Patriotism and the Vietnam War

Focus Statement:

This lesson raises questions about the meaning of patriotism at the time of the Vietnam War. The lesson encourages students to examine a dictionary definition of patriotism and apply the meaning to soldiers and citizens who were active participants in the Vietnam War. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, patriotism is “a love of country, a devotion to the welfare of one’s country.” It includes “virtues” and “passions” that inspire someone to “serve one’s country.”

This lesson asks students to view the meaning of patriotism through the lens of four groups of participants living in the 1960s and 1970s: veteran soldiers who volunteered to fight in the Vietnam War; veteran soldiers who were drafted and fought in the war; home front citizens who protested against the Vietnam War; and home front citizens who supported the war.

The vital theme of Values, Beliefs, Political Ideas, and Institutions guides the content of this lesson. The habit of mind is to perceive past events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time, to develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness. This lesson includes a poem from Gary Jacobson, “Soldiers of the Wall.” Students will examine these particular lines:

We didn’t wish to die,
When we heard that clarion cry,
A call to arms set us on this course.
And we’d do’er again without remorse.
For we’d rather be men than shirk
When our country needs us to do dirty work
For we know that freedom is not free and our children must grow tall in liberty.

Another source includes excerpts from the Big Red One veterans’ transcripts. Students and teacher will discuss the definition of patriotism, the “Soldier of the Wall” poem, and the transcripts in class.

At the conclusion of the class session, students will be asked to find their own sources – in books, on-line, or personal interviews – that reflect one of the following perspectives: Vietnam veterans who were drafted, home front citizens who opposed the war, and home front citizens who supported the war.

Vital Theme and Narrative: Values, Beliefs, Political Ideas, and Institutions

Habit of Mind: Perceive past events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time, to develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness

Objectives

A. Explain key ideas in the poem “Soldiers of the Wall” and its underlying meaning.
B. Comprehend that patriotism was a driving factor that sustained many veterans through the Vietnam War.

C. Evaluate the different levels of patriotism and understand that there can be different levels and perspectives.

**National History Standard:** Era 9 Standard 2C Explain the composition of the American forces recruited to fight the war [Interrogate historical data]

Historical Thinking Standard 3B Consider multiple perspectives.

**IX. Procedures**

**A. Bell Work**

1. (Set Induction) As students walk into the classroom, they will be required to pick up a handout of the poem titled “Soldiers of the Wall.” (See excerpt in focus statement above or link to entire poem in materials.) Students will be asked to read this poem and consider the following questions:

   a. Who is the author?

   b. When was this poem composed?

   c. Based on the content of the poem, what experiences might you expect the author to have had?

2. The teacher will then lead students in a discussion of the poem. The discussion of the poem should include: What is the wall that is being referenced? What names are on the wall? What are the reactions of the soldiers in the poem? How is this poem an example of “patriotism?”

**B. Brainstorm Activity**

1. The teacher should next pose the question, “What is patriotism?” Individually, the students will write down their definition of patriotism or characteristics that make up a patriot or patriotic person.

2. The class will then discuss their answers regarding the definition of a patriot. Teacher will list the ideas on the board. The teacher, with help from students, should then take all the characteristics and place them into different levels of patriotism. For example, saying the pledge may be a lower level of patriotism, where dying for one’s country would most likely be the ultimate level of patriotism.

3. The teacher should ask students to describe the most patriotic act that they or someone they know has done. For example, the act might be something like fighting in a war, donating blood, giving packages or writing letters to soldiers overseas, working or helping out an election polls, or teaching someone the Pledge of Allegiance.
4. The teacher and students will also discuss an American Heritage Dictionary definition of patriotism. Students will compare their definitions to the dictionary definition. The teacher and students will reach a consensus definition of “patriotism.”

C. Vietnam Patriotism

1. The teacher will discuss the role of patriotism in the Vietnam War. By making references to the poem and the Big Red One (1st Infantry Division) transcript of Phil Rosman, the teacher will address the issue of soldiers not only fighting for their lives, but for the lives and freedoms of their families and friends in America. The teacher should use direct quotes from the poem/transcript and ask the students what the meaning is behind the quotes. Teacher should also mention the reaction of the home front once these soldiers arrived back to America.

2. The teacher should ask students to investigate “patriotism” by finding examples from one of three groups: Vietnam veterans who were drafted and fought in the war; anti-war protesters who opposed the war on the home front; and home front citizens who supported the Vietnam War. To prepare students as they find their own sources, the teacher should provide a brief overview of the counter culture and anti-war movement.

   The teacher should stress that students have a four-part assignment. First, they should find a source from one of the above categories. Second, they should identify the source and explain how their source demonstrates “patriotism.” Third, students should explain in writing how the source they found compares to the poem, “Soldiers of the Wall.” Fourth, students should share what they found in a class discussion.

D. Closure

1. Explain the assignment detailed below.

X. Method of Assessment: Teacher will assess students in two ways. First, the teacher should determine the willingness of students to find a source. Second, how well did students relate the source they found to the teacher’s source, “Soldiers of the Wall.” This assessment allows the students to examine different perspectives of patriotism. The assessment also allows students to investigate views and reactions from family members, neighbors, written, and picture sources.

XI. Materials:

1. “Soldiers of the Wall” Poem
2. Students Finding Sources
3. Sources
A. http://pzzzz.tripod.com/wall.html

B. Phil Rosman Transcript