

Activity from [Contemporary History](#) and [Foreign Policy](#)
Activity

Discussion Activity: The Jay Treaty

Learning Objectives

Students will use primary sources to evaluate the competing priorities shaping early U.S. foreign policy, including economic interests, national security, and revolutionary ideals. Use the [Primary Sources from the Early Republic Learning Journey](#) to facilitate the discussion activity below.

Length

1-2 class periods

Instructional Plan

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, coffeehouses were frequently places for people to meet and discuss the issues of the day. They were democratic places where people from different parts of society could come together. In that spirit, set up a coffeehouse in class to discuss the Jay Treaty. Students will be assigned a role. Then, they will learn about the era by exploring a collection of readings. Finally, they will have a discussion about an issue in character.

Part 1: Overview and Assign Roles

Guiding Questions:

- What are the primary factors that should guide U.S. foreign policy?
- Should the United States align more closely with Britain or France? Why?

Have students read the overview, which will outline some of the foreign policy questions the United States faced at the time and the possible countries it could align with.

Assign students their roles. In the event there are more students than roles, more than one student can play the same role. They should still participate individually, they'll just share the same assigned perspective (e.g. there could be two lawyers or three farmers at the coffeehouse).

Roles:

- Import/export merchant who lives in a port city
- Woman who works a small farm with her husband
- Lawyer with a university degree

- Well-to-do blacksmith
- Widow who runs a boarding house in a seaport town
- Sailor or ship captain
- Revolutionary War veteran
- Frontier settler from the Ohio Valley

Consider adding unique details to each role, or ask your students to write a short profile to give their role additional background. For example:

Thomas Hartley has been a sailor for twelve years, working merchant ships out of Philadelphia. He was pressed into service on a British naval vessel in 1793 while his ship was stopped in the Caribbean and spent eight months aboard before escaping at a port in Jamaica. He is unmarried and has no formal education but can read and write.

Part 2: Primary Source Gallery Walk

Put students into groups. Spread the documents around the room and assign each group to one or more documents. Students should read the document together and answer the following questions:

- Who is the author of the document? What do we know about them?
- When and where was the document produced?
- What insight does this document give about the coffeehouse discussion question?
- What insight does this document give about my assigned role?
- What questions does this document raise that you'd like answered?

Once students have examined their primary sources, have groups briefly share out one or two key insights from their documents. This ensures all students have exposure to all sources, not just the ones their group analyzed.

Part 3: The Coffeehouse Discussion

For homework, have students write a short position paper in the voice of their assigned role, reflecting their character's perspective. They should write persuasively, using evidence and reasoning, as if writing an opinion piece for a newspaper.

Have students make placards that indicate their role. At the start of the discussion, ask them to briefly introduce themselves in their role to set the scene. (Optionally, students could bring props or even arrive in costume.)

Conduct the coffeehouse discussion in class. Introduce the exercise with a brief scene-setter:

The year is 1795. It is a warm summer evening, and you have gathered at the City Coffeehouse after a long day's work. The talk tonight, as it has been for weeks, is of the treaty. John Jay, the Chief Justice, was sent to London last year to negotiate with the British. The Senate debated the treaty behind closed doors and voted to ratify it just weeks ago. The full text has just been published in the newspapers for all to read, and what people have read has made many angry. Each of you has your own opinions, shaped by your own experiences and circumstances. Join the discussion and share what you make of the Jay Treaty.

Once students are ready to begin discussion, consider the following questions:

- What foreign policy and economic issues is America facing that would be affected by the choice of whom to align with?
- What do you think is the proper vision for America? What do you think its identity and role in the world should be?

- Is remaining truly neutral possible in this scenario?
- What are the pros and cons of aligning more closely with Britain or France?

Whenever necessary, push students to provide evidence and reasoning for their comments.

Consider recording the class or using a transcription app to help with giving feedback and assessment.

Leave time at the end of the discussion for a debrief in which students can step outside their roles and reflect on what they learned. Optionally, consider also assigning students a short reflection paper in their own voice.

Consider the following questions:

- In the discussion, what seemed to be the most important points of agreement and disagreement?
- What made this a controversial issue? In other words, why did people disagree about it?
- Who do you think the United States should have aligned with?