

**Title of Lesson: *Military Conscription in World War I: Alabamians Express Their Opinions***

*(Suggested grade level: 11<sup>th</sup> Grade U.S. History from 1887 to Present)*

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**Background Information:**

The following links provide background information on the World War I conscription debate:

- [Biographical Directory of the United States Congress](#) has brief biographies of every U.S. senator and representative, going all the way back to the first Congress. This particular page deals with John Bankhead Sr., the Alabama senator who served from 1907 until his death in 1920.
- The Lincoln Institute, funded by the Lehrman Institute, promotes the study of Lincoln's life by providing on-line information and resources for scholars, including links to multiple websites dealing with the 16<sup>th</sup> president. One such site is "[Mr. Lincoln and New York](#)" and within that site is information about the [Draft Riots of 1863](#).
- [Selective Service Site](#) provides information about the Selective Service, including its history, current status, the use of the draft, and the exemption of women (among other topics). The link provided below goes directly to the page with the [history of conscription](#).
- [Encyclopedia of Alabama](#) offers an extensive selection of articles and multimedia resources dealing with almost all aspects of Alabama history, geography, culture, and natural environment. For this lesson, the most relevant material is a biography of [John Hollis Bankhead](#), and an article about [World War I and Alabama](#).

**Overview of lesson:**

Students will examine six primary documents (letters) from Alabamians related to passage of the Selective Service Act of 1917. Coming a few months after the United States entered World War I, this act reauthorized the draft for only the second time in our history. As the U.S. Senate debated the bill, Alabama Senator John Bankhead received letters from citizens throughout the state, expressing their opinions on the topic. At the beginning of this lesson, students will write reflective journal entries exploring their initial feelings about the power of government to impose a draft during any war. They will then read the letters written to Sen. Bankhead during the summer of 1917, and, using teacher-supplied questions, sort the letters into different groupings. That activity will require students to practice generalizing, evaluating, and synthesizing information from the letters, all higher level thinking skills. Finally, using the six letters as evidence, students will write a brief essay characterizing the reaction of some Alabama citizens to the Conscription Act. They must offer one generalization and support it with specific references to at least three letters.

**Content Standards**

[Alabama Course of Study: Social Studies](#) (Bulletin 2004, No. 18)

Grade 11: Content Standard 4

- Explain how the mobilization of the United States for World War I affected the population of the United States.

## [National Standards for History, 1996](#)

### **Standards in Historical Thinking**

Standard 2: The student comprehends a variety of historical sources.

- C. Identify the central question (s) the historical document addresses and the purpose, perspective, or point of view from which it has been constructed

Standard 5: The student engages in historical issues-analysis and decision-making.

- D. Propose alternative ways of resolving a problem or dilemma and evaluate each in terms of ethical consideration (is it fair? just?), the interest of the different people involved, and the likely consequences of each proposal.

### **National Standards for U.S. History**

Era 7, Standard 2B - Explain U.S. military and economic mobilization for war and analyze the impact of public opinion and government policies on constitutional interpretation and civil liberties.

## [National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies](#) (Bulletin 111, 2010)

*Standard 2:* Time, Continuity, and Change

*Standard 6:* Power, Authority, and Governance

*Standard 10:* Civic Ideals and Practices

### **Primary Learning Objective(s):**

Students will

- Acquire knowledge about the Conscription Act of 1917 (and its antecedent in the Civil War)
- Discuss reasons (practical, moral, legal) both for and against conscription
- Analyze letters written to Alabama Sen. John Bankhead urging him to vote for/against the Conscription Act
- Sort letters into multiple categories (using teacher-supplied questions), looking for relationships both within and between categories
- Draw tentative conclusions regarding what the letters reveal
- Write an analytical paragraph in which they characterize the reactions of some Alabamians to the proposed Conscription Act (as evidenced in the letters)

**Time allotted:** 90-110 minutes

### **Materials and Equipment:**

- Enough copies of the six letters (all are attached), so that each student will have his/her own complete set
- [Letter A: Letter from Jos. Kohlenberg](#), who opposes the conscription bill, and claims that the majority of Alabama citizens do as well. He references the "...munition makers and capitalists who gain by the slaughter of their fellowmen."
- [Letter B: Letter from E.L. More, president of Horse Shoe Lumber Co. \(River Falls, AL\)](#), who supports the conscription bill and says, "I do not remember having heard a single voter in Alabama express an opinion contrary to above."
- [Letter C: Letter from the Community Club of Birmingham](#). The club, consisting of 120 young business men between the ages of twenty and thirty, sent Sen. Bankhead a copy of their resolution supporting conscription. They mention that it is "practical, efficient, and a democratic means of providing an army to meet the present crisis."
- [Letter D: This is a telegram from W. P. Lay \(Gadsden, AL\) to Sen. Bankhead](#). Mr. Lay claims to be among the friends of Sen. Bankhead who have heard that he opposes conscription. He says that raising

the pay for volunteer soldiers would produce the best army, “while they would resent very bitterly conscription as a last resort.”

- [Letter E: Letter from Robert Lee \(Birmingham, AL\)](#), who is concerned with class issues as they relate to the draft. “I regard it as very important to the nation to have as large as possible a trained force for military purposes from the higher walks of life, and to have them as separate as possible from the armies that are gotten from the people and have to be forced to serve.” He is also concerned about possible “anarchistic and socialistic troubles that may follow peace.”
- [Letter F: Letter from H.K. Milner, owner of the Milner Land Company](#), who urges Sen. Bankhead to support the Conscription bill. He says that if we wait for volunteers, then we might have to send them into battle before they’re fully trained, as the British were forced to do.
- Copies of the Categorizing Sheet to help students sort documents (attached)
- Map of Alabama so students can see where the letter-writers lived
- Rubric to use in grading student essays (attached)

### **Technological Resources:**

- Computer with internet connection & digital projector to show the letters one at a time to the whole class as students discuss them. (*This is optional.*)

### **Background/Preparation:**

Students may or may not know that in 1863, in the middle of the Civil War and at President Lincoln’s urging, Congress passed the first draft law. If students have no knowledge whatsoever about this event, it would be helpful to offer them a few historical facts before beginning the lesson. Reactions in 1863 reveal the controversial nature of any conscription legislation, particularly as regards issues of fairness. An abbreviated summary of events regarding this legislation can be found at [The Lincoln Institute Web site](#).

Conscription was unpopular in the North when it was first imposed in 1863, so much so that anti-draft demonstrations took place in many cities, the worst one occurring in New York City that same year. Part of the reason for negative reaction was that the law allowed men to avoid conscription by supplying someone to take their place or paying a replacement fee. Since only wealthy men could afford to pay the fee, the draft aggravated long-simmering class tensions. New York City experienced extreme violence in July of 1863. For three days, bloody battles raged across rich and poor neighborhoods, with African Americans as the main targets. Peace was eventually restored with the arrival of federal troops, many directly from the battlefield at Gettysburg. New York City’s draft riots constitute the nation’s single most violent civil disorder, with more lives lost than in any other instance of urban domestic violence in American history.

By contrast, during World War II conscription was generally supported as a patriotic duty. During the Vietnam War, however, as resistance to the war itself intensified, draft evasion and draft resistance reached historic peaks. When students study the Vietnam War later in the year, they can use material from this lesson to help broaden their perspective on the whole issue of conscription and its place in American history.

Before you begin the lesson:

- 1) Photocopy enough copies of the six letters so that each student will have his or her own set, and
  - 2) Photocopy the sheet asking them to sort the letters into groups.
- (Both the letters and the sorting sheet are attached.)

## Procedures/Activities:

### Engagement/Motivation Activity:

Have students write a reflective journal entry at the beginning of class which answers the following questions:

- Do you believe our government has the right to conscript (draft) young men into the army during wartime? Why or why not? List your reasons.
- Knowing that our government has imposed conscription in the past, why do you think some people resisted (other than just opposing the idea of a draft altogether)? List as many reasons as you can. Do these possible reasons strike you as legitimate? Why or why not?

Lead a brief discussion (10 minutes) in which students share their responses. Tell them they'll be reading and analyzing what six Alabamians had to say to Senator John Bankhead when the Conscription Act of 1917 was pending in Congress, shortly after the United States had declared war against Germany.

<b>Step 1</b>	Distribute copies of the letters so that each student has a complete set of six. In order to facilitate discussion later on, instruct them to label each letter in order, beginning with the capital letter A for the first letter. (See attachments for the correct order.) Allow students time to read each letter (one is a telegram). Urge them to note anything that prompts a question, regardless of whether it is a literal or inferential question. When finished, allow students to ask their questions and encourage them to answer each other's.
<b>Step 2</b>	Give each student a copy of the sheet with the numbered category headings to use in sorting the documents. Allow time for them to record their answers individually. (Alternatively, you could read each question/prompt out loud, stopping to let students jot down their answers before proceeding to the next one.)
<b>Step 3</b>	Arrange students in groups of 3-4 and have them compare answers to each numbered category heading on the sheet, discussing possible combinations of documents among themselves. Although some groupings are obvious, it's not important that all students agree about which documents belong where. It's extremely important, however, that group members encourage each other to <b>explain why they believe certain documents fit within a given category.</b> They need to be explicit about what within a letter relates to the categorical heading and at least attempt to explain the link in their own words.
<b>Step 4</b>	Reconvene the whole class and walk through the numbered category headings in order. Make certain that as many different groups as possible have a chance to be first to respond.
<b>Step 5</b>	Because Categories #4 & #5 call for a more sophisticated level of thinking, spend more time processing those student responses. As much as logic will allow, validate whatever categories students offer, helping them to refine their understanding of the letters and express themselves more completely in terms of what the connection is and why it's significant.
<b>Step 6</b>	Assign the original guiding question, to be written either in class or for homework. A three-paragraph essay (approximately 250 words) is probably the most appropriate length, given the limited number of documents and the need to spend more time studying World War I. The first paragraph would be the introduction, followed by two body paragraphs, each dealing with a different

	grouping. <b>Guiding Question: “Beyond just supporting or opposing the draft, how would you characterize the response of some Alabamians to the Conscription Act of 1917?”</b>
<b>Step 7</b>	Go over the evaluation rubric so that students understand what attributes their essays must exhibit to earn the grade they desire. Emphasize that their characterization of how Alabamians responded to the Conscription Bill of 1917 should do more than state the obvious, e.g. “Some Alabamians explained their objections to the Conscription Bill of 1917, while others did not.” That’s a default category which requires no thinking. They have to probe the letters and find connections beneath the surface features. This doesn’t mean that their paragraph has to focus on similarities. A student could build a solid, analytical paragraph contrasting two or more letters, as long as they characterized the nature of the differences and explained why those particular differences mattered.

**Assessment Strategies:**

Students will write a three-paragraph essay that answers the guiding question. Use the attached rubric and multiply the total number of points by any factor that’s appropriate to your situation.

## Categorizing Sheet on Conscription Bill

One of the key skills all students need to learn (and practice) is the how to organize information into meaningful categories in response to a guiding question. Groups or categories create order out of what might otherwise seem like random data. They provide a framework for discussing the possible significance of facts. By drawing various bits of information into relationship with one another, they also reveal significant commonalities as well as important differences that might otherwise go undetected. Most importantly, when students create their own categories, they demonstrate their ability to think about facts...to use them...not just list them. While there's nothing wrong with sorting information into standard, ready-made categories (in history, some of these include political, social, economic, intellectual, religious, geographic, and cultural labels), the ability to create more original and authentic categories shows that a student can evaluate and synthesize information, a very high level skill.

**Guiding Question for Letters on Conscription Bill: "Beyond just supporting or opposing the draft, how would you characterize the response of some Alabamians to the Conscription Act of 1917?"** You'll eventually write an answer to this question, but before you do, work your way through the more specific questions listed below. They'll help get you started on some possible groupings or categories to use in your answer.

### DIRECTIONS

- Respond to all the category prompts BEFORE conferring with your group members.
- Next to each one, write down the letters of the documents (A-F) that you believe fit the category. **Note: A document can be placed in more than one category.**
- Be prepared to explain the reasons for your choices by referencing specific portions of the letters.
- Be prepared to change your mind!

### Category 1: Opinion

- List the documents that favored conscription.
- List the ones that opposed it.
- List the ones that fell somewhere in the middle.

### Category 2: Support

- List the documents whose authors expressed their opinions without stating any reasons.
- List those whose authors offered at least one or more reason.

### Category 3: Authority

- List the documents whose authors were speaking only on behalf of themselves
- List the documents whose authors said they were speaking on behalf of a group or organization.
- List the documents whose authors claimed to be speaking on behalf the entire state.

- Category 4: Reasons
- Look back at all the documents whose authors supported their opinions. Do any of these authors seem to use the same sort of reasoning or draw on similar kinds of support? Create a group/category (in this exercise, a group could be composed of just two documents). Identify the documents and try to state the underlying link as best you can (that link equates to your creative category).
- Can you come up with another group? You could use a document from your first group but link it to another document in a different way? Identify the documents and try to state the underlying link as best you can.

#### Category 5: Other attributes?

- Can you think of any other kind of significant link between two or more documents? Which documents seem to resonate together or play off of each other? Don't limit yourself just to the literal information in the letters. Sometimes more subtle qualities are equally important. Just be prepared to explain your reasoning and answer the "so what?" question (why does this link matter?). Remember, you want to be able to discuss the implication of what you notice.

## Rubric for Evaluating Paragraphs on Conscription Letters

**Guiding Question: “Beyond just supporting or opposing the draft, how would you characterize the responses of these six Alabamians to the Conscription Act of 1917?” Write a three-paragraph answer. The first paragraph will provide an introduction (relevant time period, overall topic, and thesis). The next two body paragraphs will discuss two groupings or categories of documents.**

0 – Not Present

1– Present, but flawed and incomplete

2 – Present but limited

3 – Present and Sophisticated

Student:

- Provides a clear, coherent thesis that:
  - a. identifies the relevant time period
  - b. identifies the overall topic
  - c. identifies the elements that connect documents into two meaningful categories
- First body paragraph supports that thesis by identifying the category and referencing specifics from the documents cited
- First body paragraph provides valid interpretive commentary linking those specifics to the thesis
- Second body paragraph supports the thesis by identify the category and referencing specifics from the documents cited
- Second body paragraph provides valid interpretive commentary linking those specifics to the thesis
- All paragraphs display an organized, coherent approach

COMMENTS: