



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2011 Volume III: The Idea of America

Introduction

by Bryan Garsten, Professor of Political Science

What has "America" meant to different generations of Americans? The diverse and talented group of teachers in this seminar explored together the various hopes and disappointments that have been found in the word and idea of America since the nation's founding. America has stood for principles and for power, for freedom and for imperialism, for opportunity and for disillusionment. We explored these questions by reading eighteenth-century founding documents, writings by Europeans visiting nineteenth-century America, speeches by presidents and by former slaves, and writings by and about immigrants. We noticed the image of "a city on a hill" and the idea of "manifest destiny"; we discussed the surprising connotations in the image of a "melting pot." We spent time thinking about the traditional ideals of freedom and equality and also about the ways in which those ideals have been, and remain, unrealized. We found that we came at the topic from different perspectives, and yet were able to create a shared conversation in which no one's identity was melted away.

One of the wonderful things you will find in this collection of curriculum units is a genuine diversity of perspectives and backgrounds. Our group included not only history and social studies teachers but also an art teacher, a language teacher teaching musical theater, and elementary school teachers thinking about younger children's needs. For those younger children, you will find here a unit that explores the symbolism and meanings to be found in images and objects that children see often but rarely fully understand, such as the American flag (Carol Boynton), as well as a guide to thinking about the Declaration of Independence for the first time and seeing how it protects the uniqueness of individuals even as it gives us something to share (Laura Turner). For students around the third-grade level you will find a tour of key Inaugural Addresses by presidents throughout history, complete with original "translations" into language that is more age-appropriate (Kathleen Gormley), and also an innovative use of historical fiction to explore the experiences of different groups of immigrants at different moments in history (Waltrina Kirkland-Mullins). High-school history and social studies teachers can find here challenging units on the debates surrounding the U.S. Constitution and the question of whether it should be amended again (Sonia Henze), on the international "exporting" of democratic ideas to other places through a whole range of policies, from the gentle power of example to more invasive and forceful initiatives (Amanda Joy Hatcher), as well as a creative use of hip-hop to draw students in to empathizing with the historical experiences of three different waves of immigrants (Rodney Robinson). Middle-school teachers will find here a detailed and compelling exploration of Andrew Jackson's life and treatment of the American Indians (Pat Mitchell-Keita-Doe). Finally, readers interested in the arts will find innovative units on the way that different understandings of America and its democratic principles manifest themselves in key moments of twentieth-century musical theater (Michael Husni) and in twentieth-century visual artists' collectives (Emily Faxon). The collection of units as a whole is a potluck dinner to which everyone contributed – a real Thanksgiving feast. Enjoy!

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