

Rights and Responsibilities in Wartime

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CONTEXT

Although the United States is a nation with defined rights protected by a constitution, sometimes those rights are challenged by the circumstances at hand. This is especially true during wartime and times of crisis. As Americans remained divided in their support for World War I, President Woodrow Wilson's administration and U.S. Congress pushed pro-war propaganda and enacted laws meant to deter anti-war protesting. When war protests did arise, those who challenged U.S. involvement in the war faced heavy consequences, including jail time for their actions. Many questioned the pro-war campaign and its possible infringement on Americans' First Amendment freedoms, including the right to protest and freedom of speech. Using World War I as a backdrop and the First Amendment as the test, students will examine the Sedition Act of 1918 and come to realize that Congress passed laws that violated the Constitution and that the Supreme Court upheld those laws. Additionally, students will be challenged to consider the role President Wilson had in promoting an anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States and how that rhetoric emboldened Congress to pass laws that violated the civil rights of all Americans. The lesson will wrap up challenging students to consider the responsibilities of citizens when they believe the president and Congress promote legislation that infringes on First Amendment rights.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Eugene Debs Speech at Canton, Ohio, June 16, 1918 (excerpt)
Indiana State University
http://debs.indstate.edu/d288c3_1971.pdf

Sedition Act of 1918, (excerpt)
WWI Document Archive, Brigham Young University Library
https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Sedition_Act

Woodrow Wilson, State of the Union Address, December 7, 1915 (excerpt)
Teaching American History
<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/state-of-the-union-address-104/>

SECONDARY SOURCES

Mark Ruffalo, Eugene Debs Speech at Canton, Ohio (re-enacted excerpt)
Zinn Education Project
<https://www.zinnproject.org/materials/eugene-debs-canton-ohio/>

OBJECTIVES

At the end of this activity, students will be able to:

- Understand that the U.S. government passed laws during World War I that infringed upon First Amendment rights and that the U.S. Supreme Court upheld those laws;
- Discuss in small and large groups if the U.S. government should be allowed special powers during wartime and times of crisis that restrict Constitutionally protected freedoms, First Amendment rights specifically; and
- Think about the role citizens should take in challenging presidential speeches and Congressional laws they believe are unconstitutional or will result in trespassing upon rights guaranteed to all Americans in the Constitution.

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Teacher Instructions

- Make one copy of the document packet for each student.
- Divide the class into groups of four to five students each.
- Remind students that President Woodrow Wilson campaigned for the 1916 election on a platform of isolationism and to keep the U.S. out of World War I, which began in 1914. He knew that strong economic ties to the Allied powers could necessitate American involvement in the conflict. Wilson began targeting immigrants, socialists, and labor leaders (supporters of American isolation) and began a campaign to disparage them and label them as un-American and disloyal.
- Distribute one document packet to each student.
- Ask students to work in groups to complete the activity and question connected to Wilson's State of the Union Address (1915).
- Ask students to discuss in their small groups the influence they think a president can have on domestic policies and Constitutional rights.
 - ***Teacher Tip:** Depending on time constraints, this activity can be completed as a whole group or individually.
- Remind students that the United States entered World War I on April 6, 2017. On June 15, 1917, Congress passed the Espionage Act, which made it a crime to speak out against the war effort. This was followed by the Sedition Act, which passed Congress on May 16, 1918. This act updated the Espionage Act and enhanced the provisions that restricted free speech and a free press.
- Ask students to read and respond to the Sedition Act excerpt in groups. When complete, bring students back together as a group and share their discussions.
 - ***Teacher Tip:** As you moderate the discussion, ask students to make any connections they think are appropriate between the rhetoric in Wilson's State of the Union speech and the passage of the Espionage and Sedition Acts. Students may begin to link what Wilson did to any current examples; save those discussions for the end of class. Keep students on track and have them focus on Wilson's actions and the passage of the Espionage and Sedition Acts.
- Introduce Eugene Debs and explain he was a socialist, pacifist, labor leader, and former presidential candidate.
- Ask students to read the excerpt from his speech in Canton, Ohio and respond to the questions.
 - ***Teacher Tip:** If desired, students can watch the video clip re-enacting the speech.
- Let students know that Debs entered prison in April 1919. President Wilson denied him a pardon in January 1921, but President Warren G. Harding commuted Debs' sentence on December 23, 1921.
- Bring the class together and lead a wrap-up discussion. Some questions may include:
 - *Do you think essential freedoms of the Constitution should be sacrificed during wartime or times of national crisis? Which one(s)? In what circumstances?*
 - *If a citizen believes that the president, Congress, or the U.S. Supreme Court has promoted or affirmed the passage of legislation that they believe is unconstitutional, what responsibilities does he or she have?*

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Document Packet

WOODROW WILSON, STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS, DECEMBER 7, 1915 (EXCERPT)

Teaching American History

<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/state-of-the-union-address-104/>

DIRECTIONS:

Highlight or underline the passages of the speech that demonstrate President Wilson's views on immigrants.

"...I am sorry to say that the gravest threats against our national peace and safety have been uttered within our own borders. There are citizens of the United States, I blush to admit, born under other flags but welcomed under our generous naturalization laws to the full freedom and opportunity of America, who have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life; who have sought to bring the authority and good name of our government into contempt, to destroy our industries wherever they thought it effective for their vindictive purposes to strike at them, and to debase our politics to the uses of foreign intrigue...

"...America never witnessed anything like this before. It never dreamed it possible that men sworn into its own citizenship, men drawn out of great free stocks such as supplied some of the best and strongest elements of that little, but how heroic, nation that in a high day of old staked its very life to free itself from every entanglement that had darkened the fortunes of the older nations and set up a new standard here, that men of such origins and such free choices of allegiance would ever turn in malign reaction against the Government and people who had welcomed and nurtured them and seek to make this proud country once more a hotbed of European passion. A little while ago such a thing would have seemed incredible. Because it was incredible we made no preparation for it. We would have been almost ashamed to prepare for it, as if we were suspicious of ourselves, our own comrades and neighbors! But the ugly and incredible thing has actually come about and we are without adequate federal laws to deal with it. I urge you to enact such laws at the earliest possible moment and feel that in doing so I am urging you to do nothing less than save the honor and self-respect of the nation. Such creatures of passion, disloyalty, and anarchy must be crushed out..."

QUESTION:

Do you think President Wilson views immigrants who became naturalized citizens as equal citizens of the nation? Why or why not? Provide specific references to the speech to support your answer.

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Document Packet

SEDITION ACT OF 1918, SECTION 3 (EXCERPT)

World War I Document Archive, Brigham Young University Library
https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Sedition_Act

“SECTION 3. Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully make or convey false reports or false statements with intent to interfere with the operation or success of the military or naval forces of the United States, or to promote the success of its enemies, or shall willfully make or convey false reports, or false statements,...or incite insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty, in the military or naval forces of the United States, or shall willfully obstruct...the recruiting or enlistment service of the United States, or...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 shall willfully display the flag of any foreign enemy, or shall willfully...urge, incite, or advocate any curtailment of production...or advocate, teach, defend, or suggest the doing of any of the acts or things in this section enumerated and whoever shall by word or act support or favor the cause of any country with which the United States is at war or by word or act oppose the cause of the United States therein, shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both....”

LIST FOUR SPECIFIC EXAMPLES FROM THE SEDITION ACT THAT MAY VIOLATE THE FIRST AMENDMENT OF THE U.S. CONSTITUTION.

1.

2.

3.

4.

QUESTION:

Do you think the Sedition Act of 1918 was constitutional? Why or why not?

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Document Packet

EUGENE DEBS SPEECH AT CANTON, OHIO, JUNE 16, 1918 (EXCERPT)

Indiana State University

http://debs.indstate.edu/d288c3_1971.pdf

CONTEXT:

Prior to this speech, the U.S. government considered Eugene Debs a threat to the nation because of his pacifist and socialist views. The U.S. Department of Justice knew of the gathering and placed federal agents in the crowd to gather evidence that may be used to arrest Debs under the Sedition Act.

ACTIVITY:

Underline four specific passages from the speech where Debs might have violated the Sedition Act of 1918.

"Wars have been waged for conquest, for plunder. In the middle ages the feudal lords, who inhabited the castles whose towers may still be seen along the Rhine—whenever one of those feudal lords wished to enrich himself, then he made war on another. Why? They wanted to enlarge their domains. They wanted to increase their power, their wealth, and so they declared war upon each other. But they did not go to war any more than the Wall Street junkers go to war. (Applause.) The feudal lords, the barons, the economic predecessors of the modern capitalist, they declared all the wars. Who fought their battles? Their miserable serfs. And the serfs had been taught to believe that when their masters declared and waged war upon one another, it was their patriotic duty to fall upon one another, and to cut one another's throats, to murder one another for the profit and the glory of the plutocrats, the barons, the lords who held them in contempt. And that is war in a nutshell. The master class has always declared the war; the subject class has always fought the battles; the master class has had all to gain and nothing to lose, and the subject class has had nothing to gain and all to lose—including their lives. [Applause.] They have always taught you that it is your patriotic duty to go to war and to have yourselves slaughtered at a command. But in all of the history of the world you, the people, never had a voice in declaring war. You have never yet had. And here let me state a fact—and it cannot be repeated too often: the working class who fight the battles, the working class who make the sacrifices, the working class who shed the blood, the working class who furnish the corpses, the working class have never yet had a voice in declaring war. The working class have never yet had a voice in making peace. It is the ruling class that does both. They declare war; they make peace."

QUESTION:

The United States Supreme Court found Debs guilty of violating the Sedition Act sentenced him to ten years in prison. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the conviction. Do you agree with the Supreme Court and its ruling? Why or why not?