

A Free Press in Wartime

Theme: Commitment

Duration: 1–2 Class Sessions

Interdisciplinary Subject: Social Studies

Grade Level: 9-12

Lesson Overview: In this lesson, students will analyze a political cartoon created by William Allen Rogers during World War I to give context to press censorship during that war. Next, students will explore additional sources from the Library of Congress to analyze how censorship worked both before and after the passage of the Sedition Act of 1918. Finally, students will compose their own “email to the editor” of a local newspaper or online news source, expressing their own views about the importance of freedom of the press and their informed opinion of press censorship in wartime.

Overarching Essential Question

- What is civic action?

Lesson Essential Questions

- Is press censorship ever necessary?
- How is expression of political opinion in wartime a form of civic action?

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify elements of a WWI political cartoon to gain historic meaning.
- Analyze text of primary sources to distinguish *voluntary censorship* from *government censorship*.
- Compose an email to a local newspaper or news source expressing views on freedom of the press.

Civic Knowledge

- Civic life, politics, and government.
- Roles of citizens in American democracy.

Civic Skills

- Identifying and describing information.
- Explaining and analyzing information.
- Working with others.
- Clearly articulating ideas and interests.

Civic Dispositions

- Developing as an engaged member of society.
- Participating in civic affairs in an informed, thoughtful, and effective manner.
- Promoting the healthy functioning of American constitutional democracy.

Materials Needed

- Teacher Guide: A Free Press in Wartime
- Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tool ([online version](#) or [PDF](#))
- Optional: [Scaffolded Analysis Tool](#)
- [PowerPoint: A Free Press in Wartime](#)
- [Handout A – The Espionage and Sedition Acts of World War I](#)
- [Handout B – “Suppression of The Masses”](#)
- [Handout C – “The Committee on Public Information”](#)
- [Handout D – A Free Press Political Cartoon](#)
- Access to the Library of Congress or printouts of materials (noted in lesson)

Library of Congress Resources

Students may need access to the online bibliographic information. Links to handouts are included in the Teacher’s Guide below.

Primary Source Analysis Tool: <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/primary-source-analysis-tool/>

Teacher’s Guide: Analyzing Political Cartoons:

[http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing Political Cartoons.pdf](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Political_Cartoons.pdf)

Primary Sources:

- "Now for a round-up/W.A. Rogers" (political cartoon): <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cai.2a14550/>
- "Suppression of The Masses" (excerpt from pages 3-6 of the letter from Max Eastman to Woodrow Wilson): <https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/world-war-i-american-experiences/about-this-exhibition/over-here/surveillance-and-censorship/suppression-of-the-masses/>
- "The activities of the Committee on public information ..," 1918. Committee on Public Information, Washington Govt. Printing Office, Library of Congress. Retrieved from Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/activitiesofcomm00unit>.
- Flagg, J. M. (ca. 1917) I want you for U.S. Army: nearest recruiting station / James Montgomery Flagg. United States, ca. 1917. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/96507165/>.

Additional Resource(s):

- An image of the First Amendment excerpted from <https://www.congress.gov/content/conan/pdf/GPO-CONAN-2017-10-2.pdf>.

Standards

C3 Indicators:

D2.Civ.3.9-12. Analyze the impact of constitutions, laws, treaties, and international agreements on the maintenance of national and international order.

D2. Civ.12.9-12. Analyze how people use and challenge local, state, national, and international laws to address a variety of public issues.

D2.His.11.9-12.Critique the usefulness of historical sources for a specific historical inquiry based on their maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

D2.His.12.9-12. Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to pursue further inquiry and investigate additional sources.

Teacher's Guide

I. Introduction

- A. Ask students: *Where do you find out about what's happening in your community and the world? Where do you get your news?* Students may respond that they get their news from television, Internet news sites, or even the school newspaper.
1. Explain that the sources they have mentioned are examples of what we call *the press*, a word which originally meant news that was printed on paper using a printing press.
- B. Project **Slide 2**, which shows the First Amendment.
1. Ask students to note freedom of the press and then ask them: *What does "freedom of the press" mean?* Accept reasonable responses. Look for answers that highlight the need for people to access information in order to make wise decisions in voting, forming political opinions, and even deciding how to spend their money or where they might donate money.
 2. Ask students: *What if the government shut down the news sources you just mentioned? What would happen?* Accept reasonable responses. Explain that when government shuts down the press, it is called censorship. Not too long after the First Amendment was ratified in 1791, during the presidency of John Adams, the government censored the press. Later, during World War I, the government censored the press again. But the government did this in more than one way. That's what this lesson is about.

II. Lesson Tasks

- A. Organize students into pairs. Distribute [Handout A: The Espionage and Sedition Acts of World War I](#) to each student. Give students a few minutes to read the handout.
1. Project **Slide 3**. Check for understanding by discussing the two review questions with the class. (Point out to students that the famous poster that depicts Uncle Sam by James Montgomery Flagg was a product of the U.S. government during World War I. Uncle Sam is a patriotic symbol, and they will see him again in the next slide.)
- B. Distribute the **Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tool** to each student. Questions from the Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tool for Political Cartoons are included on Slides 3-5.
1. Project **Slide 4** - "Now for a round-up/W.A. Rogers." Give student pairs a couple of minutes to look at the image and discuss their answers to the questions. Each student should record his or her answers on their handouts.
 2. Repeat step 1 above for **Slides 5 and 6**.
 3. When finished, ask students to share additional questions they have about the image. If any questions can be answered in the next part of the lesson, write those questions on the board or document reader. Leave those questions up during the next part of the lesson.

- C. Distribute [Handout B – “Suppression of The Masses”](#) excerpt to *one person* in each pair. [Distribute Handout C – “The Committee on Public Information”](#) excerpt to the *other person* in each pair. Distribute a source analysis tool to each *student*. You can choose to use the **Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tool** or the Scaffolded Analysis Tool depending on your students’ needs.
1. Give students a few minutes to read the excerpt they have been given and the bibliographic information included on the respective handouts, and to answer the questions from the analysis tool. As students work through their primary source, you might help get them started on the OBSERVE section by asking them to describe what they see.
 2. Have each student jot down their answers to each of the REFLECT and QUESTION questions in the appropriate boxes on the analysis tool. As students work through each primary source, you might help get them started by asking them:
 - What was the purpose of this text? (REFLECT)
 - Who created it? (REFLECT)
 - What can you learn from examining this? (REFLECT)
 - What do you wonder about . . . Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? (QUESTION)
 3. Once students have completed the questions, give them a few minutes to take turns sharing their answers with their partner.
 4. Project **Slide 5** again (“Now for a round-up” with bibliographic information). Ask students if any questions they had about the “Now for a round-up” source were answered when exploring the text-based primary sources in this activity.

III. Closure

- A. Project **Slide 7**, which shows debriefing questions:
- Explain the difference between voluntary censorship and government censorship.
 - Is press censorship ever necessary? Why?
 - How is expression of political opinion in wartime a form of civic action? Explain.
- B. Students will draft an “email to the editor” (150-200 words) to a local newspaper or online news source. (It could be to the school newspaper.) In the email, they should:
- State their understanding of the meaning of freedom of the press;
 - State their opinion of whether and how much the press should be censored during wartime;
 - Use facts and analysis of the World War I primary sources to support their claims; and
 - Connect the facts and analysis to another current or historical U.S. military conflict (e.g., North Korea, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, or the Vietnam War).
- C. Extension Activity: [Distribute Handout D – A Free Press Political Cartoon.](#)

As an extension of the lesson, students each create their own political cartoon expressing their contemporary views on (a) the importance of a free press, or (b) their opinion of press censorship in wartime.

This lesson is part of a larger initiative, Citizen U, which aims to integrate civic learning across the curriculum for students in grades 2-12. For more lessons like it, in Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies, or to learn more about related creative, community, and professional development opportunities, please visit our [Citizen U website](#)