

CONSOURCE



The Constitutional Sources Project

Revolutionary War Unit

General Washington's Council of War

TIME AND GRADE LEVEL

One 45 or 50 minute class period in Grade 4 through 8.

PURPOSE AND CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT QUESTIONS

History is the chronicle of choices made by actors/agents/protagonists who, in very specific contexts, unearth opportunities and inevitably encounter impediments. During the Revolutionary War, people of every stripe navigated turbulent waters. As individuals and groups struggled for their own survival, they also shaped the course of the nation. Whether a general or a private, male or female, free or enslaved, each became a player in a sweeping drama. The instructive sessions outlined here are tailored for upper elementary and middle school students, who encounter history most readily through the lives of individual historical players. Here, students actually *become* those players, confronted with tough and often heart-wrenching choices that have significant consequences. History in all its complexity comes alive. It is a convoluted, thorny business, far more so than streamlined timelines suggest, yet still accessible on a personal level to students at this level.

In this simulation, elementary or middle school students convene as George Washington's Council of War in September 1775. Washington is proposing that the fledgling Continental Army attack the British garrison inside Boston. He lays out the arguments, pro and con, and students—assuming the role of generals—weigh in. Students know that generals must make decisions, as they did in this case, so this lesson eases them into a decision-making mode. In subsequent lessons, they will experience how private citizens also had to strategize when confronted with harsh realities imposed by war.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

*Students will be able to weigh factors involved in military decisions: size of opposing forces, armaments, geography, morale, and possible strategies.

*Students can point to seemingly mundane factors that are often overlooked: soldiers must be fed, clothed, and sheltered in harsh weather.

*Historical players can never be certain of outcomes, and in this lesson students will learn to entertain the possibility of negative consequences.

*Students will be able to show by this example that patience and listening can be considered military virtues.

*Students will be able to demonstrate, by citing this example, that despite the top-down military chain of command, this was a truly republican army. Here, and in other instances as well, General Washington heeded the advice of his Council and changed his mind.

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

Prefatory homework:

Handout A: The Siege of Boston

In class:

1. Homework review and discussion: 15 minutes
2. Presentation: Proceedings of the Council of War: 10 minutes
3. Class convenes as the Council of War: 10-20 minutes
4. Presentation of historical outcome: 5-15 minutes

Summary Homework / Extended Activities

MATERIALS

Background Handout (Students read.)

- A. The Siege of Boston

Classroom Handouts (Teacher presents or students read this material.)

- B. Council of War Proceedings
- C. Historical Outcome

Vocabulary List

PREFATORY HOMEWORK

Distribute **Handout A: Siege of Boston**. Define the key word: *siege*.

CLASS ACTIVITIES: 45-50 MINUTES

1. HOMEWORK REVIEW AND DISCUSSION: 15 minutes

Class looks at a [Revolutionary map of Boston](#). Students observe that Boston was perched on a peninsula, a key factor in laying siege. For either side, the only line of attack by land was on the peninsula's connection to the mainland, what was called the Boston Neck; to attack anywhere else, soldiers would need to be transported by boats. (If you show a modern map, you can explain that the Boston Neck was much narrower back then. The bay to the east has been filled, and it is now called the "Back Bay" district of Boston.)

Discuss the difference between *professional soldiers* and *citizen soldiers* like *minutemen*, who serve only when called upon to face an immediate danger. Ask: *Why might Washington be disappointed that his soldiers were mostly farmers, not true professionals?*

Discuss this key concept from Handout A: *In a pitched battle, defending was easier than attacking. Whichever side was on the defense could discharge muskets and cannons from behind protected barriers.*

Students can share some of their personal writings, from the standpoint of the men who would have to fight any battle. Emphasize the reason for this exercise: *You are doing this because soon you will imagine yourself a general, and generals should always keep in mind what is at stake: the lives of the people they command.*

2. PRESENTATION: PROCEEDINGS OF THE COUNCIL OF WAR, SEPTEMBER 11, 1775: 10 minutes

Distribute **Handout B: Council of War Proceedings**. Go over that sheet as a class. Discuss Washington’s term: the “probable consequences” of failure. Note that this does not mean the attack would “probably” fail, but that *if* it failed, it would have “probable consequences.” Instruct students: *As you consider the possibility of failure, consider what that failure could mean – the “probable consequences.” Would that be the end of the war? Would the Revolution be over if Britain soundly defeated the Continental Army in a battle over Boston? Could the King and Parliament do anything they wanted after that, or could colonies still resist in some manner?*

3. CLASS CONVENES AS THE COUNCIL OF WAR: 10-20 minutes

Students can either take on the persona of specific historical generals, or they can be “General Amanda” or “General José,” using the students’ own names. They can meet in breakout groups, perhaps mimicking the number of the actual council, or as a class. Discussion can be free ranging. Let students know at the beginning that a vote will be taken at the end, after a specified amount of time.

4. PRESENTATION OF HISTORICAL OUTCOME: 5-15 minutes

Teacher presents or students read **Handout C: Historical Outcome**. Teacher can also introduce any of the extended activities listed below.

SUMMARY HOMEWORK / EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1. What was life like within Boston in April of 1775? In the weeks before Lexington and Concord, most residents of Boston expected that war was about to break out. Worse yet, they feared that the fighting would soon encompass their city—and many decided to leave their homes before it did. On April 10, a Boston newspaper reported, “A number of Families are moving themselves and their most valuable Effects [belongings] from this Town into the Country.” The following day, April 11, Boston merchant John Andrews noted that “we are all in confusion at present,” and that “the streets and neck” [the Boston “neck” was the thin strip of land connecting Boston with the rest of Massachusetts] were “lin’d with

waggons carrying off the effects of the inhabitants.” (You can read the detailed letters that Andrews sent to a friend [here](#). This quotation is on page 89.) Imagine that you and your family were considering whether to leave—and where to go if you do leave. Of course there is no good option, but what sorts of things would you consider when making your decision? Even if the actual fighting did not take place within Boston, what would it be like to live in a city controlled by thousands of British soldiers? After students write or discuss their thoughts about this, teacher can present the historical outcome: over half of Boston residents left the city in the spring and summer of 1775.

2. Here is a list of generals present at the Council of War:

Artemas Ward
Charles Lee
Israel Putnam
John Thomas
William Heath
John Sullivan
Joseph Spencer
Nathanael Greene

Research any of these. At the time, what military experience did he already have? How did he fare during the rest of the Revolutionary War?

3. Imagine that you are King George III, and you have just heard that your army suffered major losses at Breed’s Hill. Would you send more soldiers to Boston? What else might you do to punish the colonies and suppress the rebellion? Or would you ask Parliament to repeal the Coercive Acts, which were causing the colonies to rebel? But if you did that, would other British colonies around the globe also try to rebel?

4. Find a historical map of the siege of Boston. Explain that map in words: who was stationed where? If Washington did order an attack on Boston, where might he send soldiers? If British officers wanted to attack the colonials again, where might they strike?

5. Although Washington did not attack the British garrison in Boston, he did order attack on the city of Quebec, several hundred miles to the north. Not many British troops were stationed there, and he thought that if the colonials took Quebec, they could control the rest of Canada. (Note that Quebec is located on the St. Lawrence River, the main passageway for British trade into Canada.) Washington sent two armies, each on a different route. Research what happened to one or both of these along the way—and what happened when they tried to take the city on New Year’s Day, 1776.

6. Read and report on the [complete text of Washington’s letter to his Council](#) and the [complete text of the Council’s response](#).

Vocabulary for “General Washington’s Council of War”

barracks — buildings where soldiers live

consequences – what happens after a decision is made

expedient — practical or helpful

garrison — a military base, sometimes inside a city that soldiers occupy

minutemen — men who are not professional soldiers but who have military training and promise to fight at moment’s notice

occupy – take control of a place and stay in it

reinforcements — extra soldiers sent to aid soldiers already in a place

siege/lay siege — surrounding a place to cut off supplies and force surrender

Handout A: Siege of Boston

On the night of April 19, 1775, under cover of darkness, British soldiers marched out of Boston in their bright red uniforms. They were headed to Concord, where rebellious Massachusetts colonists had stored guns, cannon, and supplies of every kind. As they passed through the small town of Lexington, colonial minutemen stood in their way. Shots were fired and eight of the colonials were killed. The Redcoats marched on to Concord, but thousands of minutemen from nearby towns met them there. As British soldiers retreated toward Boston, minutemen fired at them from both sides of the road.

In the days and weeks following that dramatic event, about 15,000 of these farmers-turned-soldiers surrounded Boston and “laid siege,” trapping British soldiers inside the city. Boston is on a peninsula, and if Redcoats tried to cross the narrow strip of land that connected the city to the mainland, colonials would fire at them. That continued for almost two months. But on June 17, British soldiers piled into boats, crossed the Charles River, and headed straight toward American soldiers, who were waiting for them on top of Breed’s Hill. (The British had planned to attack Bunker Hill, but they found the Americans waiting for them on Breed’s Hill.) Bravely the Redcoats marched on, bayonets gleaming. The Americans fired away, killing and wounding many of the King’s troops. After this Battle of Bunker Hill, as it is mistakenly called, British generals decided not to attack the Americans again until reinforcements arrived from Britain.

Meanwhile, in Philadelphia, the Continental Congress made George Washington a general and placed him in charge of the “Continental Army,” the soldiers who were surrounding Boston. When Washington arrived on the scene two weeks later, he was not particularly pleased with the soldiers he was supposed to command. Most were really farmers. They needed to plow their fields and sow seeds in the spring, then harvest plants in the fall. They had signed up to serve for only a short period of time, and most would be free to go on December 31st.

Washington guessed that Britain would soon send reinforcements to Boston. These would be professional, highly disciplined soldiers. They were called “Regulars” and they would be a lot more “regular” than his come-and-go group of men, who had little training. Once reinforcements arrived, the British might overwhelm his troops. The war might end before it had barely begun.

But the King’s soldiers had not crossed to America, not yet. Right now the men and teenage boys in Washington’s army outnumbered British soldiers by more than three-to-one. Numbers were in his favor. And although his troops had little experience in war, they had already proved their valor under fire. They were dedicated. They were spirited. But if he made the first, unexpected move and attacked Boston, could this force triumph? Or would it be overwhelmed? In battle situations, defenders could discharge muskets and cannons from behind protected barriers. Attackers had to run into that volley of shots head-on, firing as best they could. Could General Washington ask those under his command to take that risk?

For this plan to work, he had to commit to it soon. But before he acted, Washington decided to ask for advice. [Early in September, he consulted his Council of War, which consisted of eight generals.](#) Would they talk him out of a direct attack on Boston, or would they talk him into it? In class, you will soon be those generals: *What will you advise Washington to do?*

For now, though, imagine you are only a private in the Continental Army. You left your farm on April 19 as a minuteman to confront the Redcoats. You decided to stay in the army because you thought that your colony, Massachusetts, should control its own destiny. You fought at Breed's Hill. You saw a friend take a shot in the head. Blood covered the ground where he fell.

Generals should always keep in mind what is at stake: the lives of the people they command. That's you, a common soldier. You are writing to someone or writing in your diary or talking to other worried soldiers at night, looking into a campfire's flames. How would *you* feel about making a direct assault on British Regulars in Boston? Express your feelings quickly—this is not a polished essay. Just let it all out.

Handout B: Council of War Proceedings

On September 11, 1775, eight generals, in addition to Washington, met as a “Council of War.” Note the date. The weather was still warm, but winter was not far away. Back in those days, in cold climates like New England, soldiers had enough trouble just staying warm and dry during winter, let alone waging war. General Washington presented these arguments for and against an attack on Boston:

PRO:

1. “That the winter was fast approaching when warm & comfortable barracks must be erected for the troops.”
2. To get wood to build those barracks, and to gather firewood to stay warm, soldiers would have to cut down “fences, woods, orchards, & even houses.”
3. With “considerable difficulty & great expense,” the army would also have to get warm clothing for the men. “Blankets in particular are much wanted”—and they would also be hard to get.
4. Most of the soldiers had enlisted only until January 1, 1776. After that date, if soldiers did not choose to reenlist, the army would have to recruit new and untrained men—or else be outnumbered by the enemy.
5. The army’s gunpowder might get wet over the winter, and if it did, muskets would not fire.

CON:

“On the other hand, the hazard, the loss of men in the attempt, & the probable consequences of failure are to be considered.”

SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

If Washington ordered an attack, do you think the Americans are more likely to win or to lose that battle? They have more men, but the British have cannons and warships. They can take cover and fire. The Americans must charge across open ground.

If Washington and his army attack the British soldiers in Boston but *lose* that battle, what might the “probable consequences” be?

What about the consequences of *not* attacking? Will morale hold up? Will soldiers stay? Will there even be a Continental Army in the spring of 1776?

This class will now convene as Washington’s Council of War. What will you generals decide? To attack or not to attack?

Handout C: Historical Outcome

Here is what the Council of War [decided](#).

“After duly weighing the above Proposition, considering the State of the Enemies Lines, ... it was unanimously agreed that it was not expedient to make the Attempt at present at least.”

The Siege of Boston continued for six more months because neither side dared to attack the other. Finally, Washington and his army took command of Dorchester Heights, a hill to the south of Boston. From there, the Americans mounted cannons that could reach British ships in the Boston harbor. That worried General Howe, the British commander, but he also worried what might happen to his troops if they attacked the Americans by marching up the hill at Dorchester Heights. Enemy soldiers might mow down his men, the way they had on Breed’s Hill. Howe decided not to attack Dorchester Heights. Instead, the British left Boston. But five months later, the British invaded New York with the largest combined army and navy assembled in the 18th Century. The war wasn’t over, not by a long shot.

This was not the only time that General Washington listened to the advice of others. On Christmas Eve, 1776, before crossing the Delaware River to attack British and Hessian soldiers in Trenton, he asked local militiamen for their advice. Where exactly should the patriots attack and how? He listened carefully, and his troops were victorious.

By 1780, France had joined the war on the American side, and French soldiers had arrived in Rhode Island. British troops now occupied New York. General Washington, who was stationed nearby, wanted to attack them there, but the French commander, Rochambeau, wanted to wait. Washington agreed to wait, even though he did not really want to.

In 1781, Washington proposed once again that French and American forces attack New York. This time Rochambeau had another idea. A British army under General Cornwallis was making its way across Virginia. Attack them there, he advised. Washington and Rochambeau argued about it, and then Washington made a great suggestion: let the French Admiral Comte de Grasse, who could provide naval support, make the decision. He would know best where his fleet could beat back British ships that hoped to supply Cornwallis’s army. De Grasse said he would go to the Chesapeake Bay, along Virginia’s coast. That settled the argument. Washington, Rochambeau, and their armies quickly marched southward, and that turned out well for the Americans. French and American forces, along with De Grasse’s fleet of ships, laid siege to Yorktown, Virginia. The British were surrounded by land and by sea. They couldn’t escape, and no one could get to them with all they needed—food for the soldiers and ammunition for their weapons. Cornwallis soon surrendered his army of 8,000 men. Britain still had plenty of soldiers in North America, but its defeat at Yorktown was a terrible blow.

Credit General Washington for listening. Throughout the war, that helped him make wise decisions.