



Memorial Day Lesson Plan

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About this Lesson

This lesson takes a closer look at the history of Memorial Day by examining World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War and their connections to this civic holiday.

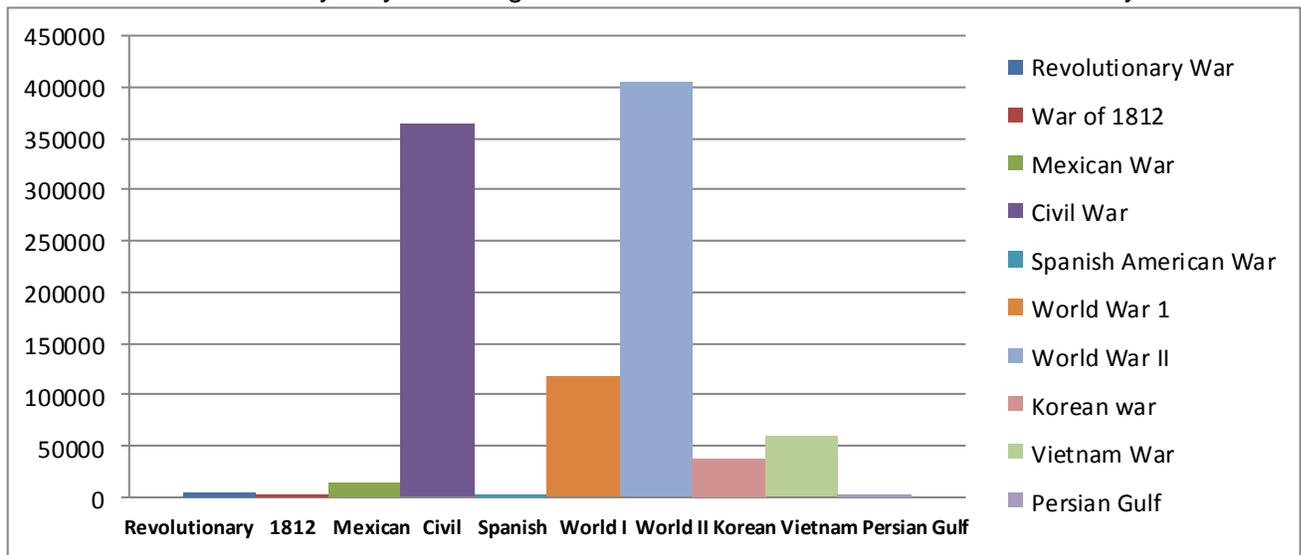
Activity

Opening Activity

Begin by having students list all the wars they can think of in which the United States was involved. As they say the different names, ask them to explain what the war was about or why America got involved.

Discuss which wars they think were most important and why. Are there any in which we shouldn't have gotten involved? Ask them to try to put the wars in order of most American casualties. When they have done that, show them the graph (below) which has the war and number of casualties for each. Are there any surprises?

Do the students know anybody who fought in one of these wars? What stories have they heard?



What was the Cold War? How was it different from other wars in which we were involved?

What symbols do they know of that we use to honor the fallen on Memorial Day? Why do we use those symbols?

Memorial Day and World War I

On April 6th, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany, and on April 7th it declared war on Austria-Hungary and entered World War I on the side of Britain, France and Russia.

Start with a discussion. What do the students already know about World War I? How did the war start? What was the fighting about? What was trench warfare like?

The Flanders poppy was one of the few things to grow around the mud, graves and trenches of World War I when spring came. John McCrae wrote the following poem.

In Flanders Fields

In Flanders Field the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That marks our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short day ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Discuss the poem or have the students write a response to it. What does it make them think and feel? How does the author of the poem express both hope and despair? What does the poem mean? 116,516 American troops died in World War I. How does that affect their view of the poem? Is the poem still relevant today? Could you replace “Flanders fields” and “poppies” with another location and product of the environment?

How does this poem reflect the nature of trench warfare and the outcome of the war? Have every student talk and share their opinions and ideas so that they understand.

Memorial Day and World War II

Begin with a discussion reviewing what the students already know about World War II. If you have been discussing this in class for a while, it should be quite a lot. Try to get them to explain things in a chronological order in order to understand cause and effect.

Ask them if they know of anybody who lived during or fought in World War II. What stories have they heard about it?

Look at the brief timeline of battles the allies won with the casualties on it. Discuss the importance of the battle and then ask them to imagine what it would be like to hear about a battle and wonder if their boyfriend, father, brother, or uncle had been in that battle and had survived. Ask them to look at the casualty numbers not as statistics, but as people. Encourage them to really think about what was lost in each battle.

- A total of 13,112,566 Americans served in World War II. 405,399 of them died.

- **Battle of Midway-June 4-7 1942**-most important naval battle of Pacific Campaign. Decisive American victory against Japanese. 301 American casualties
- **D-Day, the Invasion of Normandy- Began June 6 1944**-The allies' invasion of Normandy. At least 12,000 Allied casualties.
- **Battle of the Bulge-December 16th 1944-January 25th 1945**- a major German offensive in Belgium. Decisive Allied victory and a German operational failure. 80,987 American casualties
- **Battle of Okinawa- April 1-June 22 1945**-largest amphibious assault in Pacific Campaign. 12,513 American and British soldiers killed.

Have students find letters written between a soldier and civilian during World War II. Ask students to discuss the following:

How do the authors describe their experience? In what ways do the authors of the letters express emotions? What do you sense is their hopes and fears?

Resources for finding letters:

<http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/victorymail/letter/index.html>

<http://lettersww2.com/>

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/veterans/>

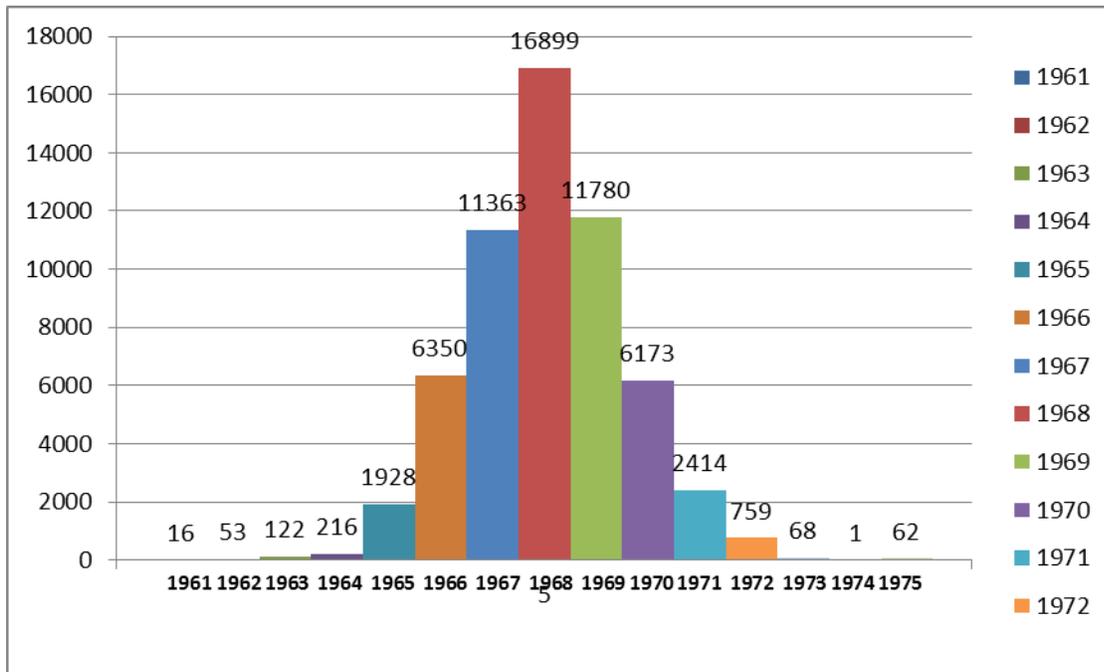
If you have access to computers, have your students go online to the World War II memorial website and search the registry, or do this as a group. Look up the names of any people students may know who served.

Discuss the GI Bill. What was it? How did it help returning soldiers and how did it change society?

Memorial Day and the Vietnam War

Ask the students to discuss what they know about the Vietnam War. What caused the Vietnam War? What was the response at home?

A total of 58,220 Americans died in the Vietnam conflict, 47,434 due to battle. Show your students the graph of the casualties for the years of the conflict. Does this make them think of the casualties any differently? Is casualties defined only as deaths as the first sentence suggests?



If you can, pull up the Vietnam Veterans Memorial page, which is dedicated to remembering those killed in the conflict. Click on “today’s wall birthdays.” Take a few moments to let the students read some of the names and click on some of the info pages. Then click on “today’s wall casualties.” Again give them time to read the names and click on some of the info pages. Ask them to reflect on the war now, with names in their minds. Ask them to think of the war as if they were a soldier whose name is on the wall, or a family member or friend. Have them step away from the war as a bunch of numbers and dates, and turn it into an personal thing. What impact does war have on the individual? What impact does the individual have on war? Now give them some time to respond and reflect any way they want. They can write poems, stories, reflections, or they can draw.

Now bring them back and discuss the draft. Discuss the impact the draft had in America. How did people respond to it? About 1,700,000 men were drafted. Ask them how they would respond if someone they cared about had been drafted for a war they didn’t believe in and then died in it. This sentence is one-sided. Many also go to war because they believe in the protection of our country and its values. Reframe this last part—Are drafts necessary? Is war necessary? What are the intended and unintended consequences of the war? Use these questions and exercises to encourage them to understand what life was like in the U.S. during this time.

Extension

Ask your students to now write a letter thanking a veteran for their sacrifice. Memorial Day is about remembering those who died, but we can honor their memory by thanking those who survived. Your students can either design their own, or you can download and print the cards that are on our website. Please send the cards to:

Thank-A-Vet
P.O. Box 36715
Philadelphia, PA 19107

or

National Constitution Center
525 Arch Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106