

Songs of the Revolution

Songs have often served as a forum for political protest or expression during times of unrest in American history. Protests against the Vietnam War, for example, included folk songs that promoted peace in the 1960s and 1970s, and, more recently, songs have been written expressly for September 11, 2001 by popular music artists. In addition to exploring popular sentiment during the Revolutionary period, this exercise allows students to use documents that are less frequently analyzed than newspapers or diaries to understand popular thought and expression. It also reminds students that history can be found anywhere and that an effective historian looks for history in unexpected places.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The following verses were actual songs sung by soldiers and lay people prior to and during the Revolutionary War. Many of them were sung as “drinking songs” at taverns or bars. They represent the sentiments of American “rebels” as well as those of Tories (loyalists, who supported the British king). It is important for students to realize that not all Americans were rebels. Many, in fact, including some in Congress, wanted to rebuild their relationship with the mother country. One could compare the Revolutionary War with the American Civil War. Many Southerners fought for the North during the Civil War, and vice versa, many native-born Americans fought on the side of the British during the Revolutionary War. It was not necessarily where they lived but what they thought the role of government should be that determined what side of a war a soldier might be on.

To make the songs easier to sing, those writing political songs frequently wrote new words to old tunes. For example, the tune of “God Save the King,” the English National Anthem, is the same melody used in “America,” (which later, was re-written again as “My Country ‘Tis of Thee”). Though one is about America and the other England, the first verses of each song are very similar in tone. But the next three verses differ markedly from one another. The English version asks God to help the king control his enemies (“Confound there politics, frustrate their knavish tricks”) while the American version blesses “the commonwealth,” “Great Washington,” and acclaims the independent “free states.” By studying these songs, students will be introduced to a range of political opinions during the Revolutionary period, and recognize that not all colonists were rebels. Approximately two-thirds of the people living in North America were either undecided about their allegiances or remained loyal to the crown.

THEMES: political protest, mass demonstrations, popular culture, patriotism, and loyalism

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- 1) Analyze songs of the American Revolution to gain insight into public thought and sentiment of the period.
- 2) Analyze a primary source to interpret meaning and historical context.

- 3) Create songs/verses that reflect public thought from pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary America.

MATERIALS (printed and copied for each student)

- Copies of each of the 8 songs (you can choose to use all 8 or select longer or shorter songs depending on students' reading level and class size. The more songs you use, the smaller each group of students will be).

ACTIVITY: MAKING SENSE OF MUSIC

Part I: Analyzing a Song

Distribute a copy of “God Save the King,” both the American and the original British versions. As a class, compare and contrast the ideas in both songs—how are they similar, how do they differ? It might help to organize ideas by drawing two columns on the chalkboard—one for each song.

The “American” version of this song was adapted from the original British version, which remains the United Kingdom’s national anthem today. The choice of such a well-known tune probably helped singers learn the song quickly. This is a great song to sing as a class since most students in the class will already know the tune—as the tune to “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” (hint: if you have the time, add the lyrics from “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” to this exercise and compare all three songs on the board).

God save the King (British interpretation)

God save our gracious King,
Long live our noble King, God save the King!
Send him victorious, happy and glorious,
Long to reign over us, God Save the King.

O Lord and God arise, scatter his enemies,
And make them fall.
Confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks,
On Thee our hopes we fix, God Save the King.

Thy choicest gifts in store
On him be pleased to pour, long may he reign!
May he defend our laws, and ever give us cause
To sing with heart and voice, God save the King.

God save the King (American interpretation)

God save great George our King,
Long live our noble King, God save the King

Send him victorious, happy and glorious.
Long to reign over us, God save the King

God bless the Commonwealth,
May it increase in strength, its foes annoy
That George is now no more king of this fertile shore,
From whence he drew his store, completes our joy!

God save great Washington,
Virginia's war-like son, and make him brave
Defend him from all the blows of Howe and all his foes
Guard him where'er he goes, Washington save.

Free states attend the song,
Now independent from the British throne
To earth's remotest bound, echoing skies resound,
The sweet melodious sound. Liberty's our own!

God Save the King (British)	God Save the King (American)	America/ My Country 'tis of Thee
<p>God save our gracious King, Long live our noble King, God save the King! Send him victorious, happy and glorious, Long to reign over us, God Save the King.</p> <p>O Lord and God arise, scatter his enemies, And make them fall.</p> <p>Confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks, On Thee our hopes we fix, God Save the King.</p> <p>Thy choicest gifts in store On him be pleased to pour, long may he reign! May he defend our laws, and ever give us cause To sing with heart and voice, God save the King.</p>	<p>God save great George our King, Long live our noble King, God save the King Send him victorious, happy and glorious. Long to reign over us, God save the King</p> <p>God bless the Commonwealth, May it increase in strength, its foes annoy That George is now no more king of this fertile shore, From whence he drew his store, completes our joy!</p> <p>God save great Washington, Virginia's war-like son, and make him brave Defend him from all the blows of Howe and all his foes Guard him where'er he goes, Washington save.</p> <p>Free states attend the song, Now independent from the British throne To earth's remotest bound, echoing skies resound, The sweet melodious sound. Liberty's our own!</p>	<p>My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing; land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims' pride, from every mountainside let freedom ring!</p> <p>My native country, thee, land of the noble free, thy name I love; I love thy rocks and rills, thy woods and templed hills; my heart with rapture thrills, like that above.</p> <p>Let music swell the breeze, and ring from all the trees sweet freedom's song; let mortal tongues awake; let all that breathe partake; let rocks their silence break, the sound prolong.</p> <p>Our fathers' God, to thee, author of liberty, to thee we sing; long may our land be bright with freedom's holy light; protect us by thy might, great God, our King.</p>

Part 2: Working in Groups (15-20 min., depending on the length of the song)

Split the class into small groups and assign each of them a different song. Some songs are longer or more complicated than others, so you may choose to select songs based on students' ages and readings levels. Each group must complete the following requirements.

Ask groups to analyze their song. Encourage them to look up any words they don't know in the dictionary, explaining that "Old English" is different from "American" English. At the end of the group session, students should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What political position—before or against independence—do the song's writers take? Which words or lines in the song reveal the songwriters' perspective?
2. Who do you think might have sung this song? Where might they have sung it? Think about whether the images and words it uses are widely known that could be understood by most people, or are difficult words or complex ideas that might have been understood by a smaller group.
3. If this song refers to a particular event, review the introductory paragraph to the song for a brief background as to what happened then. How does the song portray the event?
4. What is the meaning of the song and how is it significant to the American Revolution?

Part 3: Extending the Story (15 min.)

Ask each group to create a last verse that complies with the rest of the song. Make sure they pay attention to the tone and the mood of the rest of the verses.

As an optional additional task, ask them to create a collage of pictures or images that represent their song, or write a song of their own about the same idea to a familiar tune (i.e. "Row, Row, Row Your Boat"). Remind them to be both creative and historically accurate.

Part 4: Presentation (20-30 min. depending on number of groups)

Each group should come to the front of the class and present their final verse, collage or poster, or new song. Points should be given for preparation, creativity, participation (each member should have a part), and content.

Credit and Resources:

This activity is based on the educational materials of Carpenter's Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and the Discovery Channel's teacher education resource center. More information about Carpenter's Hall can be found at: <http://www.ushistory.org/carpentershall/edu/> and about the Discovery Channel at: <http://school.discoveryeducation.com/lessonplans/programs/revwar1/>.

SONG 1: The Battle of the Kegs

Introduction (for students):

The Battle of the Kegs was one of the more interesting “battles” of the Revolutionary War. The British naval fleet held some of their ships in the Delaware River during the occupation of Philadelphia in 1778. The Rebels, who had no way of causing damage to these ships because of low funds, concocted a plan to fill kegs, or barrels, with explosives and send them downstream, in the middle of the night, to detonate near the British ships and hopefully sink one or two. With scattered organization the Rebels managed to release a few kegs a little later than they planned. However, due to some ice in the river, the British decided to pull their ships closer to the wharfs that night. The next morning, a soldier happened to see some kegs and other driftwood floating harmlessly past the ships. Suspecting that rebels were actually inside the barrels, armed and ready to attack, the British navy decided to fire their cannons and rifles at the kegs. Not knowing the rebels intentions, Philadelphia citizens watched as the British navy destroyed what appeared to be trash.

Background/Analysis (for teachers):

Author and patriot Francis Hopkinson wrote this tale of the Battle of the Kegs from the perspective of a British sailor. In this account, Hopkinson, who was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence from New Jersey, used sarcasm to mock the “conquering British troops” who so bravely attacked kegs filled with explosives rather than rebels.

Lyrics:

Tw'as early day as poets say, just when the sun was rising,
A soldier stood on a log of wood and saw a sight surprising
A sailor too in jerkin blue this strange appearance viewing
First damned his eyes in great surprise, then said “Some mischief's brewing.”

These kegs now hold the rebels bold, packed up like pickled herring
And they're come down to attack the town in this new way of ferrying
Therefore prepare for bloody war, these kegs must all be routed
Or surely we despised will be, and British courage doubted.

The cannons roar from shore to shore, the small arms make a rattle
Since war began I'm sure no man ere saw so strange a battle.
These kegs 'tis said, though strongly made of rebels staves and hoops, sir
Could not oppose their powerful foes, the conquering British troops, sir!

SONG 2: Johnny Has Gone for a Soldier

Background/Analysis (for teachers):

Except for the first verse, this song has been sectioned off with two male verses and two female verses. It is a lament about having to go away to war and leave loved ones behind. Of course, during any war, separation between family members is inevitable, and couples part each other not knowing when or if they will see each other again. As this song states, men and women may not have liked it, but most felt it was their duty to support the war and their country. Men showed their support by fighting as soldiers and women by sacrificing their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons. Many families became destitute without the man as provider of the main source of income. One could easily change some of the period rhetoric and apply this song to other wars in American history.

Lyrics:

(Verse I, All): Here I sit on Buttermilk Hill, who could blame me cry my fill?
And every tear would turn a mill. Johnny has gone for a soldier.

(Chorus, All): Shule, shule, shulagra, sure and sure and he loves me.
When he comes back we'll married be. Johnny has gone for a soldier.

(Verse II, Men): Me, oh my, I love her so, Broke my heart, I had to go
And only time will heal my woe. Johnny has gone for a soldier.

(Verse III, Women): I'll sell my rod, I'll sell my reel, likewise I'll sell my spinning wheel.
And buy my love a sword of steel. Johnny has gone for a soldier.

(Repeat Chorus, All) Shule, shule, shulagra, sure and sure and he loves me.
When he comes back we'll married be. Johnny has gone for a soldier.

(Verse IV, Men): With fife and drum I marched away, I could not heed what she did say,
I'll not be back for many a day. Johnny has gone for a soldier.

(Verse V, Women): I'll die my dress, I'll die it red, and through the streets I'll beg for bread,
The lad that I love from me has fled. Johnny has gone for a soldier.

(Repeat Chorus, All) Shule, shule, shulagra, sure and sure and he loves me.
When he comes back we'll married be. Johnny has gone for a soldier.

SONG 3. Free America

Background/Analysis (for teachers):

This song would have been sung heartily with the same strong conviction as one would sing a school's team song at a current day high school football game. The word "huzzah" used as a celebratory exclamation in colonial America (and in England)—like "hurray" today—and in this context would be like yelling, "Go America!" The last verse refers to the desire to dominate ("the masters of the main") and to be recognized as a free and strong country, similar to the reputation of England, France, and Spain at that time.

Lyrics:

Lift up your hands ye heroes and swear with proud disdain
The wretch that would ensnare you shall lay his snares in vain.
Should Europe empty all her force, we'll meet her in array,
And fight and shout and shout and fight for North America!

Torn from a world of tyrants beneath this western sky.
We form a new dominion, a land of liberty.
The world shall own we're masters here, then hasten on the day.
Huzzah, huzzah, huzzah, huzzah for free America!

Some future day shall crown us the masters of the main.
Our fleet shall speak in thunder, to England, France, and Spain.
And the nations o'er the oceans' spread shall tremble and obey,
The sons, the sons, the sons, the sons of brave America!

SONG 4: The Congress

Background/Analysis (for teachers):

“The Congress” is a Tory or Loyalist song that defends “the gracious King” while calling members of Congress “knaves,” “stupid fools,” and “servile acquiescing tools,” worse than the “plague,” and “famine.” The writer makes it clear that if Congress did not convene, peace, harmony, and law would be restored.

Lyrics:

Ye, Tories all rejoice and sing, success to George our gracious King.
The faithful subjects tribute bring, and execrate the Congress.

These hardy knaves and stupid fools, some apish and pragmatic mules,
Some servile acquiescing tools, These compose the Congress.

Then Jove resolve to send a curse, and all the woes of life rehearse
Not plague, not famine, but much worse, He cursed us with a Congress.

Then peace forsook this hopeless shore, Then cannons blazed with horrid roar,
We hear of blood, death, wounds, and gore, The offspring of the Congress.

Prepare, prepare, my friends prepare, For scenes of blood, the field of war
To royal standard we'll repair, And curse the haughty Congress.

Huzza! Huzza! And thrice Huzza! Return peace, harmony, and law!
Restore such times as once we saw, And bid adieu to Congress.

SONG 5: Chester

Background/Analysis (for teachers):

Chester was a popular tune that eventually became the anthem for the Continental Army. The piety and solemnity of the words and tune, as it trusts in God to win the war suggests that this was not a song to be taken lightly nor sung in taverns. Men might have marched off to battle singing or humming this patriotic tune, “Slavery clank her galling chains, we fear them not, we trust in God.” Note that the slavery referred to in this song is not about African chattel slavery, as practiced in the American colonies, but rather slavery to the British crown.

Lyrics:

Let tyrants shake their iron rods. And slavery clank her galling chains.
We fear them not, We trust in God. New England's God forever reigns.

The foe comes on with haughty stride, our troops advance with martial noise,
Their veterans flee before our youth, and generals yield to beardless boys

What grateful offerings shall we bring, what shall we render to the Lord,
Loud Hallelujahs let us sing, and praise His name on every chord.

SONG 6: Revolutionary Tea

Introduction:

This song recalls the Boston Tea Party on December 16, 1773, when a group of colonists disguised as Indians boarded three ships in Boston Harbor and threw overboard more than 300 chests of tea. The colonists acted in order to oppose Parliament's taxation of tea. They believed that they should not be taxed without representation. The British government responded with a series of Coercive or Intolerable Acts including closing Boston's port, stopping town meetings, and empowering the soldiers to be lodged in private homes. Such measures united the colonies against the British.

Background/Analysis (for teachers):

Revolutionary Tea is one of the best songs to represent the relationship between England and the colonies: it was a mother-daughter relationship. This song also tells the story of the Tea Tax, which was imposed upon the colonists without a voice in British parliament. Tea was a widely used beverage in Britain and the colonies. Most colonists drank tea, so the effect of the tax was widespread.

A note of contempt is clear as England is portrayed as a rich, old queen who only wanted to become wealthier. The rebellious young daughter who is attached to her "dear mother" is willing to pay for the tea, but not a "thrupenny tax." Knowing that her daughter is being rebellious the mother sends a significant amount of tea to her daughter who promptly throws it into the ocean (The Boston Tea Party), and again declares to her "dear mother" that she will never pay a tax on tea.

Lyrics:

There was a rich lady lived over the sea,
And she was an island queen.
Her daughter lived off in the new country,
With an ocean of water between
With an ocean of water between, with an ocean of water between.

The old lady's pockets were filled with gold,
Yet never contented was she
So she ordered her daughter to pay her a tax,
Of thrupence a pound on the tea.
Of thrupence a pound on the tea, of thrupence a pound on the tea.

"Oh mother, dear mother," the daughter replied.
"I'll not do the thing that you ask.
"I'm willing to pay a fair price for the tea,
But never a thrupenny tax,
But never a thrupenny tax, but never a thrupenny tax,"

"You shall!" cried the mother, and reddened with rage.
"For you're my own daughter you see.
"And it's only proper that daughter should pay
Her mother a tax on the tea,
Her mother a tax on the tea, her mother a tax on the tea."

She ordered her servant to come up to her
And to wrap up a package of tea.
And eager for threepence a pound she put in
Enough for a large family,
Enough for a large family, enough for a large family

The tea was conveyed to her daughter's own door,
All down by the Oceanside.
But the bouncing girl poured out every pound
On the dark and the boiling tide,
On the dark and the boiling tide, on the dark and the boiling tide.

And then she called out to the island queen
"Oh mother, dear mother," called she.
"Your tea you may have when 'tis steeped enough.
But NEVER a tax from me,
But NEVER a tax from me, but NEVER a tax from me."

SONG 7: Address to the Ladies

Background/Analysis (for teachers):

This call to the ladies before and during the Revolution was intended to encourage them to stop buying goods made in or shipped from Britain. They are asked to make sacrifices of money and fashion, and not to buy any clothing or other English goods. The song pleads with women to instead “love your country much better than fine things,” and in turn the young men will “love you much stronger than ever” because you will “appear fair, charming, true, lovely, and clever.”

This address can compare with recent advertisement campaigns to encourage people to buy American-made products. As it does today, buying locally made products was intended to boost the American economy, and make it less dependent on England for both necessary and luxury items. This song helps students understand that it was not only men supporting and perpetuating the war movement, but women, too, came together to help in ways that were socially acceptable for them at that time.

Lyrics:

Young ladies in town, and those that live round
let a friend at this season advise you;
Since money's so scarce, and times growing worse,
Strange things may soon surprise you;
First then throw aside your high top knots of pride,
Wear none but your own country linen;
Of economy boast, let your pride be the most,
To show clothes of your own make and spinning.

What if homespun they say is not quite so gay,
As brocades, yet be not in a passion;
For when once it is known this is much worn in town
One and all will cry out 'tis the fashion!
No more ribands wear, not in rich dress appear,
Love your country much better than fine things;
Begin without passion, it will soon be the fashion,
To grace your smooth locks with a twine string.

These do without fear, and to all you'll appear Fair,
Charming, true, lovely, and clever,
Tho' the times remain darkish, young men may be sparkish,
And love you much stronger than ever.
Then make yourselves easy, for no one will tease ye,
Nor tax you, if chancing to sneer,
At the sense-ridden tools, who this us all fool;
But they'll find the reverse far and near.