

His Policy was WHAT?!?...Thomas Jefferson and the Native Americans

Summary Description:

Thomas Jefferson was a unique and very influential individual in our nation's history. I have had the opportunity to examine and explore Mr. Jefferson while at this NEH Seminar. I have studied at great length both his writings and his character. I discovered that Jefferson was a man of very conflicting styles and ideals. He would write or say one thing, and would then carry out something different. I believe you will discover this in the lesson concerning Thomas Jefferson and his communications concerning Native Americans.

Intended Audience:

The materials and topic are best suited for a high school classroom. United States History, Sociology, Cultural Studies, or Native American Studies would be the appropriate class settings. This lesson is formulated for a class of 5-6, 50 minute class periods. Block scheduling, or a different length class period will require modifications. The lesson could also be modified for a middle school setting.

The Purpose:

Many would argue that Thomas Jefferson was one of the most important presidents of the United States. During his life, the United States was encountering issues with the Native Americans, both good and bad. I believe that our students and our society can be enhanced by understanding the role and the issues surrounding the Native Americans throughout history. One aspect of this role is to understand the relationship and ideas that Jefferson portrayed towards Native Americans before, during, and after his presidency.

Learning Objective:

Students will be able to:

- Explain the attitude of Thomas Jefferson towards Native Americans as expressed in his writings prior to his presidency.
- Analyze Jefferson's attitudes and policies towards Native Americans during his presidency as revealed in his writings.
- Analyze Jefferson's attitude after his presidency as revealed in a letter.
- Compare and Contrast Jefferson's attitude towards Native Americans, and what the actual policies our government instituted.

Resources:

There are vast resources on this subject. There are over 100 primary sources from Jefferson alone that mention or relate to Native Americans. If you research primary sources on Native Americans from the 18th or 19th century, you will need to use the term "Indian." It was not until recently that it has become customary to use Native American. You will also find countless government documents about Native Americans during the time of the Jefferson presidency. You would be able to create an entire semester covering just Native American policy from 1492-1826, so please be aware of your purpose, and the reading ability of your students.

-Materials for your research and preparation:

- Thomas Jefferson, Writings: The Library of America Series.
- Jefferson and The Indians: The Tragic Fate of the First Americans. Authored by Anthony F.C. Wallace. Printed in 2001 by Harvard University Press.
- www.monticello.org (Monticello web page)
- www.loc.gov (Library of Congress)
- <http://founders.archives.gov> (National Archives)

-Materials for your students, written prior to the Jefferson presidency:

- Notes on the State of Virginia, Query VI
- Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XV
- Letter written from Thomas Jefferson to Charles Carroll, dated 15 April 1791

-Materials for your students, written during the Jefferson presidency:

- Indian Address to Brother Handsome Lake, 3 November 1802
- Indian Address to the Brothers of the Choctaw Nation, 17 December 1803
- Indian Address to the Chiefs of the Cherokee Nation, 10 January 1806
- Indian Address to the People of the Mandan Nation, 30 December 1806
- Letter written from Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Hawkins, 18 February 1803. Start with the second paragraph which starts “Altho’ you will receive...” Stop at the paragraph which starts “Mr. Madison enjoys better health...”
- Letter written from Thomas Jefferson to Governor William H. Harrison, 27 February 1803. Start with the third paragraph which starts “You will receive here with...”
- Letter written from Thomas Jefferson to Captain Lewis, 20 June 1803. Start with the tenth paragraph which starts “The commerce which may be carried on...” Stop with the paragraph which starts “On your arrival on that coast...”

-Materials for your students, written after the presidency of Thomas Jefferson:

- Letter written from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 11 June 1812.

Instructional Process:

Day 1: Communications prior to the presidency of Thomas Jefferson.

- Review policy and attitudes that colonial settlers had of Native Americans.
- Expand on the discussion by reviewing government policy towards Native Americans from 1776-1800.
- Review the concept of Indian Removal Policies.
- Review why Native Americans were viewed as “savages.”
- Distribute primary sources, one per student.
- Have students read and answer the following questions:
- What were Jefferson’s thoughts on the Native Americans?
- What did Jefferson believe would be in the best interests of the Native Americans?
- Should the Native Americans retain their customs, or should they convert to the colonial way of life?

- Be sure students support their point of view with specific examples from the three primary sources.

Day 2 and 3: Communications written during the presidency of Thomas Jefferson.

- Divide your class into four groups. Each group will read one of the Indian Addresses written by Jefferson.
- Each group will prepare a presentation of their particular address. They may use a worksheet, poster, PowerPoint, Prezi, Wordle, or other presentation format.

Day 4: Communications written during and after the presidency of Thomas Jefferson.

- Student groups will present their projects. Be sure to formulate discussions during the presentations.
- Distribute to each student copies of the final communication during the Jefferson presidency.
- Have students write a summary of the final communications that Thomas Jefferson wrote during his presidency.

Day 5: Review of communications by Thomas Jefferson concerning Native Americans.

- Review Thomas Jefferson's attitudes and policies both prior to and during his presidency.
- Discuss insights the students received after reading the letters that Thomas Jefferson wrote during his presidency.
- Hand out the letter that Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Adams, 11 June 1812.
- Have students read the letter, and discuss the following questions. You may also have students answer these as homework.
- What was the intent of the letter?
- Was Jefferson speaking highly of the Native Americans?
- Does he feel that war with the Native Americans was imminent?
- Was Thomas Jefferson's policy and attitude towards the Native Americans ever clear?
- Did it ever change?
- Did he seem to support one policy while writing to a Native American, but another policy while writing to his "white friends?"
- How can you explain these differences?

Assessment:

Throughout the five day lesson, students were evaluated on their class discussions, group presentations, and questions formulated during the readings.