



Suspending Death: Lincoln, the Telegraph, and Military Justice

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THE LINCOLN TELEGRAM COLLABORATIVE – APRIL 2013

Executive Mansion

Washington, DC March 17, 1864

Major General Rosencrans, St. Louis.

Suspend execution of death sentence of John F. Abshier, citizen, until further orders.

A. Lincoln

Sent 12:10PM

Summary

This lesson focuses on President Abraham Lincoln's approach to military justice. The lesson is designed to model the Inquiry Arc from the C3 Framework for State Standards in Social Studies. In the inquiry described in this document, students examine telegram messages Lincoln sent in 1864 and 1865 to better understand Lincoln's approach to military justice.

Image credit - The Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C. (© Natural Selection Chris Pinchbeck / Design Pics / Corbis)
Available: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/Lincolns-Contested-Legacy.html#ixzz2SoLHMASs>

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[Http://lincolntelegrams.com](http://lincolntelegrams.com)

LESSON OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND

Reading the brief and deliberate telegram above about John Abshier, we can learn much about Abraham Lincoln— his temperament and his personality. Lincoln was a sensible and caring man, as well as stern, hands-on, equitable, and above revenge and the temptations of power. Telegrams that Lincoln sent in the last year of his presidency consistently suggest his strong loyalty to friends, family, and political supporters and also his stubborn determination and careful attention to questions of justice in a time of war.

A significant number of Lincoln’s telegrams concern the exercise of military justice, exchange of prisoners of war, and stays of the execution. Researching the context of these telegrams reveals the gripping, complex politics and the morbid negotiations concerning prisoners of war in both Union and Confederate camps. Generals leveraged the lives of soldiers in power struggles, demanding the attention of Lincoln, who often responded to the pleas of distraught soldiers’ wives and families. Several historical researchers, including Alotta (1990), Thompson (n.d.), Wittenberg (2012), and Homstad (2001) tell of Lincoln’s involvement in negotiating the fates of soldiers and POWs. Lincoln was “bombarded with letters and telegrams” from families, politicians, army officers, and clergy (Homstad, 2001, p. 33), and his responses were urgent, calculated, and — sometimes — with despondency or frustration.

DESIGN OF THE INQUIRY

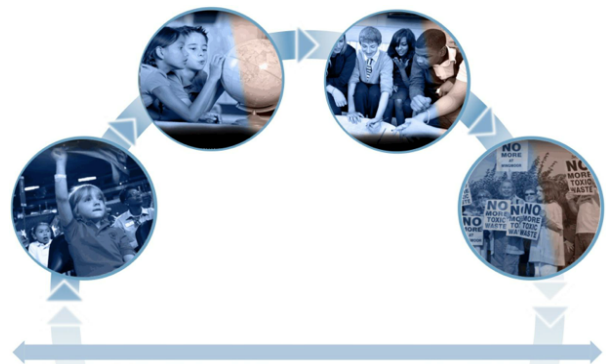
This inquiry activity makes use of a set of telegrams from the Lincoln Telegrams collection, with a focus on Lincoln’s interventions in military justice. The lesson is designed to reflect the Inquiry Arc suggested in the C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards. As illustrated below on the right, the Inquiry Arc includes four dimensions.

Dimension 1. Developing questions and planning inquiries

Dimension 2. Applying disciplinary concepts and tools

Dimension 3. Evaluating sources and using evidence

Dimension 4. Communicating conclusions and taking informed action



This lesson includes details for how to facilitate students as they engage in an inquiry about Lincoln’s use of the telegraph to manage and direct the application of military justice. The lesson is organized using the four dimensions of the Inquiry Arc.

Dimension 1 - Developing questions and planning inquiries

All inquiry begins with questions. The C3 Framework recognizes that teachers and students both play an important role in the process of developing questions and then planning inquiry. Ultimately, students should be enabled to develop their own questions and situate those questions in the context of what we already know. Such work requires deep knowledge of facts, ideas, and general context supporting the questions. Consequently, teachers should provide support and even models for students as they build up their questioning skills.

For this lesson, students might be given the following compelling question as a starting place for planning the inquiry.

- *Why did Lincoln interfere with wartime justice?*

Students should read some background material (see the Background Historical Sources) to understand why this question is important and to get some ideas for how others have addressed the question. Students might even return to the question and revise or rewrite the question. As students read the background materials, they should write down other questions that occur to them. Students should ask what more they need to know to about Lincoln, about the Civil War, and about prisoners of war to answer the compelling question. They should also think about what “hunches” they might have about how to answer the question.

Students should also develop supporting questions that will guide the process of researching the compelling question and maybe even spark further questions. Supporting questions require explanations and are typically more factually oriented than compelling questions. Examples of supporting questions for this inquiry include:

- *What were some of the reasons why soldiers could be court-martialed during the Civil War?*
- *How many soldiers were court-martialed during the Civil War?*
- *How common were court-martials?*
- *For what reasons did Lincoln interfere with wartime justice?*
- *How many pardons did Lincoln issue?*
- *How many times did Lincoln request by telegram information about military justices cases? (focusing on our collection from March 1864-April 1865)*

Dimension 2 - Applying disciplinary concepts and tools

With compelling and supporting questions in place, students should read some of the telegrams from Lincoln, including those that are listed below. In addition, students should read the analysis that accompanies the telegram messages. This analysis was conducted by students and teachers at NC State University and is presented in a wiki format.

March 17, 1864 - [http://wiki.lincolntelegrams.com/index.php?title=March 17, 1864](http://wiki.lincolntelegrams.com/index.php?title=March_17,_1864)

April 12, 1864 - [http://wiki.lincolntelegrams.com/index.php?title=April 12, 1864](http://wiki.lincolntelegrams.com/index.php?title=April_12,_1864)

December 27, 1864 - [http://wiki.lincolntelegrams.com/index.php?title=December 27, 1864](http://wiki.lincolntelegrams.com/index.php?title=December_27,_1864)

February 1, 1865 (5) - [http://wiki.lincolntelegrams.com/index.php?title=February 1, 1865 \(5\)](http://wiki.lincolntelegrams.com/index.php?title=February_1,_1865_(5))

February 9, 1865 (2) - [http://wiki.lincolntelegrams.com/index.php?title=February 9, 1865 \(2\)](http://wiki.lincolntelegrams.com/index.php?title=February_9,_1865_(2))

March 20, 1865 (3) - [http://wiki.lincolntelegrams.com/index.php?title=March 20, 1865 \(3\)](http://wiki.lincolntelegrams.com/index.php?title=March_20,_1865_(3))

April 11, 1865 - [http://wiki.lincolntelegrams.com/index.php?title=April 11, 1865](http://wiki.lincolntelegrams.com/index.php?title=April_11,_1865)

As students read the telegrams and the related analysis they should take notes using a graphic organizer such as the one below. The organizer includes a place for students to begin the process of developing an answer to the compelling question. These initial responses will be more like a hunch or an impression that is emerging during the process.

	<i>What am I learning from this telegram?</i>	<i>What more do I need to know?</i>	<i>What are my initial ideas or hunches?</i>
<i>Telegram 1</i>			
<i>Telegram 2</i>			
<i>Secondary sources</i>			

After reading and analyzing the telegram transcripts and analysis, students should use specific details or perspectives to determine the meaning and purposes of each telegram. As they conduct their analysis, students will apply disciplinary concepts and tools so they can write about the context in which the telegrams were written. This should include where and when the telegrams were produced and what was happening within the broader context of the Civil War.

Dimension 3 - Evaluating sources and using evidence

As students read the telegrams, they will be evaluating important historical information for the purpose of answering their compelling question. This process can be supported with additional questions, such as, what is their gut feeling about Lincoln? Was he really a fair man or do they think the telegrams suggest that he abused his power as president?

As the analysis continues, students should begin to develop some conclusions in response to the compelling questions. In doing so, they should reflect on the research and findings:

- Did their conclusions match their hunches?
- What mysteries still lie in the telegrams?
- What other questions arose as a result of your research?

As students continue to refine their ideas, they should draft an initial response to the compelling question. This response should reflect the evidence students have located to support claims that emerged through research and corroboration. The writing process should continue with additional refinement and peer review.

Dimension 4 - Communicating conclusions and taking informed action

As a culminating activity, students should assess the responses to the compelling question, noting the common inferences, opinions, and results did other students worked to reach. Students should consider questions such as these.

- What disagreements or variations did the students encounter?
- How does Lincoln's approach to military justice compare to other presidents?
- How does what you learned about Lincoln influence you thinking about military justice today? Consider high profile cases such as those of Patrick Manning, the Guantanamo Detention Camp, and the Abu Ghraib torture case.

Background Historical Sources

Alotta, R.I. (1990). Civil War Justice: Union Army Executions under Lincoln. Review by Richard Bardolph in *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Nov., 1990), pp. 762-763. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.prox.lib.ncsu.edu/stable/2210963>

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