CIVIC SPIRIT

AMERICAN CIVIC HOLIDAY RESOURCES

250th Anniversary of the Start of the American Revolution

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This April 19th, 2025, marks the 250th anniversary of the start of the American Revolution, with the first shots being fired at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, leading to Lexington being referred to as the "birthplace of American liberty." Although there are debates about which town truly fired first and started the war, both were instrumental in launching the American endeavor for freedom over tyranny, a republican government over monarchy, and the birth of "the American experiment" that would lead to our constitutional government twelve years later.

This historical event invites the question: **What compels an individual or a collective, as in this case, to break free and change course?**

Despite this outbreak in military fighting, the American patriots, even after the First and Second Continental Congresses had convened, extended an Olive Branch Petition to King George III in a last-ditch effort to reconcile with their home country and come to an agreement. This advance was rejected by Britain, and the movement for American independence prevailed.

As we teach this milestone that spurred the founding of the United States, we can invite students to reflect on when it is necessary to fight for principles—such as liberty versus tyranny—and when conciliatory measures should be embraced. **On April 14th, we mark the 160th anniversary of President Abraham Lincoln's assassination.** In his public address, Lincoln exemplified the use of the language of conciliation while simultaneously adhering to principles and convictions.

The following texts welcome these ideas into your classroom and school community and raise the important civic question of where one draws the line between compromise and concession. We invite your feedback about how these topics resonate and generate ideas with your students.

Source 1: Edmund Burke. "Speech on Conciliation with America." 1775. Excerpt.

Edmund Burke was an Irish-British statesman and philosopher who is considered one of the founders of conservatism.

The proposition is peace. Not peace through the medium of war; not peace to be hunted through the labyrinth of intricate and endless negotiations; not peace to arise out of universal discord, fomented from principle, in all parts of the empire; not peace to depend on the juridical determination of perplexing questions, or the precise marking the shadowy boundaries of a complex government. It is simple peace, sought in its natural course and in its ordinary haunts.

Let the colonies always keep the idea of their civil rights associated with your government-they will cling and grapple to you, and no force under heaven will be of power to tear them from their allegiance. But let it be once understood that your government may be one thing and their privileges another, that these two things may exist without any mutual relation – the cement is gone, the cohesion is loosened, and everything hastens to decay and dissolution. As long as you have the wisdom to keep the sovereign authority of this country as the sanctuary of liberty, the sacred temple consecrated to our common faith, wherever the chosen race and sons of England worship freedom, they will turn their faces towards you. The more they multiply, the more friends you will have, the more ardently they love liberty, the more perfect will be their obedience. Slavery they can have anywhere. It is a weed that grows in every soil. They may have it from Spain, they may have it from Prussia. But until you become lost to all feeling of your true interest and your natural dignity, freedom they can have from none but you. This is the commodity of price, of which you have the monopoly.

Discussion Questions:

1. What kind of peace is Burke advocating for?
2. What does peace that is "sought in its natural course" mean? How do you interpret this idea? Can you think of an example of peace that fits this description?
3. Burke argues that the relationship between England and the American colonies is based on England being the protector of their liberty. How did the ideas in the American Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution reject or challenge this proposition?

Source 2: John Locke. "Second Treatise of Government." 1689. Excerpt.

The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have only the law of nature for his rule. The liberty of man, in society, is to be under no other legislative power, but that established, by consent, in the commonwealth; nor under the dominion of any will, or restraint of any law, but what that legislative shall enact, according to the trust put in it.

Discussion Questions:

1. According to Locke, what are 'natural rights'?
2. What does Locke identify as safeguards of man's natural rights?
3. What do you think Locke means by "according to the trust put in it" concerning government authority?
4. In what other areas of government are people's input particularly important?
5. How does Locke's perspective on liberty differ from Burke's?

Source 3: Abraham Lincoln. "Lincoln's Last Public Address." Washington, D.C., April 11, 1865. Excerpt.

We meet this evening, not in sorrow, but in gladness of heart. The evacuation of Petersburg and Richmond, and the surrender of the principal insurgent army, give hope of a righteous and speedy peace whose joyous expression can not be restrained. In the midst of this, however, He from whom all blessings flow, must not be forgotten. A call for a national thanksgiving is being prepared, and will be duly promulgated. Nor must those whose harder part gives us the cause of rejoicing, be overlooked. Their honors must not be parcelled out with others. I myself was near the front, and had the high pleasure of transmitting much of the good news to you; but no part of the honor, for plan or execution, is mine. To Gen. Grant, his skilful officers, and brave men, all belongs. The gallant Navy stood ready, but was not in reach to take active part.

By these recent successes the re-inauguration of the national authority -- reconstruction -- which has had a large share of thought from the first, is pressed much more closely upon our attention. It is fraught with great difficulty. Unlike a case of a war between independent nations, there is no authorized organ for us to treat with. No one man has authority to give up the rebellion for any other man. We simply must begin with, and mould from, disorganized and discordant elements. Nor is it a small additional embarrassment that we, the loyal people, differ among ourselves as to the mode, manner, and means of reconstruction.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is Lincoln expressing gratitude for?
2. What does Lincoln say is “fraught with great difficulty”?
3. What is Lincoln referring to when he says, “No one man has authority to give up the rebellion for any other man”? How can a society balance personal and collective responsibility?
4. How can a democracy advance individual and collective responsibility? Where does one distinguish between the two?
5. How did the historical context of this speech present a tension between reconciliation and change?

Classroom Activity:

- In small groups, students create a list of items that fall under the purview of personal vs. collective responsibility.
- Students discuss who determines which of these fall under in the United States and address whether in other countries this is the same. They can use research in coming up with these points of comparison.

Source 4: Bob Dylan. "Times- they- are- a Changin." 1964. Excerpt.

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin'
And you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'
Come writers and critics
Who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide
The chance won't come again
And don't speak too soon
For the wheel's still in spin
And there's no tellin' who
That it's namin'
For the loser now
Will be later to win
For the times they are a-changin'
Come senators, congressmen
Please heed the call
Don't stand in the doorway
Don't block up the hall
For he that gets hurt
Will be he who has stalled
The battle outside ragin'
Will soon shake your windows
And rattle your walls
For the times they are a-changin'
Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don't criticize
What you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters
Are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly agin'
Please get out of the new one
If you can't lend your hand
For the times they are a-changin'

Discussion Questions:

1. Who does Dylan caution about changing times? Do you think he accurately captures the profile of America? Why or why not?
2. What kinds of changes is Dylan referring to in the song? How do the historical events of the 1960s influence the meaning of this song?
3. What messages about change can we take away from this song? For those who either support or oppose change, what actions can they take to engage with the changes they are witnessing?

Classroom Activity:

1. Play the song "The Times They Are A-Changin'" by Bob Dylan and have students read the lyrics on a printed handout.
2. After listening, ask students to discuss the questions above in small groups.
3. In small groups, students will identify three key moments in history (either provided by the teacher or selected by the students) where major shifts occurred. For each moment, students will address the following:

- What were the causes of this shift?
- Were there specific people who played an important role in this change? What factors contributed to their influence?
- What were the major results of this shift?
- What were the positive aspects of this change? What were the negative consequences?
- If you could have been involved in this change, what role would you have liked to play? What about it particularly appeals to you?

Activity for Younger Students:

Explore the changes that resulted from the American Revolution and the Civil War by addressing the following?

- Create an outline identifying the causes that led to these monumental wars in United States history.
- What were some of the key decisions or events along the way that led to the divisions?
- Activity: Students create a timeline of these events.
- What outcomes did this lead to in each case?
- Which of these outcomes is most important to the history of this country? Why did they select that one?