

Lesson Plan

# America's Role in the World: World War I to World War II

**Length**

2-3 periods

**Grade Level**

High School

## Learning Objectives

Students will be able to

- Analyze primary source documents
- Infer subtle messages from primary sources
- Summarize the meaning of primary sources
- Incorporate primary source materials in a scripted news conference

[Complete Lesson Plan with Handouts](#)

## Overview

**\*\*Click the link above for the full plan with readings and handouts.\*\***

This unit has been developed by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History in partnership with CFR Education from the Council on Foreign Relations. These lesson plans were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original documents of historical significance. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on visual and textual source materials.

In the two lessons in this unit the students will analyze and assess cartoons, speeches, government documents, and other texts created between 1915 and 1941. The objective is to have students recognize the contrasting arguments of the isolationists and interventionists and analyze key elements of the debate about America's role in the world between World War I and World War II. Using these key elements students will examine, identify, evaluate, and discuss significant ideas from several isolationist- and interventionist-focused documents. As an assessment, they will use the documents to create a scripted news conference aimed at shifting the opinion of the American public toward isolation or intervention in the world.

## Lesson 1: Analyzing the Isolationist and Interventionist Messages

**\*\*Click the link above for the full plan with readings and handouts.\*\***

In the first lesson, students will identify, examine, and analyze the language and imagery of primary sources related to the debate between isolationists and interventionists from 1915 to 1941. Students will work with a variety of primary sources including cartoons, speeches, government documents, and other texts. For each document students will identify important actions, moods, and phrases associated with the argument and cite evidence from the document to support their answer. At the end of the lesson, the class will come together to discuss both sides of

the debate and which side had better arguments.

1. Optional: You may choose to incorporate the Historical Background (and the Important Phrases activity sheet) at any point throughout the two lessons in this unit, or you may discuss the information in the essay with the class. In addition, you may have the students read “How Did the United States Become a Global Power?” from CFR Education.
2. Place students into pairs or small groups and hand out, provide a digital copy of, or screen share the four Analyzing a Cartoon: Isolationist and Interventionist Arguments activity sheets.
3. Lead the class through the analysis of one of the political cartoons. Have students conduct a brief 30-second analysis on their own and elicit answers about the actions, mood or tone, and message of the cartoon. It is perfectly fine if they disagree. Next, have them cite evidence from the political cartoon that supports their answers. The analysis and discussion of evidence is crucial to a deeper understanding of the primary source.
4. Have students complete the analysis of the remaining cartoons. If you are in a hybrid teaching setting, make certain that at least one person from each group is in-person.
5. Lead a brief class discussion of the messages in the cartoons and have students answer the essential question: What part should the United States have played in the world between 1918 and 1941?
6. With students still in their small groups, hand out, provide a digital copy of, or screen share the Analyzing Isolationist Arguments activity sheets, Analyzing Interventionist Arguments activity sheets, and all ten texts. If time or student learning level is a consideration, you may choose to use the following two primary sources for each side of the argument.
  - Analyzing Isolationist Arguments activity sheets paired with the following documents:
    - Washington’s Farewell Address, 1796
    - Smedley D. Butler, War Is a Racket, 1935
  - Analyzing Interventionist Arguments activity sheets paired with the following documents:
    - Woodrow Wilson, The President’s Address, April 2, 1917
    - Franklin Roosevelt, Address of the President at Chautauqua, NY, 1936
7. Lead the students in a “share read” of one of the texts. To share read the text, have the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud. This technique will support struggling readers and English language learners.
8. Have students complete the remaining activity sheets.
  - Students will analyze the five isolationist and five interventionist primary sources and identify the most important or powerful phrase in each text, writing it into the appropriate activity sheet. They will explain their reasons for selecting each phrase.
  - Students will determine the overall message of the isolationist and interventionist texts taken together and answer the essential question: What part should the United States have played in the world between 1918 and 1941?
9. When they have completed all of the activity sheets, have them discuss which set of primary sources had the greatest impact and the most effective message.
10. Have students answer the essential question as a wrap-up discussion or an exit ticket activity: What part should the United States have played in the world between 1918 and 1941?

## Lesson 2: Isolationist/Interventionist News Conference

**\*\*Click the link above for the full plan with readings and handouts.\*\***

In the second lesson, the students will use the materials from Lesson 1 to create and present a scripted news conference. At the end of the lesson, the class will come together to discuss the news conferences and the effectiveness of the messages, and answer the essential question.

1. Optional: You may choose to incorporate the Historical Background (and the Important Phrases activity sheet) at any point throughout the two lessons in this unit, or you may discuss the information in the essay with the class. In addition, you may have the students read “How Did the United States Become a Global Power” from CFR Education.
2. Divide the class into small groups, evenly split between isolationists and interventionists if possible; for example, two groups of isolationists and two groups of interventionists. Each group is assigned either the isolationist or interventionist documents from Lesson 1. If you are in a hybrid teaching setting, make certain

- that at least one person from each group is in-person. If you are working remotely, you may wish to place students in breakout rooms.
3. Students select who will take the role of speaker, with the other members of the group portraying reporters at the news conference.
  4. Hand out the Isolationist/Interventionist News Conference organizer. Working together, the students will write both the questions and the answers to those questions on the form. The questions should highlight the major issues in the documents. The students should be careful to cite evidence from the texts in the answers given by the speaker. Each student will fill out their own complete copy of the questions and answers, not just their own question. If there are more than three “reporters,” they may write additional questions and answers on the back of the organizer. If possible, have the students watch a recording of a traditional news conference prior to this activity.
  5. Hand out the Audience Response organizers to the class. If there are more than three groups in each category, they may write additional responses on the back of the organizer.
  6. Presentation:
    - The speaker takes questions from reporters.
    - The reporters raise their hands, and the speaker selects them to ask their questions.
    - The news conference continues until all of the questions have been asked, one per reporter; if time permits, the students could script follow-up questions.
    - Using the Isolationist/Interventionist Audience Response organizer, have those students not presenting evaluate the effectiveness of the speaker’s answers. Have the audience members record the documents cited and the most effective evidence used, and write a brief summary of the speaker’s argument.
  7. Repeat the process with all groups. This may mean going into another class period to allow time for all of the presentations as well as time to debrief the experience.
  8. Have the class debrief the presentations. What evidence was the most effective? What made the speaker’s answers effective? What documents were cited? Focus on good oral presentation skills as well as which questions elicited the most meaningful answers.
  9. Have students answer the essential question as a wrap-up discussion or an exit ticket activity: What part should the United States have played in the world between 1918 and 1941?