

## LESSON PLAN

### “I Hear America Singing”: Controversy and Music in the Mexican War

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**Grade:** 8

**Subject:** Social Studies (U.S. History)

**Time required:** 1 class period (50-60 min.)

#### 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\(sm1848+431770\)\)](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\(sm1857+611580\)\)](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/kera/usmexicanwar/timeline\\_flash.html](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/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](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.)

## 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](http://www.americaslibrary.gov/sh/game/jukebox_game.html) (Click “play,” then scroll through list for title.)

## CURRICULUM STANDARDS

### Grade 8 Social Studies

#### 5.0: History, Era 4—Expansion and Reform (1801-1861)

- **8.5.spi.4.** Recognize causes and consequences of conflict, (i.e., French and Indian, Revolutionary War, War of 1812).
- **8.5.spi.5.** Recognize consequences of the westward expansion of the United States.
- **8.5.spi.11.** Identify conclusions about historical events using primary and secondary sources.

## 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.

## PROCEDURE CONTINUED

**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 19<sup>th</sup>-century and 20<sup>th</sup>-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.

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## 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.*