

Lesson Title: You be the Historian—Analyzing Primary Sources

Grades: High School (this source can be challenging so use your judgment about the level of your class and adjust accordingly.)

Theme Area: Civil War and Reconstruction, 1861-1877

Standards: Social Studies: History: B.12.1, B.12.2; Political Science and Citizenship: C.12.12; Economics: D.12.6, D.12.7

Introduction/Background

The Foreign Relations of the United States series is the official documentary historical record of major U.S. foreign policy decisions that have been declassified and edited for publication. The series is produced by the State Department's Office of the Historian and printed volumes are available from the Government Printing Office.

This online version contains primary source documents relating to the presidency of Abraham Lincoln from 1861 to the Eisenhower administration 1959.

The Civil War that broke the United States did not simply have domestic repercussions; it had implications for Europe as well. This lesson is designed to help students analyze government documents for a different perspective about an event that is usually viewed only from the domestic perspective of the United States.

The UW Digital Collections provide access to the Foreign Relations of the United States at the following link: <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.d/FRUS>

Lesson Objective(s):

Students will be able to:

1. Identify the foreign countries that corresponded with the US during the Civil War
2. Analyze the correspondence in Foreign Relations of the United States as a primary source on the Civil War
3. Identify the specific issues that concerned the US government during the war in relation to foreign countries

Information Sources/Resources:

<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.d/FRUS>

Materials

Computers with Internet connection (either an instructor computer with an LCD or computer lab; would work better with students in groups of 2 or 3)

You can make a handout with the questions from this lesson plan

US history textbook

Suggested Activities

1. From the FRUS home page, go to “Browse the collection.” Then click on Foreign Relations of the United States (1861- 1958/1960). Next select United States Department of State Message of the President of the United States to the two houses of Congress, at the commencement of the second session of the thirty-seventh congress: Volume I (1861).
2. First, have students acquaint themselves with the layout of the volume, then click on the “[Contents] List of papers relating to foreign affairs, accompanying the president’s message to Congress, at the opening of its session in December, 1861.” You can adjust the size of the page by clicking the icon on the left of the screen.
3. Have students click through the contents and note the countries with which the US corresponded. Which countries did the US correspond with the most? Speculate why you think these countries were important to the US? They should come up with trade and close political ties, especially with France and Great Britain.
4. You can start with the Circulars from Secretary of State J.S. Black and then William Seward to the American ministers to other countries. Ask: What instructions was the secretary of state giving to his ministers? Why? What were the concerns of the US at the start of the Civil War regarding foreign countries?
5. Discuss what diplomatic recognition is and what it means with regard to the Confederate States of America. Why was Seward concerned about Great Britain or France recognizing the southern states? (see pp. 71[unnumbered]-80 for Great Britain and pp. 195 [unnumbered]-215 for France)
6. Students can also search for biographies of some of the ministers to European countries. For example, the minister to Britain, Charles Adams is a grandson of John Adams and the son of John Quincy Adams, both of whom were ministers to England.

Glossary

Recognition	domestic v. foreign policy	diplomacy
Sedition	Circular	secretary of state
Minister	William Seward	Abraham Lincoln
Charles Adams		

Conclusion

You can discuss what inferences can be drawn about the concerns of the US toward European countries and the concerns of European countries toward the US and the southern states during the Civil War.

Assessment

From large class discussion of the questions, students will exhibit achievement of the objectives. You can require students to hand in the biographies they created of some of the players in the volume.

Additional Information

See the “History Matters” web site for tips on how to analyze letters:
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/sia/letters.htm>

Possible Lesson Extensions:

1. You can expand this lesson to other units in US history (i.e., WWI, WWII, Korea, etc.)
2. Students can use language arts skills by writing editorials or newspaper articles about one or more of the letters.