

Figure 4

The Prospect of War and the U.S. History Curriculum

The wars found in U.S. history are obvious opportunities to explore what justifies war. Below are examples of other events where students might apply their guidelines. These events involve: varying reasons for war; examples where solutions other than war were chosen; and, some of the parties involved were not government officials.ⁱ

The Barbary Pirates – since George Washington’s administration, the U.S. had struggled with conducting trade in the Mediterranean Sea due to raiding by ships from the Barbary States. Seizure of a U.S. ship and its crew and the subsequent ransom demand caused President Jefferson to refuse to negotiate and to consider military action.

Trail of Tears – the use of the military to forcefully remove the Cherokee people still living east of the Mississippi River is well known. The opposition of missionary groups and individuals such as Ralph Waldo Emerson is less well known, as well as the request from General Wool, the officer overseeing the Cherokees’ removal, that President Van Buren reassign him.

Oregon Territory Boundary Dispute & Treaty – the Democrats’ election year slogan, “fifty-four forty or fight,” heightened the Oregon boundary dispute between the U.S. and England. Under the Convention of 1818, the U.S. and England jointly occupied Oregon. A Senate resolution to end the joint occupation introduced early in 1846 brought the two nations to the brink of war.

Annexation of the Philippines (1899) – the annexation of the Philippines, which led to the Filipino War (1899-1902), generated a heated national debate among groups such as the Anti-Imperialist League and dramatically shaped U.S. foreign and military policy well into the 1900’s.

Berlin Crises – several times during the first 15 years of the Cold War, the U.S. and the Soviet Union used Berlin as a “battleground.” Stalin set up a blockade around Berlin during 1948-49, which led to the Berlin airlift by the U.S. Khrushchev and Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy faced off several times from 1958 to 1961 with the eventual erection of the Berlin Wall.

Balkans (1990’s) - during the 20th century genocide became a tactic of choice of several governments. Prior study of the mass killing of Armenians in Turkey, Jewish people in Nazi controlled Europe and the Cambodian people under the Pol Pot regime might lead to discussion of “ethnic cleansing” in the Balkans and U.S. military intervention there during the 1990’s.

ⁱ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 2nd ed. (Basic Books, 1992). Originally published in 1977, this book set the stage for the discussion of just war theory for the next two decades.