

Vietnamese Americans

LESSONS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

LESSON 2

Immigrants and Refugees

SUBJECTS

World History, American Experience, World Literature, American Literature and Multicultural Education

OBJECTIVES

1. To learn the differences between the terms “refugee” and “immigrant.”
2. To develop a basic understanding of the politics behind refugee and immigration policies.
3. To understand the refugee mindset upon arriving at a destination country.

STANDARDS SUPPORTED

This lesson supports national social studies standards, Strand IX: Global Connections.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

1-2 class periods

Copies of Handout: Background

Copies of Handout: Arguments & Options

HOW TO DO IT

STEP 1

Start with a brainstorm to find out what students think about refugees.

- Write the word “refugee” on the wall and ask the class to say their immediate thoughts about the word.
- Now write the word “immigrant” and brainstorm ideas and concepts.
- Next, write the word “citizen” and do the same.

See if the class can come to a consensus regarding the definitions of these words. Make sure that the class understands that refugees are people who escape from their home country for reasons of survival (e.g. war, famine, persecution), and immigrants generally emigrate to seek better opportunities, usually economic.

STEP 2

Tell the class that they are to role-play a situation involving refugees. Let students read the “Background Handout.”

Then read the following scenario aloud:

On a dark, cold, and rainy night in the Pacific Ocean, 30 Vietnamese Boat People have been picked up by a merchant ship. The ship has dropped them off at a refugee detention center that will determine what to do with them. They are hungry, tired and cold; they have no money or documents. The immigration officials from the

United States have opposing viewpoints — some want to allow the refugees to enter America; others do not. The refugees are desperate and use several arguments to try and persuade the immigration officials.

STEP 3

Divide the students into three groups.

Ask one group to imagine that they are the immigration officers from the United States and to consider the following options:

- Will you let all of the refugees into the United States?
- Will you let some into the United States?
- Will you split them up by age, profession, wealth...?
- Will you do something else instead?

Ask the second group to pretend that they are refugees. Have them think about the following options:

- Will you split up if the immigration officers ask you to?
- Will you go home if they try to send you back?

Ask the remaining third of the class to act as observers. (Half can monitor the “immigration officers” and half can monitor the “refugees.”)

STEP 4

After a few minutes, give the immigration officer and refugee groups copies of Handout 2(b): Arguments & Options.

Give the “refugees” and the “immigration officers” a few minutes before the role-play to read through their arguments and options, and to decide on tactics. Tell the players that they can use the arguments on their handouts and any other relevant arguments they can think of. If it helps, draw a line on the floor to symbolize the border. Tell them that when the role-play begins, they have ten minutes to reach some sort of conclusion.

STEP 5

It is up to you and the class to decide whether the “refugees” and the “immigration officers” will argue as a group, or whether they will individually take a position and give individual arguments.

Start the role-play. Use your own judgment about when to stop. If there is time, have the students role-play again but have them trade roles — for example, students who were immigration officers must now be refugees.

STEP 6

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is responsible for protecting the rights of refugees. Ask the class in groups to role-play as an official team sent by the UNHCR to help the refugees from Vietnam. Ask the students to write an official report including the following issues:

- What arguments could you use to persuade the immigration officers to let the refugees in?
- Are the immigration officers doing anything wrong?
- What could be done with this report to make the U.S. protect the rights of the refugees?

STEP 7

After the role-play, discuss it using the following questions:

- How did the situation work out? What happened?
- How did it feel to be a refugee? How did it feel to be an immigration officer?

- Refugees have a right to protection under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Were these refugees given their right to protection? Why or why not?
- Do you think that a country should have the right to turn away refugees?
- Would you do this yourself? What if you knew they faced death or persecution in their own country?

STEP 8

Ask students to write an imaginative account of the scene at the border. The account could be from the point-of-view of a refugee child.

ASSESSMENT/CLOSURE

Have students write a diary entry reflecting either the refugee viewpoint or the immigration official viewpoint. Make sure they attempt to address the complexity of the issue and ultimately take a stand.

SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM A LESSON BY AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Lesson 2: Immigrants and Refugees
Handout 2(a)

Background Information

Every year, thousands of people leave their homes and often their countries because of war, persecution, or human rights abuse. Unlike immigrants who choose to leave their country for opportunity, refugees have no other choice but to leave in order to survive.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) says there are 27 million people in the world who are “of concern” to them. Of these, at least 15 million people are entitled to international protection because they are refugees. Most refugees are women and children.

They nearly always have to move abruptly, leaving their possessions behind and sometimes tearing families apart. Many are never able to return to their homes. Most refugees seek safety in a neighboring country; others have to travel great distances to find safety. Refugees often arrive at airports and seaports far from their native land asking for entry.

In 1951, the United Nations adopted the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which protects refugees by restricting countries from forcing refugees to return to their country of origin. Article 33 of the Convention states:

No Contracting State shall expel or return a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

The Convention also applies if a government wants to send a refugee to another country from which the refugee might be sent home. Governments must also hear the claim of a refugee who wants to find safety or seek asylum in their country. This principle applies to all states, whether or not they were party to the 1951 Convention. Furthermore, the Convention says that refugees should be free from discrimination and should receive full rights in the country where they go to be safe.

In addition, many articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948 protect refugees. However, countries disagree about who is a “genuine” refugee. To justify restrictions on refugees, more developed countries often assert that refugees are not victims of oppression but are rather “economic migrants” who simply want a better standard of living.

In recent years, the governments of many of the world’s richest countries have become victim to “compassion fatigue,” or a growing wariness to allow refugees into their borders. These countries claim that large influxes of refugees create additional stresses on their existing populations, including more competition for housing and jobs, a financial impact on welfare systems, and higher racial tension.

To protect the rights of refugees, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, based in Geneva, Switzerland, was established by the United Nations General Assembly on December 14, 1950. Governments often argue that refugees’ fears are exaggerated or untrue. However, to protect the welfare of refugees, many humanitarian organizations document human rights violations in the refugee’s country and use such evidence to persuade governments to allow refugees to apply for asylum.

Lesson 2: Immigrants and Refugees
Handout 2(b)

Arguments & Options

IMMIGRATION OFFICERS' ARGUMENTS AND OPTIONS

You can use the following arguments and any others you can think of:

- They are desperate; we can't send them back.
- If we send them back, we will be responsible if they are arrested, tortured, or killed.
- We have a legal obligation to accept refugees.
- Maybe they have skills, which our country needs or can use.
- They have no money and will need state support. Our country cannot afford that.
- Can they prove that they are genuine refugees? Maybe they are just here to look for a better standard of living.
- There are enough refugees in our country; we need to take care of our own people. They should go to the other countries.
- If we let them in, others will also demand entry.
- They don't speak our language, they have a different religion, and they eat different foods. They won't integrate in our society.
- They will bring political trouble.

REFUGEES' ARGUMENTS AND OPTIONS

You can use these arguments and any others you can think of.

- It is our right to receive asylum.
- Our children are hungry and you have a moral responsibility to help us.
- We will be killed if we go back.
- We will be jailed if we go back.
- We have no money.
- We don't have anywhere else to go.
- I was a doctor in my hometown.
- We only want shelter until it is safe to return.
- Other refugees have been allowed into your country.