, support, and uphold the rights of the people of this country.

In this world crisis where do you stand? Are you with the forces of liberty and light or war and darkness?

Vocabulary

Conscription: military draft

Specious: untrue

Source: Charles Schenck was a Socialist who printed and distributed thousands of anti-war pamphlets in 1917 and 1918 opposing the war. The excerpt above comes from one of his pamphlets.

Document C: The Sedition Act (1917) (Modified)

Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully utter, print, write or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States or the Constitution of the United States, or the military or naval forces of the United States, or the flag of the United States, or the uniform of the Army or Navy of the United States into contempt, scorn, contumely, or disrepute, or shall willfully utter, print, write, or publish any language intended to incite, provoke, or encourage resistance to the United States...shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or the imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both.

Source: This is an excerpt from the Sedition Act, signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson in 1917. Along with the Espionage Act, the law limited the rights of Americans. Wilson and the United States Congress created the laws because they feared dissent would harm America's effort to win the war.

Document D: *Schenck v. United States* (Modified)

Opinion delivered by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

The character of every act depends upon the circumstances in which it is done. The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting "Fire!" in a theatre and causing a panic...

The question in every case is whether the words used are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about the substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent...

When a nation is at war many things that might be said in time of peace are such a hindrance to its effort that their utterance will not be endured so long as men fight and that no Court could regard them as protected by any constitutional right.

Source: The excerpt above comes from the Supreme Court's majority opinion in Schenck v. United States. Schenck was found guilty of violating the Sedition Act.

Graphic Organizer

Name _____

	Document A: Debs	Document B: Schenck
Sourcing: 1. What type of document is this? When was it written?		
2. Who is the audience?		
3. What do you predict Debs or Schenck will say in this document?		
Contextualization: 4. What was happening in the United States and in Europe at this time? (Same answer for both documents)		
Close Reading: 5. Read the document carefully. What is Debs's or Schenck's main message? What does he try to convince his audience?		
6. Find a quote from the document that supports your answer to question #5.		
7. In your opinion, is Debs or Schenck patriotic or anti-American? Why or why not?		

