

World War I Sedition Worksheet

Source: Socialist leader Eugene Debs delivered this speech in June 1918.

Eugene V. Debs was a founding member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), U.S. presidential candidate of the Socialist Party of America, and one of the most famous American socialists. This excerpt is from a speech he gave across the street from a jail, where he had just visited three socialists who were in prison for opposing the draft.

Comrades, friends and fellow-workers, . . . three of our most loyal comrades are paying the penalty for their devotion to the cause of the working class. They have come to realize, as many of us have, that it is extremely dangerous to exercise the constitutional right of free speech in a country fighting to make democracy safe in the world. . . .

Every one of the aristocratic conspirators and would-be murderers claims to be an arch-patriot; every one of them insists that the war is being waged to make the world safe for democracy. What humbug! What rot! What false pretense! These . . . tyrants, these red-handed robbers and murderers, [say they're] the "patriots," while the men who have the courage to stand face to face with them, speak the truth, and fight for their exploited victims—they are [called] the disloyalists and traitors. If this be true, I want to take my place side by side with the traitors in this fight. . . .

[He] who owns the earth and tells you that we are fighting this war to make the world safe for democracy—he who profiteers at the expense of the people who have been slain and mutilated by the thousands, under pretense of being the great American patriot . . . is in fact the archenemy of the people; it is he that you need to wipe from power. It is he who is a far greater menace to your liberty and your well-being than the . . . [Germans] on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Source B: "Assert Your Rights," Charles Schenck, 1917-1918.

Charles Schenck was a Socialist who in 1917-1918 printed and distributed more than 15,000 anti-war pamphlets, including some to drafted American men. The excerpt below comes from one of his pamphlets.

ASSERT YOUR RIGHTS

The Socialist Party says that any officers of the law entrusted with the administration of conscription . . . violate the provisions of the United States Constitution when they refuse to recognize your right to assert your opposition to the draft. . . .

To draw this country into the horrors of the present war in Europe, to force the youth of our land into the . . . bloody trenches of war-crazy nations, would be a crime the magnitude of which defies description. . . .

No specious or plausible . . . pleas about a "war for democracy" can cloud the issue. Democracy can not be shot into a nation. It must come spontaneously and purely from within.

To advocate the persecution of other peoples through the fighting of a war is an insult to every good and wholesome American tradition.

You are responsible. You must do your share to maintain, support, and uphold the rights of the people of this country.

In this world crisis where do you stand? Are you with the forces of liberty and light or war and darkness?

	Document A: Debs	Document B: Schenck
What type of document is this? When was it written?		
Who is the audience?		
What was happening in the United States and in Europe at this time?		
How might this historical context have influenced the content of these documents?		
What is Debs's or Schenck's main message? What does he try to convince his audience?		

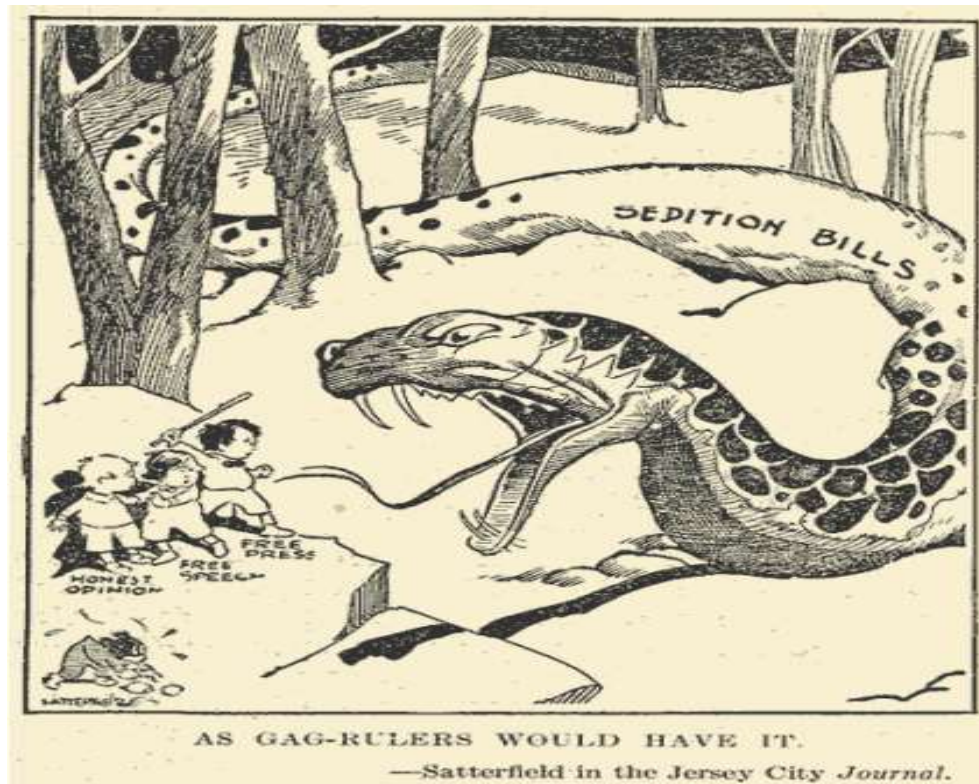
Source C: The Sedition Act of 1918 was passed by the United States Congress on May 16, 1918.

This is an excerpt from the Sedition Act, signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson in 1918. Along with the Espionage Act, the law shrunk the rights of Americans. Wilson and the United States Congress claimed dissent would harm America's effort to win the war. Congress repealed the act in December 1920, two years after the end of WWI.

Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully utter, print, write or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States or the Constitution of the United States, or the military or naval forces of the United States, or the flag of the United States, or the uniform of the Army or Navy of the United States . . . or shall willfully utter, print, write, or publish any language intended to incite, provoke, or encourage resistance to the United States . . . shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or the imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both.

1. When was this law passed? Why did the U.S. government pass this law?
2. In your own words, summarize this law.
3. Do you think this law was necessary? Why or why not? Use evidence to support your answer.
4. Do you think Debs and Schenck broke the law?

Source D: Sedition Act Cartoon



1. How does the cartoonist represent the Sedition bills?
2. What is the snake attempting to devour?
3. What do you think is the cartoonist's opinion of the government's attempt to stifle civil liberties?

Source D: Supreme Court opinion by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., March 3, 1919

The excerpt below comes from the Supreme Court's unanimous opinion in *Schenck v. United States*, 1919.

OPINION BY JUSTICE OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, JR.

The character of every act depends upon the circumstances in which it is done. The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting "Fire!" in a theatre and causing a panic. . . .

The question in every case is whether the words used are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about the substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent. . . .

When a nation is at war many things that might be said in time of peace are such a hindrance to its effort that their utterance will not be endured so long as men fight and that no Court could regard them as protected by any constitutional right.

1. What does this ruling say?
2. Do you agree with the ruling? Remember to consider the events going on in America and the 1st Amendment.
3. Write a paragraph addressing the questions (10-15 Sentences):
 - a. Were critics of WWI anti-American? Include evidence from at least 2 documents.
 - b. Agree or disagree with the following: "Civil liberties came under attack in the United States during the years World War I as a result of actions of the Federal government."