The Zimmermann Telegram. Teaching with Documents.

Between 1914 and the spring of 1917, Europe engaged in the conflict known as World War I. The United States remained neutral. In January of 1917, British cryptographers deciphered a telegram from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmerman to the German Minister to Mexico, Heinrich J. F. von Eckhardt, offering U.S. territory to Mexico in return for joining the German cause. This message helped draw the United States into World War I and changed the course of history. In an effort to protect their intelligence from detection and to capitalize on growing anti-German sentiment in the United States, the British waited until February 24, 1917, to present the telegram to President Woodrow Wilson. The U.S. press published news of the telegram on March 1, 1917. This lesson plan provides the background for the incident; identifies the National History Standards and National Civics and Government Standards correlations; presents three learning activities; and offers primary two documents--the coded telegram and the decoded message. Contains a written document analysis worksheet. (BT)
The Zimmermann Telegram

National Archives and Records Administration
700 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20408
1-866-325-7208

Teaching With Documents Lesson Plan:

The Zimmermann Telegram

Background

Between 1914 and the spring of 1917, the European nations engaged in a conflict that became known as World War I. While armies moved across the face of Europe, the United States remained neutral. In 1916 Woodrow Wilson was elected President for a second term, largely because of the slogan "He kept us out of war." Events in early 1917 would change that hope. In frustration over the effective British naval blockade, in February Germany broke its pledge to limit submarine warfare. In response to the breaking of the Sussex pledge, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Germany.

In January of 1917, British cryptographers deciphered a telegram from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to the German Minister to Mexico, von Eckhardt, offering United States territory to Mexico in return for joining the German cause. This message helped draw the United States into the war and thus changed the course of history. The telegram had such an impact on American opinion that, according to David Kahn, author of The Codebreakers, "No other single cryptanalysis has had such enormous consequences." It is his opinion that "never before or since has so much turned upon the solution of a secret message." In an effort to protect their intelligence from detection and to capitalize on growing anti-German sentiment in the United States, the British waited until February 24 to present the telegram to Woodrow Wilson. The American press published news of the telegram on March 1. On April 6, 1917, the United States Congress formally declared war on Germany and its allies.

The story of British intelligence efforts to decipher the German code is fascinating and complicated. The Zimmermann Telegram by Barbara Tuchman recounts that story in all of its exciting detail. It is an excellent historical account for high school students.

The coded telegram is from Decimal File 862.20212/82A (1910-1929), and the decoded telegram below is from Decimal File 862.20212/69 (1910-1929), General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59.
The Documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document 1: Coded Telegram</th>
<th>Document 2: Decoded Message</th>
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Lesson Resources

Standards Correlations
Teaching Activities
Document Analysis Worksheet

URL: zimmermann_telegram.html

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Teaching Activities

Standards Correlations

This lesson correlates to the National History Standards.

- Era 7-The Emergence of Modern America (1890 - 1930)
  - Standard 2B-Demonstrate understanding of the causes of World War I and why the United States intervened.

This lesson also correlates to the National Standards for Civics and Government.

- Standard IV.A.2-Explain how nation-states interact with each other.

Cross-curricular Connections

Share this exercise with your history and mathematics colleagues.

Teaching Suggestions

1. Decoding a Message: In this exercise, students decode a fictitious message using a simple substitution code. As homework, ask students to write a message using the code, and then exchange the messages for decoding.

2. The Zimmermann telegram provides an opportunity to review geography with your students. Ask them to locate England, Germany, Mexico, and Japan on a world map or globe. Direct students to indicate on the map or globe the territory offered by the Germans to the Mexicans in the telegram. Ask them to calculate how much the territory offered to Mexico would increase the size of that country. What geographical advantages would the Germans gain by Mexican entry into the war? What was the role of Japan?

3. Discussion questions:
   a. What other documents have changed the course of American history? For example, consider the effects of the Emancipation Proclamation, the Monroe Doctrine, and the DeLome Letter.
b. What events in 1916 and 1917 contributed to the impact the Zimmermann telegram would have on the American public?

c. Would the United States have remained neutral if the Zimmermann telegram had not been revealed?
**Document 1: The Coded Telegram**

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BERNSTORFF.
"We intend to begin on the first of February unrestricted submarine warfare. We shall endeavor in spite of this to keep the United States of America neutral. In the event of this not succeeding, we make Mexico a proposal of alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The settlement in detail is left to you. You will inform the President of the above most secretly as soon as the outbreak of war with the United States of America is certain and add the suggestion that he should, on his own initiative, invite Japan to immediate adherence and at the same time mediate between Japan and ourselves. Please call the President's attention to the fact that the ruthless employment of our submarines now offers the prospect of compelling England in a few months to make peace." Signed, ZIMMERMAN.

Document 2: Decoded Message
Written Document Analysis Worksheet

1. TYPE OF DOCUMENT (Check one):
   - Newspaper
   - Letter
   - Patent
   - Memorandum
   - Map
   - Telegram
   - Press release
   - Report
   - Advertisement
   - Congressional record
   - Census report
   - Other

2. UNIQUE PHYSICAL QUALITIES OF THE DOCUMENT (Check one or more):
   - Interesting letterhead
   - Handwritten
   - Typed
   - Seals
   - Notations
   - "RECEIVED" stamp
   - Other

3. DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT:

4. AUTHOR (OR CREATOR) OF THE DOCUMENT:

   POSITION (TITLE):

5. FOR WHAT AUDIENCE WAS THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN?

6. DOCUMENT INFORMATION (There are many possible ways to answer A-E.)
   A. List three things the author said that you think are important:

   B. Why do you think this document was written?

   C. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.

   D. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written:

   E. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document:

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