

CONSOURCE



The Constitutional Sources Project

Revolutionary War Unit

Retribution at the Highest Level: General Washington and Charles Asgill

TIME AND GRADE LEVEL

One 45 or 50 minute class period in a **Grade 4-8**. The lesson can be expanded into two or more class periods by exploring any of the Extended Activities. It can also be combined with the ConSource lesson **“Thomas Brown: Retribution and a Civil War in the South.”**

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, students are presented with a dilemma. When Patriots killed a Loyalist prisoner, Philip White, Loyalists responded by hanging a Patriot prisoner, Joshua Huddy, and pinning a note to his body: “Up goes Huddy for Philip White.” George Washington then demanded that “unless the Perpetrators of that horrid deed were delivered up I should be under the disagreeable necessity of retaliating.” The British did not deliver the “Perpetrators,” so Washington ordered that an enemy held prisoner by the Continental Army be chosen at random and executed. The unlucky victim turned out to be a fine young British officer, Charles Asgill, whose only “crime” was to have been in the British Army at Yorktown. When Washington learned who had been chosen, his conscience told him to reverse his command—but he also felt that the issue was “purely of a Military nature,” and he could hardly do back on his word. By placing students in Washington’s shoes, students see that even the most powerful historical actors can be trapped within an insidious cycle of retribution. Elementary and middle school students can embrace this sophisticated message when it is presented from the standpoint of specific historical characters.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- * Students will be able to explain the cycle of retribution.
- * Students will be able to show, by citing this example, that the cycle of retribution can ensnare even historical players at the highest levels.
- * Students will be able to show how rumors feed a cycle of retribution.
- * Students will be able to cite examples of a cycle of retribution that they have encountered in their own lives.
- * Students will be able to explain the process of prisoner exchanges.
- * Students will be able to show that the Revolutionary War was a civil war as well.

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

Prefatory homework:

Handout A: An Eye for an Eye

In class:

1. Homework review and discussion: 10-15 minutes
2. Presentation and Discussion: “Up goes Huddy for Philip White”: 10-15 minutes
3. Presentation and discussion of Washington’s dilemma: 10-15 minutes
4. Presentation and discussion of the historical outcome: 10-15 minutes

Summary Homework / Extended Activities

MATERIALS

Background Handout (Students read.)

- A. An Eye for an Eye

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

- B. “Up Goes Huddy for Philip White”
- C. Washington’s Terrible Dilemma
- D. Historical Outcome

Vocabulary List

PREFATORY HOMEWORK

Handout A: An Eye for an Eye. Go over instructions on that sheet.

CLASS ACTIVITIES: 45-50 MINUTES

1. HOMEWORK REVIEWS AND DISCUSSION: 10-15 minutes

Possible review questions:

What do we mean by “civil war”?

How does a prisoner exchange work?

According to the Patriots, how did Philip White die? According to the Loyalists, how did he die?

After a brief review to make sure students understand the situation, they share their responses—what they would do with Joshua Huddy if they were Loyalists.

2. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION: “UP GOES HUDDY FOR PHILIP WHITE”: 10-15 minutes

Present the material in **Handout B: “Up Goes Huddy for Philip White.”** Teacher can summarize it or students can read. Again, make sure students understand the situation. Then, in a class discussion or breakout groups, they discuss Washington’s options and how they think he should respond to react to Huddy’s hanging.

3. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF WASHINGTON’S DILEMMA: 10-15 minutes

Present the material in **Handout C: Washington’s Terrible Dilemma.** Teacher can summarize it or students can read. Again, make sure students understand the situation. Then, in a class discussion or breakout groups, students ponder Washington’s options and weigh in on what they would do.

4. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE HISTORICAL OUTCOME: 10-15 minutes

Present the material in **Handout D: Historical Outcome.** Conclude with a class discussion of revenge as a feedback loop: each round of violence sparks resentment and an urge for revenge. Note that another word for seeking revenge is “*retribution.*” When one harmful act spurs another, and this goes on and on, we say there is a “*cycle of retribution.*” Discuss how cycles of retribution make it very difficult to end conflicts, whether wars or feuds between people. This can lead to a wide range of issues dealing with conflict and violence. Consult the related items below, in Extended Activities.

SUMMARY HOMEWORK / EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

(These activities are the same as those of the ConSource lesson on retribution that features Thomas Brown. These two lessons can be done individually or in tandem.)

1. Think of an example in your own experience when you or others sought revenge. This can be a small thing, not necessarily hurting people physically. Person A feels that she or he has

been harmed and wants to get back at person B. If person A *does* get back at Person B, is it more likely that Person B will want to do something bad to Person A in return?

2. Sometimes the pattern mentioned in Question #1 goes on and on. If person B does try to get back at person A, person A might then do something *else* to get back at person B, and so on. In the example you used, how difficult would it be to *end* this “cycle of retribution”?

3. After World War I, the victorious side sought “reparations” (payment) from the defeated side. This hurt the losers economically and made them extra mad. Many historians say that this was one of the main causes of World War II. Research the causes of World War II. Does forcing the losers pay extra money make the people in those countries more likely to seek revenge—and perhaps even start a new war against the winners?

4. Research any conflict between Euro-Americans and Native Americans. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of these. Can you see a cycle of retribution? (To the teacher: Often, students studying the Revolutionary War will recently have been exposed to some earlier conflicts between Euro-Americans and Native Americans. They can also return to this theme when they study 19th Century conflicts in the West.)

5. Talk with somebody who fought in the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Vietnam. Explain the cycle of retribution. Then ask this person whether she or he experienced something like that. If so, listen to the story and share it!

6. Consider terrorism. How does an act of terror feed a cycle of retribution? Do you think terrorists *want* to create more violence?

7. How can any chain of retribution that involves populations, not just individuals, be broken?

Vocabulary for “Retribution at the Highest Level: General Washington and Charles Asgill”

“an eye for an eye” — a biblical saying from the Old Testament that means if someone does something bad to you, you can do something just as bad to them

avenge — pay somebody back for something and get even, sort of like *“an eye for an eye”*

blockhouse — a small fortress

brethren — people who are treated like brothers, although they are not really brothers

“by lot” — make a selection by chance, with no particular reason for choosing one thing rather than another

civil war (not just THE Civil War) — a war between people who belong to the same country but fight on opposite sides

cycle — getting repeated over and over

cycle of retribution — each act of revenge leads to an act of revenge by the other side, which then leads to *another* act of revenge, and so on.

dilemma — a difficult choice between two possibilities, where neither solution seems very good

retribution or *retaliation* — revenge, getting back at someone

Handout A: An Eye for An Eye

In 1782, after the Battle of Yorktown but before the peace treaty that actually ended the Revolutionary War, Loyalists and Patriots were still quarrelling—and worse! In New York and New Jersey, Patriots staged raids on areas still held by Loyalists, and Loyalists staged raids on areas held by Patriots. This was a civil war as well as a war between the United States and Great Britain.

On March 28, 1782, 80 Loyalists attacked the “blockhouse,” or small fortress, that guarded the Patriot-held town of Toms River, New Jersey. They captured three Patriots, including Captain Joshua Huddy, the blockhouse commander. At about the same time, Patriots captured three Loyalists, including a man named Philip White. They hoped to exchange White and the other two prisoners for the three Patriots the Loyalists had just captured. That was—and still is—a common practice during wartime: one side agrees to free one or more prisoners if the other side frees one or more of its prisoners.

But Philip White tried to escape, and his captors shot him. That’s what the Patriots said. Loyalists heard a different story: White’s captors supposedly broke his arms and legs and pulled out one of his eyes before killing him. We don’t know if either of these stories was correct. Rumors are common in civil wars. Each side exaggerates the terrible things the enemy allegedly does.

INSTRUCTIONS: If you were the Loyalist commander at that time, how would you feel about what you were hearing, and how would you respond? Would you still offer to exchange two of the prisoners you are holding for two of the prisoners the Patriots hold? Would you refuse to exchange *any* prisoners because of what the Patriots had supposedly done? To get back at what the Patriots had supposedly done, would you do something nasty to one of the prisoners you are holding? Any other ideas? Jot down your ideas and prepare to share them with the class. This is not a formal essay – just write your thoughts as they come to you. There are no right or wrong answers.

Handout B: “Up Goes Huddy for Philip White”

Here is what happened: Loyalists hanged Joshua Huddy. They also pinned a sign to his dangling body:

Having long with grief beheld the cruel murders of our brethren, ... [we] determine not to suffer without taking vengeance, for the numerous cruelties, ... and have made use of captain Huddy as the first object to present to your view, and further determine to hang man for man... Up goes Huddy for Philip White.

When George Washington heard about this, he was outraged. Some Loyalists tried to justify the hanging by saying that Huddy had been the one to kill White—but this was not true because Huddy was already a prisoner when White was killed. Washington and other Patriots guessed that Loyalists had chosen Huddy to send a message: If you kill a Loyalist, we will respond by hanging *any* Patriot prisoner, no matter who that might be. That was not fair to Huddy, Washington felt. How can you hang a helpless prisoner for a crime he did not commit?

If you were General Washington, how would you respond to the hanging of Joshua Huddy? What options did he have, and which of these would you choose?

Handout C. Washington's Terrible Dilemma

Here is Washington's response. He told British authorities that unless they handed over the people who engaged in such a "horrid deed," he would have to retaliate, or get them back. Retaliation, he claimed, was "the only means left to put a stop to such inhuman proceedings." Loyalists had said: "*Up goes Huddy for Philip White.*" Now, Washington said that a British soldier must hang to avenge the death of Huddy.

The British wouldn't tell him who had hanged Huddy, so Washington decided to choose some prisoner whom the Patriots had already captured. The unlucky victim would be selected "by lot"—meaning by chance—from among the British captains held as prisoners. Huddy had been a captain, and Washington wanted "an eye for an eye," as the saying goes. This person's only "crime" would be fighting in the opposing army.

The prisoner chosen was Charles Asgill, a nineteen-year-old who had surrendered at Yorktown. But did this young officer deserve to die for a crime in which he had played no part? Although many people, even patriots, pleaded that Asgill should not be killed, Washington held firm. He too was "exceedingly distressed" by the situation, but military honor demanded retaliation. His decision was "purely of a Military nature," Washington said.

But then [Asgill reported to Washington](#) that "my Father is on his Death Bed," and he hoped he could be released to see him. This personal appeal, as well as others, "work too hard on my humanity," [Washington admitted](#). Yet if he reversed his earlier decision, he might appear weak. Washington faced a "dilemma"—a difficult choice between two undesirable options.

If you were Washington, would you go ahead and have Asgill killed, even though you know he is a fine young man and had done nothing wrong? Or would you reverse your order and spare him? How would it look if the Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army allowed the hanging of Huddy to go unanswered?

Handout D. Historical Outcome

Seeing no easy answer, Washington placed the decision in the hands of Congress. Although *Washington* couldn't reverse his decision without losing face, he hoped that *Congress* would decide in Asgill's favor and allow him "[to go to his friends in Europe.](#)" That is what finally happened. Asgill's mother was French, and France had helped the United States win its independence. When the French King and Queen asked Congress to free Asgill, Congress agreed to do so.

What makes this story remarkable is that even George Washington, the most powerful man in American, felt trapped by the cycle of retribution: every harmful deed needs to be revenged by another harmful deed — and then *that* harmful deed must be revenged, and so on. It caused him to act against his own better judgment and do something he did not think was fair.