Sedition in WWI Lesson Plan

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

Materials:
- Copies of Documents A-D
- Copies of Graphic Organizer and Guiding Questions

Plan of Instruction:
1. Do Now. Free-write in response to the following questions:

   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 World War I anti-American?

2. Mini-lecture. [Note: The lesson should follow a more thorough lecture on WWI.]

   Public opinion on WWI was divided in the U.S. Some Americans, notably socialists, Christian pacifists, anarchists, women’s groups, unionists, and intellectuals, opposed the war. Some of these pacifists believed war was immoral, while “radicals” believed the government was entering war not to “make the world safe for democracy,” as Wilson claimed, but rather to serve the interest of capitalists. Other Americans strongly supported U.S. entry into the war in light of the Zimmerman telegram and the sinking of the Lusitania.

   In 1916 President Wilson won re-election running on the slogan “He Kept Us Out of War.” After the revelation of the Zimmerman telegram and Germany beginning a program of unrestricted submarine warfare that threatened U.S. commercial shipping, Congress declared war in April 1917. That same month Wilson established the Committee on Public Information, a propaganda agency that galvanized public support for U.S. war aims. The president pushed through Congress the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918, which suppressed anti-British, pro-German, and anti-war opinions. Over 1,500 people were prosecuted and over 1,000 convicted under these laws, many for small acts of dissent. His administration saw the arrest and deportation of many foreign-born, antiwar radicals and drew closer to pro-war unions.

   Follow up questions for brief discussion:
   - What did President Wilson do to promote nationalism and restrict dissent during WWI?
• Based on what you know about WWI, do you think these were necessary decisions? Why or why not?

3. Hand out Documents A and B along with the Graphic Organizer. In pairs, students read documents and answer questions.

4. Share Out/Discussion: Do you think Debs and Schenck were anti-American? Why or why not?

5. Pass out Document C. 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. Ask students to consider whether or not Debs and Schenck were guilty of breaking this law.

6. Debrief:
   • Let students know that both Debs and Schenck 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. Schenck spent 6 months in prison.

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

7. Hand out Document D. 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. Remind them also to consider the content of the First Amendment.)


Citations
Document A
http://www.socialistviewpoint.org/march_03/mar_03_26.html

Document B

Document C
Document D
SCHENCK V. UNITED STATES, 249 U. S. 47 (1919).

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Document A: Eugene V. Debs Speech (Modified)

Eugene V. Debs was a founding member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), U.S. presidential candidate of the Socialist Party of America, and one of the most famous American socialists. This excerpt is from a speech he gave across the street from a jail, where he had just visited three socialists who were in prison for opposing the draft.

Comrades, friends and fellow-workers, . . . 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 the aristocratic 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 . . . tyrants, these red-handed robbers and murderers, [say they're] 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 [called] the disloyalists and traitors. If this be true, I want to take my place side by side with the traitors in this fight. . . .

[He] 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 and mutilated by the thousands, under pretense of being the great American patriot . . . 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 . . . [Germans] on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Source: Socialist leader Eugene Debs delivered this speech in June 1918.

Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aristocratic</td>
<td>upper-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conspirators</td>
<td>criminals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arch-patriot</td>
<td>great patriot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pretense</td>
<td>attempt to make something that is not the case appear to be true</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slain</td>
<td>killed in battle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Document B: Schenck Pamphlet (Modified)

Charles Schenck was a Socialist who in 1917-1918 printed and distributed more than 15,000 anti-war pamphlets, including some to drafted American men. The excerpt below comes from one of his pamphlets.

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**ASSERT YOUR RIGHTS**

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

To draw this country into the horrors of the present war in Europe, to force the youth of our land into the . . . bloody trenches of war-crazy nations, would be a crime the *magnitude* of which defies description. . . .

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?


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**Vocabulary**

- *conscription*: military draft
- *magnitude*: hugeness
- *specious*: misleading
Document C: The Sedition Act of 1918 (Modified)

This is an excerpt from the Sedition Act, signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson in 1918. Along with the Espionage Act, the law shrunk the rights of Americans. Wilson and the United States Congress claimed dissent would harm America's effort to win the war. Congress repealed the act in December 1920, two years after the end of WWI.

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 . . . 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: The Sedition Act of 1918 was passed by the United States Congress on May 16, 1918.

Vocabulary

utter: say
profane: disrespectful
scurrilous: insulting
incite: stir up
Document D: **Schenck v. United States** (Modified)

The excerpt below comes from the Supreme Court’s unanimous opinion in Schenck v. United States, 1919.

OPINION 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:* Supreme Court opinion by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., March 3, 1919.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sourcing:</th>
<th>Document A: Debs</th>
<th>Document B: Schenck</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What type of document is this? When was it written?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Who is the audience?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What do you predict Debs or Schenck will say in this document?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contextualization:</th>
<th>Document A: Debs</th>
<th>Document B: Schenck</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. What was happening in the United States and in Europe at this time? (Same answer for both documents)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How might this historical context have influenced the content of these documents?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Close Reading:</th>
<th>Document A: Debs</th>
<th>Document B: Schenck</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. Read the document carefully. What is Debs’s or Schenck’s main message? What does he try to convince his audience?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Find a quote from the document that supports your answer to question #5.</td>
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Guiding Questions

Document C: Sedition Act

1. When was this law passed? Why did the U.S. government pass this law?

2. In your own words, summarize this law.

3. Do you think this law was necessary? Why or why not? Use evidence to support your answer.