



Mock Council Activity: Choosing Sides in the American Revolution

Suitability:

Simulation activities can benefit history classrooms by promoting active learning, engaging students of different abilities and learning preferences, introducing the concept of historical agency, promoting critical thinking, and requiring students to practice empathy for people unlike themselves.¹ However, given the sensitivity of the British, American, and Canadian treatment of indigenous people, this activity may not be appropriate for all classrooms. If needed, the student handout may be used as a series of case studies for a whole class discussion, in which students use historical reasoning to determine which position each nation took during the Revolution.

Before beginning the activity, have a conversation with students about cultural sensitivity and your expectations for their behavior during the activity.

Integrating Activity into Curriculum:

This activity is intended as a cumulative, formative assessment for use after an extended study of Indigenous Americans and empire in the 18th century. Students will require the following background knowledge:

- Broad pattern of Native-European alliances in North America and the disruption to those patterns caused by the Seven Years' War (French and Indian War)
- Pontiac's War
- Proclamation of 1763
- Backcountry tensions among American settlers
- Splits in Revolutionary colonial loyalties (Patriot, Loyalist, and neutral)
- Economic interdependency among most Native communities and European trade networks
- Eighteenth-century Indigenous diplomatic practices (recommended that students read and discuss "Minutes of Conferences...held at Easton, 1757, and/or "Minutes of Conferences... held at Lancaster," 1763 from Newberry DCC)

Students should be assessed based on their participation in their small group and whole class discussions. High-level contributions will demonstrate detailed background

¹ See, for instance, Lorrei DiCamillo and Jill M. Gradwell, "Using Simulations to Teach Middle Grades U.S. History in an Age of Accountability," *Research in Middle Level Education Online* 35, no. 7 (2012), 1-16; Pierre Corbeil and Dany Levault, "Validity of a Simulation Game as a Method for History Teaching," *Simulation & Gaming* 42 (4): 4652-475.



knowledge, historical reasoning, and critical thinking. Students should be graded on their thought process, not achieving the historically accurate answer. A reflection short write after the activity may also be helpful in assessing student learning.

Group Assignments:

Students should receive handout information for their assigned group, but they should not be told how the tribe or nation allied itself in the American Revolution until the end of the activity. Keep this information secret.

To ensure a rich and balanced activity, assign the nations in bold for a smaller class size. The nations in italics may be added as needed for larger classes.

For simplicity's sake, footnotes have been omitted from the student handout and placed in the teacher materials here.

- *Abenakis*: The Abenakis held tightly to neutrality in an attempt to preserve their community against a war they regarded as not theirs and not in their interest. However because of their key frontier position, individual Abenakis participated on both sides of the Revolution as spies, messengers, and scouts. Ultimately, this strategy allowed Abenakis to maintain unity and shape the conflict to their best interests.²
- *Catawbas*: The Catawba Nation allied with the colonists, and Carolinians in particular celebrated their support of the American Patriot movement. Their alliance with the United States had guaranteed them friendly treatment far longer into the nineteenth century than many other Indigenous nations received.³
- **Cherokees**: The Cherokees strove to remain neutral but became split in their loyalty largely along generational lines. Younger warriors like Dragging Canoe tended to favor Americans; older chiefs like Little Carpenter attempted to preserve friendship with the British. Even after the Revolution, Kentucky would remain “dark and bloody ground” as Cherokees fought to resist American expansionism.⁴
- **Choctaws**: The Choctaw allied with the British, and moreover, they compelled the settlers at Natchez to remain loyal by promising their protection. Natchez would become a refuge for Loyalists, and the Choctaws organized raids against the Spanish after their entry into the war in 1779.

² Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (Cambridge University Press: 1995), 65-84.

³ James H. Merrell, “The Indians’ New World: The Catawba Experience,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (Oct. 1984), 537-565.

⁴ Natalie Inman, “‘A Dark and Bloody Ground’ American Indian Responses to Expansion during the American Revolution,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2011), 258-275.



Following the Revolution, Spain took the surrounding territory. Spain was less accommodationist to the Choctaws and Chickasaws in the region, and their offer of generous land grants to settlers dramatically expanded plantation slavery in the region.⁵

- **Mohawks:** The Mohawks became one of Britain's most important allies through the pressure of Joseph Brant. Brant formed a corps of volunteers who plundered and killed Patriots and developed a notorious reputation for ferocity among Americans. Although the British provided generous gifts to sustain the Mohawk war effort, malnutrition, disease, and colonial raids reduced the number of Mohawk people by about 1/3 over the course of the war. Many Mohawks became refugees on the Canadian border.⁶
- **Oneidas:** The Oneidas split against the bulk of the Iroquois Confederacy in the decision to ally with the American colonists. They served as messengers, guides, interpreters, spies, and warriors, participating in major battles at Oriskany and Saratoga in addition to more minor engagements. Oneida support was essential in protecting against an early British victory in New York State.⁷
- **Quapaws:** The Quapaws maintained neutrality in the American Revolution even after Spain's entry into the conflict. The Quapaws built a Middle Ground situation near the Mississippi in which they were able to skillfully plan Spanish and British interests against one another to remain on friendly diplomatic terms with both European powers.⁸
- **Shawnees:** The Shawnees pragmatically allied with the British to continue to fight against land losses to American settlers. The war was especially devastating to the Shawnee people, who suffered burned villages, hunger, and the murder of noncombatants. Many families fled west of the Mississippi to escape the violence, which further disrupted Shawnee communities. For more than a decade after the American Revolution, the Shawnees continued to fight against Americans.⁹

Mock Council Outline:

- Read introduction to students

⁵ Brandon Layton, "Indian Country to Slave Country: The Transformation of the Natchez during the American Revolution," *Journal of Southern History* 82, no. 1 (Feb. 2016), 27-58.

⁶ Alan Taylor, *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 81-108.

⁷ David Levinson, "An Explanation for the Oneida-Colonist Alliance in the American Revolution," *Ethnohistory* 23, no. 3 (Summer 1976): 265-289.

⁸ Morris S. Arnold, "The Quapaws and the American Revolution," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (Spring 2020), 1-39.

⁹ Colin G. Calloway, "'We Have Always Been the Frontier': The American Revolution in Shawnee Country," *American Indian Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1992), 39-52.



- On the eve of the American Revolution, perhaps 150,000 Indigenous people lived in territory controlled—at least on the map—by the British Empire. The world of Native people has been one of increasing violence, in which your interests intersect with international affairs. It is the spring of 1776, and American Indians are hearing troubling rumors of a war between the Great King in England and his subjects in America.
- In this activity, you will imagine you are participating in a council to decide how Native people will react in the American Revolution. Councils were a common way that both Native people and people of European descent negotiated and decided on important political choices. This council is fictionalized in that Native peoples made their choices at different times and places—not at a single event.
- But this mock council gives you an opportunity to discuss and debate the choice that Indigenous people in eastern North America faced. You'll get the opportunity to see different perspectives on the problem and consider how different factors influenced people's choices.
- Your goal is to correctly determine what position the nation or tribe you represent took in the American Revolution. You will express your position in a speech and attempt to sway as many other groups as possible to your position on the conflict (British allied, American allied, or neutral). In war, there is strength in numbers.
- Assign students to small groups of three (or four, if needed). Teacher-selected, balanced groups are recommended for this activity. Each group should be assigned to a particular Native nation's viewpoint.
- Student groups meet to read their specific background information and decide which of the three positions they think
 - Remind students to consider both general factors as well as specific ones
 - The instructor should circulate to answer questions and encourage students to
- Each group in turn must give a speech that sets forward their position and rationale
- Open the floor for teams to debate, discuss and attempt to convince other groups to join them
 - Students should think about which groups in particular may be sympathetic or hostile with their arguments and aim them accordingly
- Take a final vote, marking down
 - Allow plenty of time for debrief discussion, in which historically-correct positions should be revealed



Debrief Questions and Discussion Points:

- What were the competing Native interests in the American Revolutionary conflict?
- Read correct answers for historical alliance positions (above). Was it difficult to figure out what position your tribe or band took historically?
- How does this activity help us to better understand the role Native Americans played in American history?
 - Student answers may vary. A few key points to highlight include:
 - Native Americans were critical players in major political conflicts, and their alliances were important to Euro-American figures.
 - Native people had diverse interests, and our understanding of American history is weaker if we treat them as a singular bloc.
 - Even as their cultural practices and homelands were disrupted, Native Americans continued to maneuver to find advantages and protect their interests.
- In 1784, A group of chiefs called the American Revolution “the greatest blow that could have been dealt us.”¹⁰ Why?
 - The American Revolution marked a turning point in the massive and now unchecked waves of settlement into “Indian Country” in the west. British officials in North America had been attempting to regulate that settlement.
 - New American visions of the country, for example Jeffersonian Democracy, which emphasized the foundation of the new nation as being small landholding farmers expanding ever westward, were not favorable toward Native people. The new American republic envisioned its future as one without Indigenous residents. The way people understood their political identities was also increasingly exclusionary. Indians could fit into the British political world—as the King’s Indian allies or even as subjects of King George III—but they did not fit in the understanding of American citizenship that was limited to white, property holding men.

¹⁰ Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country*, xv.

Handout: Choosing Sides in the American Revolution

Abenakis

The Abenakis were an Algonquian-speaking people who lived near Quebec. From their important position on the St. Lawrence River, they had connections to the Iroquois Confederacy as well as other Indian communities in New England and Canada. They had relied on French trade routes and gifts before the Seven Years' War, and as this new conflict emerges, they are already short on essential supplies like clothing. Both the new British government in Quebec and colonial Americans in New England treated them with suspicion. After the Seven Years' War, Abenaki towns faced floods of British settlers and traders who moved to the newly formed British colony in Canada. In 1775, the Continental Army's invasion of Quebec puts the Abenaki directly at the frontline of the conflict.

Catawbas

The Catawba Nation lived on the border between North and South Carolina, where European connections developed more slowly than they had for other American Indian nations. By 1715, the Catawbas invaded South Carolina in an alliance with the Yamasees. However, by the middle of the 1700s, the Catawbas regularly engaged with British colonial officials in trade and negotiations. They also engaged in exchanges with colonial Americans, selling animal pelts, renting land to settlers, buying manufactured goods, and selling back escaped enslaved people to plantation masters. By the early 1763, the Catawbas had secured treaty rights to the heart of their ancestral homeland.

Cherokees

The Cherokee nation lived in the southeastern woodlands in Appalachia (in the modern eastern Carolinas, Tennessee, northern Georgia, and northern Alabama). Colonial encroachment on Cherokee lands sparked clashes between the Cherokees and settlers. The Treaty of Sycamore Shoals in 1775 sold Cherokee hunting grounds in modern Kentucky and Middle Tennessee to American land speculators, which angered particularly the younger warriors like Dragging Canoe who have become intent on declaring war against the invaders. However, the Cherokees also had familial ties to Anglo-Americans. Nancy Ward, a "Beloved Woman" who held political power and Dragging Canoe's cousin, married a British trader Bryant Ward.

Choctaws

The Choctaw confederacy was made up of a multiethnic group of people who joined together in a loose political arrangement after disease and warfare disrupted American Indian life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Pro-French and anti-French Choctaw factions fought a bloody civil war in 1746-50, but they were increasingly drawn into a British orbit. After the Seven Years' War, the British Empire gained control of



Choctaw lands, including a settlement at Natchez on east bank of the Mississippi north of New Orleans. Natchez became a hub of trade between British merchants and Indian traders, but it also increasingly became a plantation economy as settlers purchased lands. When tensions emerged between the Native and settler communities at Natchez, the British Crown routinely appeased the Choctaws to preserve peace and protect British territory.

Mohawks

The Mohawks belonged to the Iroquois Confederacy and were the farthest east of any of the Iroquois nations. From this position, they were vulnerable to raids from colonials in New York, but this close contact was also a strength. They had some of the best knowledge of Anglo-American culture and ways. In particular, Joseph Brant (or Thayendanegea), worked alongside the British Superintendent of Indian Affairs William Johnson as a go-between moving fluidly between British and Iroquois cultural divides. Brant's sister, Molly, was Johnson's common-law wife. Brant is a well-known and trusted figure among British colonial officials. Understanding the importance of the Iroquois, the Continental Congress recently sent agents, including a Connecticutian who had been adopted by the Oneidas, to link the Patriot cause into the framework of the Covenant Chain.

Oneidas

The Oneidas had been in contact with Europeans for 150 years by the time of the American Revolution. The Oneida belonged to the Iroquois Confederacy and lived in modern-day central New York, where they had close communications and trade with the colonial settlement at New York. The Oneidas relied heavily on trade with the British at Ft. Stanwix, and many Oneida spoke both Iroquoian and English. A Congregationalist (New England Puritan) missionary named Samuel Kirkland was living among the Oneida, and many Oneida had converted to Christianity in recent years. They have been receiving pressure from some of their Iroquois confederates to support the British. Even as tensions have been rising, the American Continental Congress promised that they would continue supplying goods to them, and the colonists are keeping their promises.

Quapaws

The Quapaws lived on the west bank of the Mississippi River north of New Orleans (in present day Arkansas), where they had been a client of the French. For more than 75 years, the Quapaws had been avowed enemies of the British and Chickasaws. After the Seven Years' War, however, the Quapaws found themselves sandwiched between Spanish lands (to the west of the Mississippi River) and British lands (to the east). In recent years, the Quapaws have been promising friendship to both the Spanish and British, and in 1774, the daughter of the chief of Osotouy was married to an Englishman



who had taken up Indian dress and customs. The Quapaws' situation as the only potential sizeable ally in the region gives them particular power.

Shawnees

The Shawnees lost their lands in the Treaty of Fort Stanwix in 1768, in which the Iroquois Confederacy sold lands belonging to other tribes in modern-day Kentucky and West Virginia in to protect their own territory in New York. War came early to the Shawnee tribes, who were targeted in Dunmore's War in 1774. The Virginia militia targeted Indians, including the Delaware, Shawnee, and Mingo, in Ohio Valley lands desired by white settlers and speculators. The Shawnees occupy an important—but dangerous—position. The Treaty of Fort Stanwix and Dunmore's War had isolated the Shawnee diplomatically, despite repeated attempts at developing a confederacy. Although many Shawnee people are advocating for peace, a devastating war seems all but inevitable.