

2022 Theme Narrative: *Debate & Diplomacy in History: Successes, Failures, Consequences*

ASHLEY FOLEY DABBRACCIO, Program Assistant, National History Day®

Throughout the 2021–2022 academic year, National History Day (NHD) students will explore the theme of *Debate & Diplomacy in History: Successes, Failures, Consequences*. Some topics might be stories of debate and diplomacy, while others might cover debate with little diplomatic effort or diplomacy without debate. Students must investigate to determine whether one or both of those themes are present in their narrative.

Think of debate and diplomacy as a chess game. Several pieces are on the board, each with its unique talents and abilities. Some moves are aggressive and designed to advance the player one step closer to checkmate. Other actions involve the sacrifice of certain game pieces to advance.

Debates are formal or informal meetings where people argue opposing views. Some debates involve two sides, while others involve three (or more) perspectives.

Diplomacy usually involves negotiating, compromising, and communicating with people or nations to find a nonviolent solution. Debate and diplomacy can occur independently or be intertwined. Can diplomacy lead to new debates? Can debates lack diplomacy?

Students must also consider the successes, failures, and consequences of debates or diplomatic exchanges. Were they successful, and for how long? Did they fail to resolve the issues or have unintended consequences? It is important to consider the short-term and long-term impact of different events or exchanges on history. Students need to determine the legacies and consequences, good and bad, of the debates and diplomatic actions they choose. They must ask questions about successes, failures, and consequences to drive analysis. What do we consider a successful debate or diplomatic endeavor? Can a failure turn into a success or vice versa?

In the study of debate and diplomacy, key moments stand out, such as the Iran-Contra Affair (1985–1987), the Lincoln-Douglas debates (1858), or U.S. neutrality during the Great War (1914–1918). But what other instances of debate and diplomacy have defined international relationships, brokered or ended peace, and helped us better understand the past?

Consider the many different topics surrounding the Cold War (1947–1991). The Cold War exposed many social and cultural issues in the Soviet Union and the United States. Students might explore the Berlin Blockade (1948-1949), the Cold War's first crisis. Soviet Premier Josef Stalin blocked U.S., French, and British railway, road, and water access into West Berlin, hoping the western powers would surrender the city. What was the initial impact of this action? How might the events have launched the U.S. and its allies into another war? How did this crisis affect the diplomatic relationship between western powers and the Soviet Union? Students might explore other Cold War topics such as the Truman Doctrine (1947), the Korean War (1950-1953), the Kitchen Debates (1959), or the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962). Who was involved? Were these events instances of successful diplomacy, or were they diplomatic failures? How did their success or failure affect the relationship between the Western and Eastern blocs during the Cold War?



The 1948 political cartoon showed Josef Stalin seated on a table marked “Berlin Chess Game.” Stalin attempted to remove western influence in West Berlin, an area situated in communist East Germany. Truman’s and Stalin’s actions were depicted as a game of chess between two nations vying for dominance. ©Okefenokee Glee & Perloo, Inc. Used with permission.

Consider the history of the Middle East. One example was the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. How were diplomatic relationships carried out in the area? What role did the United States and Great Britain play? What were the long-term consequences for Israel? For diplomacy in the region? Or, students might be curious about the 1973 Arab-Israeli War and subsequent peace negotiations. What happened, and how did it impact the United States and other nations? What effect did these diplomatic relations have on the world economy?



United States' support of Israel during the Arab-Israeli War led to an oil embargo. As a result, Americans experienced a gasoline shortage that led to rationing and an economic crisis relating to high prices, 1973. Courtesy of the Library of Congress (2003677600).

Students might examine debate and diplomacy in colonial and revolutionary American history. Perhaps they might want to research the Carlisle Peace Commission, a group of British peace negotiators who traveled to the United States in 1778 in an attempt at reconciliation with the colonies. After their failures at the Battle of Saratoga, the British feared an American victory. The American alliance with France concerned them. Students might explore the events surrounding the Carlisle Peace Commission negotiations. What did the British offer the American colonists? What was the colonists' response? Was this a diplomatic success for the American colonists or the British? What was gained by Great Britain recognizing the negotiation power of the Second Continental Congress?

Or, students might be interested in studying some of the prominent social reformers of the 1830s and 1840s who engaged in numerous debates, hoping to change the United States for the better. Dorothea Dix advocated for prison and mental health reform. Legendary showman P. T. Barnum was a temperance advocate and prohibitionist. David Walker, the son of an enslaved father and a free mother, was a writer and anti-slavery activist. Educator Catherine Beecher promoted educational rights for women. The Lowell Mill Girls fought for labor reform for textile workers. What arguments did these people make in trying to persuade people to support their causes? How did these debates impact the United States' policies and laws?

Consider socio-political movements, such as women's rights. Students might explore the internal debates within these movements. Not all women have agreed, at any point in time, about what they wanted. How did an older generation of women who fought for the right to vote feel about the "New Woman" of the 1920s? What about women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s? How did the words of Gloria Steinem compare to those of Phyllis Schlafly? What was the role of African American or Asian American women in the women's movement? What challenges did women such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mabel Ping-Hua Lee face inside the women's movement that led to debates over the definitions of race and womanhood?

The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) is another example of how failed debates or diplomatic blunders may return later. The ERA, first proposed by Alice Paul and Crystal Eastman in 1923, revealed debates of women's legal rights. What legal rights did women hope to secure? What happened that resulted in fewer than the required number of states ratifying the ERA? The ERA was reintroduced in 1972, but once again, it failed to earn the necessary 38 state ratifications. Why do specific debates continue to reappear? How do they change over time or reflect new challenges?

Students interested in civil rights might investigate the role women played in the movement. Consider debates that occurred between African American women and their male counterparts. How did this affect and shape the movement? For instance, Ella Baker, a major proponent of the Civil Rights Movement, fought sexism in both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).¹ What were the results of these debates? Baker eventually left to help organize and advise the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). What influence did she have on the Civil Rights Movement?

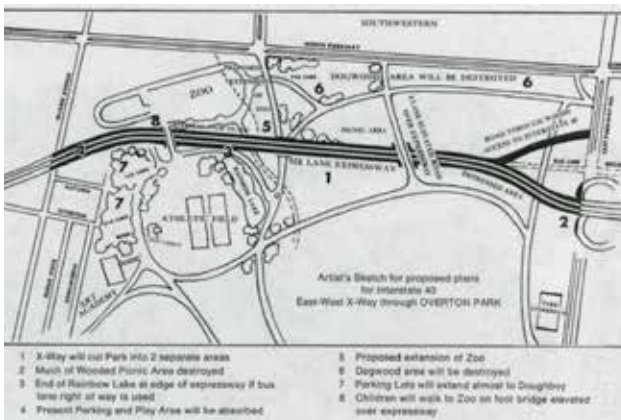


Ella Baker served as an activist from the 1930s to 1980s, working in several major organizations. Her papers are archived at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Courtesy of the Library of Congress (94504496).

1 Other Black women have come forth to discuss the challenges they faced as part of the Civil Rights Movement. For more stories, visit the Civil Rights History Project at the Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/>.

Students might be fascinated by the first televised political debate between Senator John Kennedy and Vice President Richard Nixon on September 26, 1960. What can we learn from this debate? Those who watched the televised debate had different reactions than those who heard it on the radio. Did this new format of debate change the outcome of the 1960 election? Since then, what role has television played in political debates?

How does the theme of *Debate & Diplomacy in History: Successes, Failures, Consequences* fit local history? In 1955, the U.S. Department of Commerce sparked local debates in Memphis, Tennessee, when it released its interstate highway plan. This plan would run six lanes of I-40 straight through Overton Park in the Midtown area of Memphis. Did local organizations protest or support the placement of the interstate? What impact did the highway have on residents, particularly the African American community? How did the debates around public transportation and green space lead to changes in Memphis? How does this story lend itself to discussions of race in the twentieth century?



The Citizens to Preserve Overton Park achieved its goal to block the interstate expansion in the area, to the detriment of the neighboring black community of Binghampton. Today, Overton Park contains the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, the Memphis Zoo, the Memphis College of Art, Rainbow Lake, Veterans Plaza, and Levitt Shell across 342 acres of green space. Courtesy of the Digital Archives of Memphis Public Libraries.

2026 marks the 250th anniversary of the establishment of the United States as an independent nation. Together with the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), National History Day is working to promote and encourage students to explore the history of the nation and how we continuously strive to create “a more perfect union” for all Americans. Numerous subjects relating to the American Revolution and the Early Republic would make strong topics for this year’s theme. To learn more about the partnership, please visit nhd.org/250.

Think again about that chessboard. Each move is meant to take the player one step closer to checkmate. Sometimes players have to make sacrifices. Sometimes they miscalculate or make mistakes. These decisions have an impact on the outcome of the game. Debate and diplomacy face similar issues. Sometimes we succeed. Sometimes we fail. By exploring these themes, we learn to see how these exchanges have changed the course of history and how they affect us today.

To access more theme resources, including our 2022 theme video and graphic organizer, go to nhd.org/themebook.