Overview
This lesson explores some of the controversy surrounding the U.S. involvement in the Mexican War through the lyrics of period songs.

Goal
Students will understand that U.S. involvement in the Mexican War was controversial, and will compare those differences of opinion to the controversy surrounding U.S. involvement in modern conflicts such as Vietnam.

Objectives
The learner will interpret primary source documents to determine different perspectives on the Mexican War, and will compare the controversy of the Mexican War to modern wars.

Investigative Question
How can period music help us understand the different perspectives on the Mexican War?

Materials Used
Library of Congress primary sources:

- “Eight dollars a day” by J. J. Hutchinson
  http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mussm:@field(NUMBER+@band(sm1848+431770))

- “The death of Ringgold” by J. W. Turner
  http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mussm:@field(NUMBER+@band(sm1857+611580))

Additional resources:

- Timeline on U.S. Mexican War from pbs.org
  http://www.pbs.org/kerausmexicanwar/timeline_flash.html

- “Ballad of the Green Beret” by Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler and Robin Moore (lyrics)
  http://www.scoutsongs.com/lyrics/balladofthegreenbaret.html (The audio file is available on a number of legal file serving sites for a nominal fee.)

- “Fortunate Son” by Creedence Clearwater Revival (lyrics)
  http://www.creedence-online.net/lyrics/fortunate_son.php (The audio file is available on a number of legal file serving sites for a nominal fee.)
Curriculum standards

Social Studies:
- 8.58 Describe the concept of Manifest Destiny and its impact on the developing character of the American nation, including the purpose, challenges and economic incentives for westward expansion.
- 8.62 Describe the causes, course, and consequences of the Mexican War, including the controversy over the Rio Grande boundary, the roles played by Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott, the Mexican Cession and the Wilmot Proviso.

Materials used continued

Optional Resources for Lesson Extensions:
- “Over there” by George M. Cohan (sheet music)
  http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.100010518/default.html
- “Over there” by George M. Cohan (audiofile)
  http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.100010567/default.html
- “General Taylor Storming Monterey” from America’s Library
  http://www.americaslibrary.gov/sh/game/jukebox_game.html (Click “play,” then scroll through list for title.)

Procedure

Step 1 Connect
Divide class into groups of 2 to 4 students. Give each group a copy of one of the songs.

Step 2 Connect
Using the PBS timeline or other teaching materials, briefly review the events leading to the Mexican War including the Texas War of Independence, election of Polk and Taylor, and the advance into disputed territory.

Step 3 Wonder
Ask students to hypothesize how the nation reacted to the news that “hostilities had commenced,” and discuss responses. If students have difficulty formulating responses, ask them to imagine that they have just heard that U.S. troops have been fired on by a foreign military.

Step 4 Construct
Give each group a copy of one of the songs. Ask them to determine if the song is pro-war or anti-war and in what way it encouraged or discouraged Americans to support the Mexican War. Remind them to consider the cover art and dedication as well as the lyrics of the song. Discuss their responses. Responses should include the following points:
- “Eight Dollars a Day” is anti-war and argues that members of Congress profited from the war, while the men fighting paid the price.
- “The Death of Ringgold” is pro-war and encourages support for the war by highlighting one man’s death in battle.

Step 5 Reflect
Ask students to compare their initial thoughts on the nation’s reaction to the Mexican War (Step 3) with their findings from the primary sources. Discuss the similarities and differences.
Step 6 Construct  Play “Fortunate Son” by Creedence Clearwater Revival and “Ballad of the Green Beret” by Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler and Robin Moore. Have copies of the lyrics available for students to analyze. Ask students which song is pro-war and which song is anti-war. Ask students to compare the themes and imagery from the 19th-century and 20th-century songs. Discussion should include the following points:
- “Fortunate Son” and “Eight Dollars a Day” both refer to economic differences between those who fight and those who send them to war. Both refer to the monetary cost of war and the collection of taxes to support war.
- “Ballad of the Green Beret” and “Death of Ringgold” both focus on the service and sacrifice of one man as an inspiration for others to follow in military service.

Step 7 Express  Have students determine whether they found the pro-war or anti-war songs to be more effective at influencing their opinions. Which would have been most effective for people who lived when these songs were first produced?

Step 8 Reflect  Ask the students why music is such a good medium for expressing public opinions during a time of war. Discussion should include the following points:
- Music can influence those, such as children and illiterate adults, not typical reachable through print sources.
- Music less likely to be subject to government censorship than some other forms of expression, such as soldiers’ letters home or official reports.

Evaluation

Have each student compose a paragraph that answers the following question: What themes or images are most effective in influencing public opinion on war? Score paragraphs based on the following rubric:

- **90-100:** Uses proper grammar, advanced vocabulary and 2 or more specific examples from the songs.
- **80-89:** Mostly uses proper grammar, some advanced vocabulary and 1 or 2 specific examples from the songs.
- **70-79:** Some proper grammar, 1 or 2 specific examples from the songs.
- **69 or below:** Poor grammar, 1 or no examples from the songs.
EXTENSIONS

Present students with the popular World War I song “Over There” by George Cohan (listed under “Optional resources” on page 2). Ask them to compare and contrast “Over There” with the other songs.

Play “General Taylor Storming Monterey” (from America’s Library; listed under “Optional Resources” on page 2) without telling students the title. Ask them to decide if it is a pro-war or anti-war song based on the music and lyrics. Discuss their responses.

Challenge students to find recent songs and/or music videos that express a pro- or anti-war sentiment in regards to current U.S. military involvement in the Middle East. Share with the class as appropriate.*

* Teachers should carefully preview all student-selected materials and be sensitive to those students who have a family member or friend serving in the military, and to those students with cultural connections to the Middle East.