World War I: America's Involvement

Should a democratic government tolerate dissent during times of war?

When the major powers of Europe went to war in 1914, few people expected the United States to be drawn into the conflict. American soldiers had never fought on European soil nor did the United States seem to be in danger. The United States shared a common language with the British, but Germans supplied more immigrants to Iowa than any other group. As the war progressed, however, President Woodrow Wilson insisted on America's right to trade. The British Royal Navy cut off most of U.S. trade with Germany, and German submarines began sinking any American ships bound for Britain or France. In April 1917, Congress declared war on Germany and Austria and became an ally of Britain, France and Russia.

Iowans and World War I: Participation and Discrimination

Most Iowans enthusiastically supported the war effort. Over 500,000 Iowans between the ages of 18 and 45 registered for the draft, and Iowa sent 114,242 men and women to serve during this war. Many new inductees reported to Camp Dodge just north of Des Moines for basic training. To finance war efforts, the U.S. government sold war bonds. Local committees across the state conducted five drives. The American Red Cross was a private organization established to provide extra services to American soldiers. Women knitted scarves and socks, rolled bandages and assisted with other support services. Like war bonds, Iowans contributed to Red Cross efforts. Feeding the Allied armies and their civilian populations placed pressure on farmers to boost production. “Food Will Win the War” posters promoted patriotism while guaranteed price support provided a financial incentive. The result was a huge boost in corn and livestock production. To make even more food available, rationing restricted the amounts of sugar, flour and meat that Iowans could buy.

Many German families had migrated to Iowa in the 19th century. In river towns like Davenport, Clinton and Dubuque, there were strong communities of Germans who continued to practice German customs. When the war broke out, Germans came under suspicion of not supporting the U.S. war effort but secretly supporting the Germans. Sometimes local committees harassed German families and others with strong ties to their native lands in Europe and insisted that they become “full Americans.” The Iowa governor, William Harding, even issued a proclamation, known as the Babel Proclamation, forbidding the use of any language other than English. It was probably an unconstitutional use of the governor’s authority, and it caused problems for many ethnic Iowans, including Dutch, Danish and Norwegians, particularly in church services.

Casualties of War

The war effort demanded an intense military, economic and financial commitment - and also came with a personal cost to many Americans. Iowa claimed two unfortunate “firsts.” Merle Hay from Glidden was among the first three U.S. soldiers killed on the battlefield. Marion Crandell, once a French teacher at St. Katharine's School in Davenport, became the first U.S. woman to die of injuries sustained in a combat zone. She was serving in a canteen when she was injured from the explosion of an artillery shell.

Armistice Day marking German surrender on November 11, 1918, brought wild celebrations across the state. However, problems created by the war did not immediately disappear. The national was in the grip of a deadly flu epidemic that killed more Americans than the battlefield. When the demand for farm products began to decline as European farmers began production again and with the removal of government price supports, farm surplus sent prices plunging.
Supporting Questions

During times of war, is the government justified in taking actions that may potentially restrict the rights of its citizens?

- “This Must Not Be!,” May 2, 1917
- Espionage Act, 1917

What is the right balance between protecting the rights of citizens while also expecting they fulfill their responsibilities in a time of conflict?

- “Anti-German, Pro-American Soldier Broadside, May 2, 1918

How will singling out groups during a time of conflict impact American values? Is this type of action an inevitable necessity to protect the public interests or does it show an imbalance of security over freedom?

- “Don’t Bite the Hand that’s Feeding You,” 1915
- Language Proclamation Correspondence #1, June 1, 1918
- Language Proclamation Correspondence #2, June 3, 1918
- Language Proclamation Correspondence #3, June 6, 1918

During a time of conflict, what type of speech is responsible for citizens and government officials?

- “Loyalty” - A Speech by the American Ambassador to German Americans, 1918
- Letter from President Woodrow Wilson to the Nation, July 26, 1918

*Printable Image and Document Guide

Additional Resources

“World War I - Support and Opposition in Iowa” - A brief synopsis on the stresses and tests of loyalty placed on Iowans during World War I. This included the effects of such laws like the Espionage Act of 1917 or the use of conscription (draft) to send Iowa's men to war in Europe.

The Sedition Act of 1918 - A look at the implementation of the Sedition Act of 1918 and the multiple U.S. Supreme Court cases to challenge the law and support the First Amendment.

Schenck v. U.S. (1919) - A review of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case, Schenck v. U.S., which led to the famous “clear and present danger” test to determine when a state could constitutionally limit an individual's free speech rights.

The Biographical Dictionary of Iowa: “Harding, William Lloyd” - This website contains some brief information on the Babel Proclamation and the Iowan governor that signed the bill, William Harding.

“That Coke Super Bowl Ad Would Have Been Illegal in 1910s Iowa” - This article contains information on attempts by various state governments to prohibit any language other than English being spoken.

“Eugene Debs’ Anti-War Speech in Canton, Ohio” - This website includes a speech excerpt and modern-day reading of Debs’ anti-war speech that was delivered on June 16, 1918.
“This Must Not Be!,” May 2, 1917

Description
This political cartoon shows a woman labeled “Liberty” being chased down the steps of the U.S. Capitol by a man labeled “Congress” with a whip labeled “Espionage Bill.” The image was published before the passage of the Espionage Act of 1917, which essentially made it a crime for any person to convey information intended to interfere with the U.S. armed forces prosecution of the war effort or to promote the success of the country’s enemies. The cartoon was published in the American newspaper, the New York Journal-American.

Text-Dependent Questions
• Does the cartoonist support or oppose the Espionage Act of 1917? Use specific evidence from the cartoon to support your claim.
• What emotional response is the cartoonist trying to evoke from his audience? Which details from the cartoon led you to this decision?

Citation Information
Espionage Act of 1917, June 15, 1917

Description
The Espionage Act of 1917 was passed two months after America's entrance into World War I. It was, “An act to punish acts of interference with the foreign relations, the neutrality and the foreign commerce of the United States, to punish espionage, and better to enforce the criminal laws of the United States, and for other purposes.” It was intended to prohibit interference with military operations or recruitment, to prevent insubordination in the military and to prevent the support of United States enemies during wartime.

Transcript of Espionage Act of 1917

Transcribed Excerpts from Espionage Act of 1917

Text-Dependent Questions
• Does the Espionage Act pose any threat to the rights and liberties of American citizens? Use specific evidence from the text to support your claim?
• Refer to the “This Must Not Be!” cartoon in relation to the document. Did the Espionage Act actually suppress liberty?

Citation Information
Anti-German, Pro-American Soldier Broadsides, May 2, 1918

Description
The May 1918 broadside, or one-sided poster, encouraged Americans to support the war effort during World War I. The large sheet of paper calls for the support of American soldiers "Over There" by opposing anything pro-German on the home front.

Transcript of World War I Broadsides (Poster)

Text-Dependent Questions
- How are Germans characterized in this text? Cite specific passages to support your claim.
- How would this type of rhetoric impact the lives of German Americans?
- Put yourself in the position of a German American at the time this broadside was released. What would be your response to it? Why?

Citation Information

Description
Senator Warren G. Harding, Republican candidate for president, spoke about the rights of American citizens in this 1920 speech. Warren said the responsibility of government is to protect and sustain those same liberties and said it is the “committal of the Republican party to that saving constitutionalism which contemplates all America as one people and holds just government free from influence on the one hand, and unmoved by intimidation on the other.” In the aftermath of World War I, Harding is calling attention to the trade-off between freedom and security in the United States against the “menacy tendency of the present day.”

Transcript of Senator Warren G. Harding’s Speech

Text-Dependent Questions
- Why would Senator Warren G. Harding feel the Republic has been “menaced from within?”
- What ideals is Harding trying to guard the people against? Why?
- Harding states, “He who threatens destruction of the government by force, or flaunts his contempt for lawful authority, ceases to be a loyal citizen and forfeits his right to the freedom of the Republic.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

Citation Information
“Don’t Bite the Hand that’s Feeding You,” 1915

Description
The war song, “Don't Bite the Hand That's Feeding You,” was aimed at convincing immigrants of the importance of staying loyal to the United States during World War I. The song was composed by Jimmie Morgan and the lyrics were written by Thomas Hoier. The piece was published in New York in 1915 by Leo Feist.

Transcript of Lyrics to “Don’t Bite the Hand That’s Feeding You”

Text-Dependent Questions
- Who is the targeted/intended audience of this song? Identify the line(s) that best reveal this.
- What is the songwriter asking of his audience? In other words, what is the purpose of this song?
- Based on the lyrics of the song, what concern does the songwriter have about certain populations of Americans?

Citation Information
Language Proclamation Correspondence #1, June 1, 1918

Sioux City, Ia., 6/1/1918.

The Hon. W. L. Harding,
Des Moines, Ia.

My dear Governor:

Long before your proclamation regarding the use of the foreign languages in public meetings the St. Paul’s Lutheran Church of Sioux City, Ia. has been conducting their services in the English language, and these not only as a side issue. Every Sunday at 10 a.m. we had for those who could not get the full benefit of the English service the very same in the German, and right after this German service we had the English service with the identical and very same sermon as in the German. Likewise in our parochial school the medium of instruction was the English in all eight grades, and since I am pastor, we even introduced to be more in harmony with the public school the public school books, only those branches pertaining the religion were taught in the German. Your proclamation, therefore, was indeed a hard blow for our members who proved their 100% loyalty, and are now prohibited to worship and serve their Lord in communion according to their best ability and conscience.

I guarantee you, Governor, that not one word outside of the Scriptural Truth is brought before the hearers. We stringly adhere to the Lord’s principle: “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the thing’s that are God’s.” Math. 22. 21. upon which principle we believe our constitution of this our God-blessed country is framed, where we and our children should enjoy the absolute separation of state and church.

We belong to the Missouri Synod whose founders have left Germany just on account of oppression, and have therefor absolutely no connection whatever with the church in Germany which is not even Lutheran.

Encouraged by the enclosed letter, which I wish to have it returned, I requested by my members who as before said proved themselves to be loyal, beg you to permit us to conduct our services in both languages.

Very respectfully,

L.A. Matthadiess

Description

This 1918 letter from the Sioux City Missouri Synod Lutheran Church to Iowa Governor William Harding is requesting permission to conduct services in Swedish. The letter was sent in response to the Babel Proclamation, which prohibited all languages other than English in public or private schools, in public conversations, on trains, over the telephone, at all meetings and in all religious services.

Transcript of Language Proclamation Correspondence #1

Text-Dependent Questions

• What arguments did Pastor L.A. Matthadiess use to convince the governor that sermons should be conducted in German and English?
• If reading all three language proclamation responses (Correspondence #2 and #3), which letter has more effective arguments? What makes you say that?
Language Proclamation Correspondence #2, June 3, 1918

This is a 1918 letter from Maurice W. Colbert, mayor of Danbury, Iowa, which is located on the western border of the state. Colbert is asking Iowa Governor William Harding for advice in implementing the Babel Proclamation, which was a language proclamation during World War I.

Transcript of Language Proclamation Correspondence #2

Dependent Questions

• What do you feel would motivate the mayor to ask for guidance instead of just acting on his ideas? What does this communicate about the culture of the country at this time? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

• According to the text what actions are being asked of “ordinary” citizens during this time? How would having citizens engage in these actions affect interactions among neighbors?
Language Proclamation Correspondence #3, June 6, 1918

This letter from Pastor C.A. Gavert to Iowa Governor William Harding on June 6, 1918, is asking for permission to conduct church services in Swedish. At the time, this action was illegal in Iowa because of the Babel Proclamation.

Transcript of Language Proclamation Correspondence #3

Dear Governor:

Forgive me for writing to you in regard to the proclamation regarding the language question here in Iowa. My church here, the Swedish Mission church in Sioux City, has a membership of 500 about. This church is intensely loyal, and always has been. We have bought Liberty Bonds all of us, and I, C.A., have an auxiliary Red Cross that meets every Wednesday to save for our dear soldier boys. Our church has invested this year a billion dollars, which is approximately $100,000, in Thrift Stamps, and we are very proud of it. In every way possible we have helped the country, and still till our dying day.

My members have mostly emigrated when at a young age. They are therefore unaccustomed to understand a sermon in English. I, as most of them, is very patriotic to see them keeping is there homes because they can not gather in church any more to hear the word of God in their language. Now, my dear Governor, I appeal to you. If it would be possible for me to use the Swedish language in the Sunday forenoon services. But Sunday evenings use the English, and thereby get used to the change. I feel so sorry for my members. It is very pathetic, and, therefore, I appeal to you as a man of justice to grant us this favor.

Would you please answer me before Sunday. If the time does not allow to send it by mail, please wire at my expense.

Your humble neighbor,

C.A. Gavert

Description

This letter from Pastor C.A. Gavert to Iowa Governor William Harding on June 6, 1918, is asking for permission to conduct church services in Swedish. At the time, this action was illegal in Iowa because of the Babel Proclamation.

Text-Dependent Questions

• What is Pastor C.A. Gavert requesting from Governor William Harding? Evaluate the effectiveness of his argument and use of evidence.
• How have members of the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Mission Church supported the war effort according to Gavert? Do you feel this is reason enough to allow the church to conduct services in a language other than English? Why or why not?
“Loyalty” - A Speech by the American Ambassador to German Americans, 1918

Description
The speech by Ambassador James W. Gerard is a warning to German Americans that “Every citizen must declare himself American -- or traitor!” Gerard, who was the U.S. ambassador to Germany, wrote this in 1918 during World War I to encourage German-American loyalty.

Transcript of Ambassador James Gerald’s Speech, “Loyalty”

Text-Dependent Questions
- According to Ambassador James Gerard's speech, the United States has a challenge with its population that no other country participating in the war has to overcome. What is it and how does he plan to overcome it?
- Using evidence from the speech, explain how Americans can prove their loyalty according to Ambassador Gerard.
- In a time of conflict, is this type of language in a speech responsible? Provide an explanation using evidence from the text.

Citation Information
Description
This letter from President Woodrow Wilson, the 28th president of the United States, was calling for the enforcement of law and order to put an end to the “mob spirit” beginning to appear across the country. The letter, published July 26, 1918, asks Americans to rise above the conflict of World War I and not fall into the snares of being involved in such hideous atrocities as seen in the war.

Transcript of President Woodrow Wilson’s Letter

Text-Dependent Questions

- Using evidence from the speech, explain how Americans can prove their loyalty according to President Woodrow Wilson’s letter.
- Select one passage from Wilson’s letter that you believe best addresses Ambassador Gerard’s speech. Then, provide reasoning for your selection. (NOTE: This question is meant for corroboration with Ambassador James W. Gerard’s “Loyalty” speech)
- Whose address to the nation during World War I is more appropriate: Ambassador Gerard’s or President Wilson’s? Explain your reasoning using evidence from each source. (NOTE: This question is meant for corroboration with Ambassador Gerard’s “Loyalty” speech)

Citation Information