

LESSON PLAN:

“A Peace which shall be lasting”? Analyzing Early American Diplomacy with Indigenous Peoples

Overview: One of the most important functions of the War Department in its first years was managing relationships with the native peoples and nations that abutted America’s ever-expanding borders. White Americans’ unceasing appetite for land constantly brought them into contact with the indigenous peoples who had inhabited the land for thousands of years before the arrival of European colonists.

As those populations came into increasing contact, native populations suffered, struggled, negotiated, attacked, retreated, and sometimes collaborated with whites as they attempted to preserve parts of their culture and society from the steady encroachment of a new and often threatening country.

In the United States’ first decades, the War Department served as the primary government office mediating relations between white Americans and indigenous peoples. Its files contain a wealth of reports, letters, and observations about the character and nature of those interactions. The documents in the early War Department collection reflect a distinctly white, American perspective, a product of the function of the early War Office within the new Federal government. But the archive nevertheless offers a unique and fascinating window into these important efforts at early diplomacy, before the confrontational and punitive policies of the nineteenth century became settled. These documents reflect a moment when that outcome was only one of a range of possibilities, from a time when the deliberately weak standing army established by the Constitution required the central government to use tools beyond brute force in its dealings.

This lesson explores some of the ways that the early War Department attempted to manage what it termed “Indian Affairs” during the 1790s using letters, speeches, and reports from the last years of the eighteenth century. It is suitable for classes in early American history, in human geography, and some cultural anthropology courses. (It is also appropriate for teachers and students looking for a more complex view of the early frontier than the one presented in David McCullough’s 2019 book *The Pioneers*.)

ACTIVITY:

Historical background: Winning their independence in the war against Great Britain did not end all the threats facing the new American nation. In the two decades following the War of Independence, the young United States faced a variety of challenges to their security. Some of those threats came from European great powers: the ongoing rivalry with Great Britain would erupt into war again in 1812, and conflict with former ally France nearly broke into naval warfare during the Quasi-War from 1798 to 1800. Other threats were internal challenges to the central government: the uprising known as Shays’ Rebellion in western Massachusetts tested the authority of the Articles of Confederation in 1786 and 1787, while the Whiskey Rebellion challenged the sovereignty and determination of the government under the new Constitution from 1791 to 1794.

The framers of the Constitution intended it to create a government that could, in part, “insure domestic Tranquility” and “provide for the common defense,” though they adamantly opposed supporting a

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standing professional army in peacetime. The military that would help provide for the new nation's security would, by design, be small and relatively weak compared to the grand professional armies of Europe.

In America's first decades, a critical part of providing for the common defense was managing relationships with the indigenous nations near the ever-expanding white settlements. For white Americans, the most persistent and most immediate threat to their security came not from the great European powers across the Atlantic but from the native peoples on the immediate frontier.

For the indigenous peoples of North America, of course, the situation looked vastly different. They faced simultaneous threats from white Americans moving westward and, often, from rival neighboring indigenous populations. For them, the formation of the United States between 1775 and 1789 marked only the newest chapter in a long and fraught history that had begun nearly two hundred years earlier with the arrival of the first European settlers on the Atlantic seaboard.

The U.S. government's history with the indigenous nations of North America is a long and complex one, and the treatment of Native American peoples at the hands of the federal government constitutes a protracted and shameful chapter in American history. That history includes the 1830 Indian Removal Act under Andrew Jackson's administration; the lengthy series of brutal military actions against the Plains Indians spanning decades in the mid- to late-nineteenth century; seizure of tribal lands and the forced relocation to reservations; and the establishment of the Carlisle Indian School in 1879, with its professed aim of stripping indigenous children of their tribal heritage and, in so doing, "Kill the Indian: Save the man."

Conflict between whites and native populations began with the first arrival of Europeans in North America in the seventeenth century, and flowed in often violent cycles for the next two centuries. Indigenous nations were not passive during this process: in an effort to preserve their families, lands, and culture, they would act as vigorous agents in their own right, using diplomacy, force, and negotiation to carve out accommodations alongside the expanding white population. Those interactions entered a new phase following the United States' victory in the War of Independence.

One of the most important tasks assigned to the new War Department was the management of what it termed "Indian Affairs." Using a variety of means, agents of the modest office attempted to shape relations between white Americans and indigenous nations. Given the staggering persecution that characterized white Americans' relations with indigenous nations in the nineteenth century, it is easy to imagine that the power dynamic was always one-sided, exploitive, adversarial, and violent. But while the earliest federal efforts to accommodate the interests of both whites and indigenous people would hardly be characterized as benign, the documentary record suggests that those relationships were complex, multifaceted, and frequently changing.

This lesson explores some of the ways that the early War Department tried to manage those relationships, using documents and reports from the last years of the eighteenth century. Those documents tell a distinctly white, American story (that perspective is, in fact, one of the defining features of the archive), but offers a unique look into the early efforts to accommodate competing interests and cultures on the evolving and often violent frontier.

Lesson objective: To explore the evolving relationships between native peoples and the government of the newly-independent United States in the 1790s by examining correspondence from the files of the early War Department.

Lesson materials

Primary source document packet:

Document A, Richard Butler to Delaware Chiefs, 1787

Document B, Anthony Wayne to Secretary of War Henry Knox, October 1789

Document C, Anthony Wayne to Secretary of War Henry Knox, August 1792

(transcription only)

Document D, Timothy Barnard to Henry Gaither, February 1793

Document E, Cussetah Chiefs to Henry Gaither, April 1793 (transcription only)

Historian's worksheet

Teacher answer key

Lesson preparation

Prepare copies of **Documents A, B, C, D, and E** and the **Historian's worksheet** for the class.

Depending on students' level of familiarity with early eighteenth-century American history, the lesson can work as either an individual or group activity. Students with a good working knowledge of eighteenth-century primary sources can work the exercise individually. Students who are less experienced can work on the documents in groups. If your students are still becoming comfortable with primary sources (especially older ones, like the ones in this packet), assign one document to each group.

Lesson procedure

Optional icebreaker introduction: Each of the primary sources comes with a transcription. The eighteenth-century originals were all handwritten, and digital scans of each original letter accompany the transcribed version in the lesson packet. If your students can read cursive handwriting, you can begin the lesson with a short exercise in which students transcribe a document themselves. **Document D**, Timothy Barnard's letter to Henry Gaither, is an excellent choice for the transcription exercise since the handwriting is very legible. (In fact, this document is actually a copy of the original, made by a clerk in

the War Department as a record of the correspondence. Such copies were compiled in a large volume called a “letterbook,” which served as a kind of eighteenth-century version of the modern e-mail outbox or sent folder.)

The transcription exercise works best in groups of two or three, since good transcribers must often use context clues and inference to figure out words and abbreviations that are unclear.

Students will likely find this process extremely frustrating (professional historians find it frustrating, too!), but a five-minute attempt to transcribe the documents can help them appreciate the challenges that teachers and textbook authors face in making sense of original letters from this period, even if the student attempts are unsuccessful. Distribute the document transcriptions once you are ready to begin the exercise and encourage students to check their attempts.

Before looking at the documents themselves, begin the session with some brainstorming: What do the students know about the relationships between indigenous peoples and the U.S. government in the 1800s? Students may list the Trail of Tears, the reservation system, and the wars against the Plains Indians (Custer’s defeat at Little Bighorn in 1876 often stands out in memory as a rare and thorough victory by native peoples over the whites.)

Next, engage the students in some follow-on inference: Based on what they know about relationships between whites and indigenous people in the nineteenth century, what do they imagine those relations to be like in the late 1700s? A reasonable assumption, given the brutality that characterized many of the interactions in the 1800s, might be that the relationship was violent and one-sided, with white Americans using military threats and military force to impose their will on native populations.

Once you have cataloged students’ hypotheses, introduce the collection of documents as a way to test their guesses. The War Department was the main office that managed what they termed “Indian affairs” during this period, and the correspondence coming and going from that office gives a unique window into the relationships between white Americans and indigenous nations in the years immediately following the American War of Independence.

Provide copies of **Documents A-E** and the **Historian’s worksheet**. The worksheet serves as a guide to help the students summarize, analyze, and interpret each document. The **Teacher answer key** contains information and insights into each of the documents.

Once the students have completed the summary and interpretation, reconvene the class to fit these samples into a broader pattern. What do they notice about late-eighteenth-century relations between white Americans and indigenous peoples? How were their hypotheses confirmed by the primary sources? How were their hypotheses complicated?

In that guided discussion, students may arrive at several somewhat surprising conclusions about the interactions between whites and native peoples under the new Federal government:

1. There are many different groups of native peoples (and different groups of whites) with different goals. The two groups are not monolithic. White settlers in different parts of the sprawling but thinly populated new country have different relationships with the neighboring Indian nations. And different indigenous nations have markedly different cultures and relationships, with each other and with the growing new country to the east. **Document E** in particular shows one group of native leaders urgently explaining that a recent rash of violence against whites was not undertaken by their own people but by a rogue chieftain whom they cannot control.

2. White attitudes toward native populations are not monolithic, and native attitudes toward white Americans are not monolithic, either. The tone of the correspondence varies widely. Some of the letters are accommodating if not conciliatory; agent Timothy Barnard's letter, **Document D**, is nearly sympathetic to the grievances of the native peoples, and he warns outright that unless someone prevails upon the whites to exercise some restraint in their grazing patterns, the settlers will deserve the rough treatment they are likely to get.

At the other end of the spectrum, Anthony Wayne's two letters are especially bellicose and openly hostile—Wayne (whose reputation as a fierce fighter had earned him the nickname “Mad Anthony” at the 1779 Battle of Stony Point during the War of Independence) seems to have already decided that there can be no negotiation with any of the native nations in the Northwest until they are subdued militarily, and urges Secretary of War Henry Knox to use military intimidation with a large armed force in order to secure American goals there.

3. Violence is not necessarily the government's first resort for managing relations between whites and native nations. The agents representing the new government of the United States demonstrate a strong preference for negotiation in their relationships. That preference appears in several of the documents: for example, in **Document A**, Richard Butler offers invitations to negotiate with various tribal chiefs and closes his address with the earnest hopes that those invitations “will induce you all to come with hearts disposed to perpetual Peace & Friendships with the United States.”

Students might wonder: Why would the Federal government appear to prefer negotiation and accommodation in favor of brute force? Some guided reflection can help reveal some important broader themes about the nature of the early Federal government and its War Department that are helpful in making sense of late eighteenth century U.S. history generally.

The U.S. showed restraint not purely out of magnanimity or benevolence but in some important ways out of practical reality. The Constitution, by design, kept the peacetime standing army very small. The Federal government could not afford to keep troops stationed on the long frontier border indefinitely. And in military conflict native peoples enjoyed many advantages, especially their knowledge of the terrain and ability to support themselves off the land. Early American military expeditions against indigenous nations often proved disastrous for whites. (Wayne's 1794 campaign in the upper Midwest was a devastatingly effective exception.)

Given its limitations in resources and troops, the United States government in the late 1700s could ill afford to threaten war against every indigenous group that responded to white encroachment on the frontier. Adopting a more circumspect approach to its frontier diplomacy was a strategic choice made as much out of necessity as benevolence.

Later in the 1800s, as the government grew in power, wealth, and military strength—and as the economic logic of expansion quickened whites' movement westward—the U.S. approach to indigenous diplomacy would grow more belligerent and more inflexible, giving way to the shocking policies familiar from nineteenth-century American history.