Terrorists in United States History

This lesson can be used as a current events project, in the study of recent United States history, or in a participation in government class. After the class discusses definitions of domestic terrorism and news coverage of the events of September 11, 2001, students explore differences between and similarities of “terrorists” and “freedom fighters.” Groups evaluate a list of proposed terrorists in U.S. history, decide who are the most feared and criminal terrorists in United States history, and present their views to the full class. Groups have made and defended widely different choices. In one class, one team argued Al Qaeda was “the most dangerous because it not only planned attacks on the U.S., but also on other countries.” Another team argued the Ku Klux Klan because it “spread violence against Blacks and created a chaotic feeling among United States citizens.” Other teams selected John Brown’s Raid at Harpers Ferry and the Oklahoma City bombing. – Alan Singer

Aim: Who are the most feared and criminal terrorists in United States history?

Goals:
- Analyze and translate primary source definitions of domestic terrorism.
- Work in teams to evaluate the historic importance of different events.
- Present and defend conclusions to the class.
- Promote interactive discussions based on evidence in small groups and full class.

Main Ideas:
- There have been many events in United States history that can be described as terrorism.
- Prominent Americans and the United States government have been involved in some of these actions.
- There is not always agreement about which people and events should be considered domestic terrorism.
- The FBI and the USA Patriot Act have attempted a formal definition of domestic terrorism.


Do Now: Examine these two definitions of domestic terrorism. They are written in official legal language. Translate these official definitions into a simple definition of domestic terrorism.

1. FBI’s Terrorist Research and Analytical Center, 1994: Domestic terrorism is “the unlawful use of force or violence, committed by a group(s) of two or more individuals, against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.”
2. USA Patriot Act, 2001: Domestic terrorism: “(A) involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State; (B) appear to be intended— (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and (C) occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States.”


Activities:
1. Students evaluate and translate primary source definitions of domestic terrorism.
2. Students examine news broadcasts about 9/11 and discuss why this was an example of terrorism.
3. Students discuss their opinions on the difference between a terrorist and a freedom fighter?
4. Groups evaluate and sort a list of proposed terrorists in U.S. history.
5. Students present and defend conclusions to the class about the most feared and criminal terrorists in U.S. history.
6. Class questions and evaluates reports.

Summary Question: In your opinion, how do we decide who is the terrorist, who is the freedom fighter, and who is pursuing legitimate government policies?
Aim: Who are the most feared and criminal terrorists in United States history?

Activity: Working in groups and using online sources, decide who are the ten most feared and criminal terrorists in United States history. The list includes both individuals and groups. Some people on the list may surprise you. Assign ten points to your first choice, nine points to your second choice, etc. You can add other candidates to this list if you wish. Be prepared to explain your choices to the class.

1. ADVOCATES OF SLAVERY. John C. Calhoun, Jefferson Davis and other southerners who actively defended enslavement of Africans in the United States.

2. 1960S RADICALS. Bill Ayers, the Weather Underground, the Symbionese Liberation Army, and other radical groups from the 1960s and 1970s.

3. KKK. The Ku Klux Klan and other White supremacist groups that lynched and disenfranchised Blacks in the decades after the American Civil War.

4. INDIAN REMOVAL. President Andrew Jackson, General George Custer, and other American leaders and military officers who systematically either slaughtered Native Americans or forced them off of their homelands.

5. CIVIL WAR. In 1864, General William T. Sherman’s Union troops pillaged and burned a large part of Georgia between Atlanta to Savannah in an effort to force the South to surrender.

6. RADICAL ABOLITIONISTS. John Brown and radical abolitionists who declared war on the United States in Bloody Kansas and at Harpers Ferry.

7. ANARCHISTS. Leon Frank Czolgosz, who assassinated President William McKinley in 1901, and American anarchists such as Emma Goldman who championed violent revolution.

8. ORGANIZED CRIME. Al Capone, the Mafia, and any other organized criminal group that has brought drugs and violence into American communities since the 1920s.

9. ATOMIC BOMB. President Harry Truman for authorizing the use of the atomic bomb against civilian populations to force Japan to surrender during World War II.

10. WAR ON IRAQ. George Bush for misleading the American people to support a war in Iraq that has caused the death of hundreds of thousands of civilians.

11. ANTI-UNION. The Pinkertons, private police forces, and the employers who hired them to kill labor organizers and striking workers from the 1870s through the 1940s in order to prevent the formation of labor unions.

12. PHILIPPINES. U.S. occupying army in the Philippines during the first half of the 20th century that used waterboarding and widespread torture to suppress the Philippine independence movement.

13. HAYMARKET. Albert Parsons and other anarchists accused and executed for setting off a bomb that killed at least one police officer at a demonstration at Haymarket Square in Chicago in 1886.

14. DRUGS. Drug Cartels operating in the United States today.

15. 1960S BLACK RADICALS. Black Panthers and other nationalist groups that championed revolution in the Black community during the late 1960s.

16. NATIVE AMERICANS. Geronimo and other Native American leaders who declared war on the United States and often attacked civilian settlements on the frontier.

17. OKLAHOMA CITY. Timothy James McVeigh. Terry Nichols, and Michael Fortier and “white power” advocates responsible for the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing that killed 168 people.

18. SEGREGATIONISTS. Southern segregationists bombed Black churches and killed Civil Rights workers in the 1950s and 1960s trying to block school integration and voting rights for African Americans.


20. SONS OF LIBERTY. The Sons of Liberty in the years preceding the American Revolution and other radicals during and after the war tarred, feathered, and killed supporters of the legitimate government of the colonies.

21. SCHOOL MASSACRES. In Michigan in May 1927 a member of a local school board set off three bombs that killed 45 people including 38 children. In August 1966 a University of Texas student who was a former U.S. marine shot and killed 16 people. At Columbine High School in Colorado in April 1999 two students killed twelve students and a teacher. At Virginia Tech in April 2007, a senior English major killed 32 people.

22. KENT STATE/ JACKSON. In May 1970, National Guardsmen at Kent State University in Ohio killed four students during a campus protest against the war in Vietnam and the invasion of Cambodia. Ten days later police killed two student protesters and wounded twelve at a protest rally at Jackson State University in Mississippi.