

Presidents in the Hot Seat: The Secession of the Southern States

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to use primary evidence to formulate a response to a complex policy problem.
2. Students will be able to use primary evidence to critique the actions of historical decision-makers.
3. Students will be able to analyze and apply primary evidence to develop historical empathy for past decision-makers.

Length of Lesson: Six 45-minute class periods. (Some lessons may take longer depending on teacher amendments, students' background knowledge, or students' ability to handle the complexity of some primary documents.)

Materials:

1. Presidents in the Hot Seat: Primary Document Analysis Sheet
2. Day 2 Background Slides: "How Did the U.S. Become So Divided by 1860?"
3. Day 2 News Report: "Why They Seceded," from *The New York Times*, December 29, 1860.
4. Day 5 *Address to the American People* Questionnaire
5. President Primary Documents
6. President-elect Primary Documents
7. Secretary of War Primary Documents
8. Secretary of State Primary Documents
9. Debrief Slides: "You VS Lincoln and Buchanan"

Start of Lesson

Day 1: How Should the President Respond in a Time of Crisis?

Anticipatory Set (Entire first 45-minute class period): Organize students into groups of five. At the start of class, have students write for five minutes individually in response to the question: "How should the President respond during a crisis?" After this, provide ten minutes for every student to share their responses as a group. Each group must develop a group response to the question. Afterwards, rearrange the classroom seating into a circle, and ask each group to share their responses to the question. Use these

responses to begin a socratic seminar about how the president should respond to a crisis.¹

Possible follow up questions:

- What should the president immediately inquire about a potential crisis/situation (What questions should the president ask)? What should the President try to learn about the situation?
- What resources does the President have at their disposal to begin dealing with an issue?
- Should the President establish contact with local and state leaders to handle the situation? Should the president ask what they have at their disposal to immediately address the situation?
- Should the president disclose all information to the public or distribute information selectively in order to prevent panic?

Debrief: Have students take out a piece of paper and respond to the following question: If you were the President or one of the President's advisors during a major crisis, how do you think you personally would respond? Why?

Day 2: The Election of 1860 and the Secession

Class Starter: Yesterday, we discussed how a President might respond to a crisis. For the next couple of days, you will be stepping into the role of President and his advisors in one of the most impactful crises in US history: the secession of the southern states from the Union in 1860/1861. In order to do this, though, we must better understand the this crisis.

Activity (20-25 minutes): Use the provided slides to provide students with a brief overview of sectional disputes in the United States over slavery since the framing of the Constitution. Based on instruction they have provided previously, many teachers may not find it necessary to include this section and can move on in to the next activity.²

¹ Teachers are encouraged to use any discussion format they consider to be most appropriate for the students in their classroom. This method has been provided as a simple structure to follow but can also be modified easily to suit the learning needs of individual students.

² The slides provided with this lesson are intended to be specific enough to be usable but do not include an overwhelming amount of information so that teachers can make modifications as needed based on the background knowledge their students already have or do not have. Many teachers may be able to skip this activity if they have already provided students with this background information more deeply in their course prior to conducting this simulation. This activity has been provided to teachers who find themselves in need of a review of key information. For example, teachers teaching a unit on the presidency in a U.S. Government course might find it helpful to complete a quick review of this content.

Transition: Now that we have a strong sense of the background leading up to the moment that South Carolina seceded from the Union, we need to take a closer look at *why* South Carolina (and other states) decided the time had come to separate from the United States. After all, if President Buchanan and President-elect were to respond to the crisis at hand, it was important for them to know why secession had begun in the first place.

Activity (20+ minutes): Provide each student with a copy of the Day 2 News Reports. Break students into pairs or small groups to read the reports together. Explain to students that uncertainty was common in U.S. society and politics in the days following the secession of South Carolina, and the secession of states that followed did nothing to improve the uncertainty and bitterness. Right now, though, it is important for students to understand *why* southerners decided to secede, and the document they are going to read from the *New York Times* will allow them to do this

Students should take out a piece of paper and respond to the following questions as an exit slip. Teachers may also elect to forego the exit slip and engage in a discussion about the following questions:

1. Why did the southerners that seceded provide as their reason for the secession?
2. What was the role of slavery in their reasoning?
3. Why did the secessionists believe that the rest of the world would support the fact that southern states had left the Union?

Day 3: Primary source analysis in preparation for the simulation.

Class Starter: Today, students will begin evaluating the primary sources for each of the roles the students are to fill. Begin by explaining to students that they will be taking on the role of President Buchanan, President-elect Lincoln, and their advisors to make a decision about how to respond to the secession of the southern states. Assign each student one of the roles that need to be filled (President, President-elect, Secretary of State, and the Secretary of War). Once students have their roles, provide them with the documents assigned for each role.

Activity (40 minutes): For this activity, it is necessary to allow students time to read through the primary sources assigned to them, and evaluate the merit of the information provided in each document. Have students use the Presidents in the Hot Seat: Primary Document Analysis sheet to help them classify the importance of and make sense of the information they find in their documents. They will use this information tomorrow in a

simulation in which they will have to make several difficult decisions based off of what they know.³

Materials to use when working within groups: Students will need to use the primary sources provided to them depending on their role.

Day 4: Simulation.

Class Starter (3-5 minutes): The date is March 3, 1860 - one day before the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln. Buchanan has the official authority, but Lincoln bears the responsibility for handling the crisis. Today, students will work within their groups of 4 to determine what course of action the President should take in order to effectively respond to the developing situation. Explain to students that their decisions will undoubtedly impact the lives of millions of Americans and that groups should spend time deliberating each decision before committing to a final resolution.

Activity (40 minutes): For this activity, the students should be seated within their groups so that they can discuss the best course of action they need to take to address the situation. Inform the students that they will need to work **collaboratively**, and present to the group the information they deemed important in the primary sources they read yesterday. By the end of class, each group should have answered and turned in all of the *Address to the American People Questionnaire*. Ultimately, students must use this information to make a decision about how the President will respond to the secession.

Day 5: Address to the American People.

Class Starter: Each of you has made a decision about how to respond to the fracturing of the Union. Now it is time to deliver your decision to the American people. President Buchanan will soon be exiting the presidency, and President-elect Lincoln will soon be entering office. The American people must know what they can expect going forward. Therefore, it is the responsibility of your team today to craft a quick and thoughtful speech that will inform the American people of the decision you have made.

³ This lesson has been intentionally kept short to just one day to induce some stress as students work to both analyze the primary evidence and use that evidence to make a decision "in the hot seat."

Activity (25 minutes): Provide students ample time to script out their address the president will deliver to the American people. Inform students that they should use the *Address to the American People* Questionnaire to help them to formulate their response. Students should work **collaboratively** as a group to write the address, however, ultimately the student playing the role of the president will be required to give the address. Each student in the group should be made responsible for writing part of the address that answers one of the questions mentioned in the class starter, in order to promote a fair distribution of the workload.

Activity (15 minutes): The President from each group will deliver their speech to the rest of the class, outlining the course of action they will take in order to respond to the secession of the southern states.. The address should be brief, however, and it must adequately cover all of the points mentioned in the *Address to the American People* Questionnaire.⁴

Day 6: Lesson Debrief

Use the debrief slides to assist with this lesson. Teachers can augment or subtract from these slides as needed. These slides discuss the response of both Buchanan and Lincoln to the secession crisis and then asks students the following questions to help them compare their responses to those of the presidents:

1. What plans did you and your team make to respond to the secession of the southern states?
2. How was your response different from President Buchanan's?
 - a. *President Buchanan was known as a "lame duck" President at this time. How do you think this influenced his response?*
3. How was your response different from Lincoln's?
4. Now that you know how Lincoln and Buchanan responded, is there anything you would do differently? Explain.
5. Is there anything you think Lincoln and Buchanan should have done differently? Explain.

Teachers may choose to lead this debrief as a class discussion, have students submit responses in writing or online through a medium such as Google Classroom. Discussion questions can be modified as needed to suit the needs of individual classes.

End of Lesson

⁴ For the sake of time and allowing all groups the opportunity to deliver their press conference, it is recommended that the press conferences be limited to 3 minutes, but teachers may choose to lengthen or shorten this time.