

Title: Whiskey and War: An Exploration of the Conflicts Between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson

Grade Level: 6 – 8

Time Allotment: One to two 45-minute class periods

Overview: While the end of the American Revolution saw a resolution to American citizens' grievances with Great Britain, some troubles in the new independent nation were just beginning. One domestic conflict in the unsteady early years of the republic was the Whiskey Rebellion, a small-scale revolution against the central government led by farmers in Western Pennsylvania.

Using segments from the PBS program *Rediscovering Alexander Hamilton*, this activity allows students to explore the causes and effects of the Whiskey Rebellion, as both an important test for the federal government and for Secretary of Treasury Alexander Hamilton. Students will use the Whiskey Rebellion as a “jumping-off point” to examine the conflicting viewpoints of Hamilton and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, and how that opposition affected the early growth and development of the United States of America.

This lesson is best used following a unit on the American Revolution, and/or the Articles of Confederation and the ratification of the Constitution.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- List Alexander Hamilton's methods for resolving post-Revolutionary War debt;
- Explain the causes of the Whiskey Rebellion;
- Describe the resolution of the Whiskey Rebellion;
- Articulate key differences between Alexander Hamilton's and Thomas Jefferson's approaches to government.

Standards

<http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/historical-thinking-standards-1>

Historical Thinking Standard 3

The student engages in historical analysis and interpretation:

Therefore, the student is able to:

- **Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas**, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions by identifying likenesses and differences.
- **Consider multiple perspectives** of various peoples in the past by demonstrating their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears.

Historical Thinking Standard 5

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The student engages in historical issues-analysis and decision-making:

Therefore, the student is able to

- **Identify issues and problems in the past** and analyze the interests, values, perspectives, and points of view of those involved in the situation.
- **Marshal evidence of antecedent circumstances** and current factors contributing to contemporary problems and alternative courses of action.
- **Identify relevant historical antecedents** and differentiate from those that are inappropriate and irrelevant to contemporary issues.

<http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/us-history-content-standards>

United States Era 3

Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s)

Standard 3D

The student understands the development of the first American party system.

- **Compare the opposing views of the two parties on the main economic and foreign policy issues of the 1790s.**
- **Assess the influence of the French Revolution on American politics.**

Media Resources:

- **Hamilton's Rebellion**

Jefferson & Hamilton's conflicting views on the French Revolution, and on the Whiskey Rebellion.

Websites:

A Biography of America: A New System of Government: "Jefferson or Hamilton"

<http://www.learner.org/biographyofamerica/prog05/feature/index.html>

This interactive feature from the series "A Biography of America" outlines many of the political and ideological differences between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson.

Materials:

For each pair or group of students:

- Computer with internet access

Prep for Teachers:

Prior to teaching this lesson, you will need to:

Preview the video segment and website used in the lesson.

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Download the video clips used in the lesson to your classroom computer(s) or prepare to watch them using your classroom's Internet connection.

Bookmark all websites that you plan to use in the lesson on each computer in your classroom. Using a social bookmarking tool such as delicious.com or [diigo](http://diigo.com) (or an online bookmarking utility such as [portaportal](http://portaportal.com)) will allow you to organize all the links in a central location.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY

1. Students should already be familiar with the resolution of the American Revolution, the structure of government under the Articles of Confederation, and the circumstances that led to the ratification of the Constitution. Review if necessary. Remind students that at the close of the American Revolution, the United States of America was at a pivotal point in its development. When George Washington was elected first president of the United States, the country was not in a good financial position. Ask students, based on their knowledge from previous units, why this was? (*Debt from the Revolution; Articles of Confederation prohibited the federal government from collecting taxes and, only borrowing money from states – leading to more debt!*) Ask students, if they were in a position to advise George Washington – say, his Secretary of Treasury – what suggestions might they give him to address the problem?
2. Tell students that Washington's actual Secretary of Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, came up with a plan to consolidate all of the debt held by the states and the deferral government into one all-encompassing national debt. To address this debt, Hamilton established three things: the First Bank of the United States, which provided financial order and credit for the new country; the United States Mint, which made standard coinage and currency available; and an excise tax (a tax on the production and/or sale of specific goods within a country) to generate revenue. One of Hamilton's most well-known excise taxes was the "whiskey tax." The whiskey excise act would require taxes to be paid on all liquor and spirits (not just whiskey) distilled in the United States, and would create a system of locally-posted inspectors and tax collectors to ensure that the taxes were paid by the distillers. The whiskey tax, which became law in 1791, was the first tax the United States government placed on a product manufactured domestically. Ask students how they might have reacted to Hamilton's changes if they were United States citizens in 1791? What if they were the owners of a large whiskey distillery in New York City that supported several employees and made thousands of dollars a month exporting whiskey to several different states? What if they were rural farmers who operated small, private distilleries, making only a few dollars selling a couple of bottles of whiskey to neighbors when their harvests were slow? Tell students that the excise tax was the same for all whiskey distillers, whether they were factory owners or small farmers. As a result, many citizens, especially in rural areas of the county, were not pleased with Hamilton's ideas for providing the nation with financial security.
3. Explain to students that there was another important figure who disagreed with many of Alexander Hamilton's ideas and views for structuring the country following the ratification of the Constitution – Thomas Jefferson. As George Washington's Secretary of State, Jefferson had many opportunities to be at odds

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with Secretary of Treasury Hamilton, and the two men quickly learned that they had many political and ideological differences surrounding the founding and development of our nation. As a founder of the Federalist Party, Hamilton believed in a strong central government that provided financial stability for its businesses and citizens. Jefferson, as a creator of the Republican or Democrat-Republican party, believed that the federal government only needed to play a strong role in foreign relations; beyond that he favored states' rights and powers. These fundamental differences contributed to the way each man reacted to conflicts abroad and at home.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

1. Tell students that even before Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson disagreed on the excise tax, they disagreed on significant foreign policy issues – notably, the role of the United States in the French Revolution. During the American Revolution, France was a powerful ally to the rebelling colonies. Jefferson, as Secretary of State, felt that the United States should repay France in kind during its own Revolution, support them, and honor that alliance. Hamilton, as Secretary of Treasury, was hesitant to take on more debt by engaging in another war, despite previous alliances with France. Tell students that you are going to show them a brief video clip about Hamilton and Jefferson's feelings on the French Revolution. Ask students, as they watch the clip, to note George Washington's reaction to Hamilton and Jefferson's opinions. Play clip, "Hamilton's Rebellion." Pause the clip immediately after the narrator says the word "neutrality" and the screen goes black. Review the question with students – what was George Washington's "compromise" between Hamilton and Jefferson? (*He agreed not to get involved in the conflict, but not to use the word "neutral" or "neutrality" to define the United States' stance.*) Ask students if they think that was a wise decision on Washington's part. Why or why not? What might they have done in Washington's position?
2. Explain to students that it was only a couple of years after the French Revolution that Washington once again had to negotiate between a conflict of opinion between Hamilton and Jefferson when they disagreed over the Whiskey Tax. After the excise tax and collection systems were instituted, many farmers and whiskey distillers in Western Pennsylvania and Western Virginia began to rebel against the tax. Tell Students that you are going to show them the remainder of the video clip, showing how Hamilton and Jefferson reacted to this insurrection against the excise tax. Ask students once again to note how Washington managed the clash between his two Secretaries. Unpause the "Hamilton's Rebellion" clip, and play through to the end. When the clip is finished, review the question with students. How did Washington compromise between Hamilton and Jefferson's strong opinions concerning the Whiskey Rebellion? (*Washington first sent negotiators to talk to the rebelling farmers, but sent in militia troops when negotiations did not work.*)
3. Tell students that Alexander Hamilton and, to an extent, George Washington saw the Whiskey Rebellion as a test of the new government to control rebellions and uprisings by its own citizens. Hamilton believed that the federal government's willingness to use military force was positive, and proved that the government could keep order when necessary. Jefferson strongly disagreed, and felt that it was wrong – even tyrannical – for a government to use force against its own people. He called Hamilton "dangerously unprincipled and aristocratic."

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Washington ultimately sided with Hamilton on matters concerning the Whiskey Rebellion, even going as far as to blame it on the new democratic society of America rather than the excise tax. Ask students whose opinion they agree with more – Hamilton’s or Jefferson’s? Tell them that even though Washington sent 13,000 militia troops, led by Alexander Hamilton, to battle the rebelling farmers, the rebellion had collapsed by the time the troops arrived, and no military action was actually necessary. Ask students how they think this precedent has affect events since the Whiskey Rebellion in American history? Can they think of other occasions when the federal government has chosen to use military force against its own citizens? Encourage class discussion.

CULMINATING ACTIVITY

1. To this day, both Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian principles are incorporated into our modern democratic government. Which “founding father” do students agree with more? Have students log on to the [New System of Government](#) interactive individually, or in pairs or small groups, depending on how many computers are available in your classroom. Ask students to consider what they have learned in the activity so far, read the first page of the interactive, and make a selection. Have students continue through the interactive, making selections based on the information presented.
2. When all students have completed the interactive, ask them to share who they chose as having the more enduring vision for America, and why. Ask students if they think today’s America aligns more closely with Hamilton’s vision or Jefferson’s? Ask them to explain their choice, and give specific examples. Encourage class discussion.
3. Both Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson were very successful politicians who contributed greatly to the founding and success of the United States of America, yet they both held views with which many people disagreed. For homework, ask students to choose an opinion or viewpoint of Hamilton’s or Jefferson’s with which they strongly disagree, and write a 1 – 2 page essay on a) why Hamilton or Jefferson held that belief, and thought it was beneficial for the country at the time, and b) why the student disagrees, and thinks it is disadvantageous for the country today.