

**Mapping It Out:  
Freedom of the Press Versus Public Safety**

How do journalists cover the events of a war? Does the press have a responsibility to protect national security? Should government censorship ever be allowed?

This activity will introduce students to some of the issues related to war reporting, with a focus on the Civil War (1861–1865). After a brief introduction to the concept of freedom of the press and Civil War–era journalism, students will decipher a Civil War–era battlefield map published on the front page of a newspaper. They’ll share their findings with the class and debate the public’s right to know versus the government’s role to protect.

**Time:** 45 minutes

**Level:** Grades 6–12

**Materials:** This poster, featuring the July 27, 1861, front page of *The New York Herald* and the “Interpreting a Civil War Newspaper Map” worksheet (below; make one copy for each student)

**Objectives:** Students will be able to:

- List the five freedoms of the First Amendment and define freedom of the press.
- Describe the technological abilities and limitations of Civil War–era journalism.
- Interpret basic cartographic symbols.
- Explain and analyze tensions between the free press and national security concerns.

**Procedure:**

• Ask your students if they can name the five freedoms of the First Amendment. (Answer: religion, speech, press, assembly, petition.) Tell them they’re going to do an activity focusing on freedom of the press and the Civil War.

• As a class, come up with a definition of freedom of the press. (Possible answer: Freedom of the press is the freedom to share information without government censorship.)

• What tools/media do we have for exercising our freedom of the press today? (Be sure that students list a broad array of media technologies: newspapers, blogs, social media, YouTube, radio, newsletters, cable news networks, etc.) What tools/media existed at the time of the Civil War? (Answer: newspapers, telegraph, photography.) Discuss the abilities and limitations of the technologies available to reporters at the time of the Civil War. (Possible prompts: Was a telegraph fast? Was it good for getting information to a lot of people at the same time? Could photographs be easily reproduced in newspapers at this time? How soon after a battle could newspapers report what happened?)

**ACTIVITY EXTENSION:** Have students research more details about how these technologies worked and how reporters used them to cover the Civil War.

• The Civil War was the first American-involved conflict covered by professional war reporters. One of the ways newspapers covered the Civil War was by printing battlefield maps on their front pages. Where did the information to create these maps come from? (Answers: Firsthand investigation and observation; tips from members of the military.) Why do you think these maps became popular? (Possible answers: Readers were hungry for as much information as possible about the war; they were more exciting/interesting than words alone; they were relatively easy to design and print; newspapers couldn’t print photographs at the time, so this was the next best thing, etc.)

• Not everyone thought these maps were a good idea. Discuss the national security and public safety implications of printing maps of battlefields. Who might have objected to them and why? (Possible answers: Generals, regular soldiers, politicians, etc; because the maps gave away information about troop locations, ammunition stores and railroad lines that could be sabotaged; they could possibly aid the enemy; they could endanger citizens who used the maps to try to explore what was happening on the battlefields, etc.)

• Tell your students they’re going to decode a map of battlefields in Virginia published in *The New York Herald* in 1861. Divide your students into small groups. Half of the groups will decode this map and then argue that it is OK to publish it. The other half will decode this map and then argue that it is too dangerous to publish. Have the groups complete the “Interpreting a Civil War Newspaper Map” worksheet and prepare their arguments for or against publication.

• When the students have completed their worksheets, lead them in sharing their findings with the larger group. Compare the groups’ summaries of what the map shows. Compare their map keys and discuss any differences in interpretation. Did they find the map easy or difficult to interpret? Do they think the information this map presents could affect the events of the war? Alternate between groups for and against publishing the map to start a debate over whether or not it was a good idea for a Civil War–era newspaper publisher to print it.

• Discuss the big questions this map raises: How should we balance freedom of the press with the need to protect citizens, soldiers and national security? Should the press really be free to print any information it finds? Should the government ever be allowed to censor what the press publishes? Does the public have a right to know what’s happening in war?

• Think about the modern press. Do we see media outlets today printing maps of current war zones that show troop or supply locations? Why or why not? What has changed about war reporting since the time of the Civil War? What has stayed the same?

• Conclude this activity by taking a vote. Who, if they were a Civil War–era newspaper publisher, would print this map? Who would not? Tally the votes and ask students to share the reasons for their decisions. Do these types of debates continue today?

**ACTIVITY EXTENSION:** Have your students research a contemporary war-reporting controversy and draw their own conclusions about how to balance free press versus national security in the example they find. (Possible topics: Coverage of effective or ineffective combat techniques and/or equipment; reporting on the living conditions of prisoners of war; writing about plans for troop withdrawals; printing leaked military secrets, etc.)

**Standards of Learning for “Mapping It Out” Activity**

National Center for History in the Schools, National Standards for U.S. History (5-12):

Era 5, 2B; Era 10, 2E

Center for Civic Education, National Standards for Civics and Government (5-8): II.D.2; V.B.2; V.B.4

Center for Civic Education, National Standards for Civics and Government (9-12): II.D.4; V.B.2; V.B.5

National Council for the Social Studies, Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (5-12): III; VI; X

National Council of Teachers of English: Standards for the English Language Arts: 6; 7

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Interpreting a Civil War Newspaper Map**

**Directions:** In one sentence, summarize what this map shows.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Using the chart below, create a key for your map. What do the various line styles and symbols mean?

Line Style or Symbol	Meaning

**On the back of this sheet, answer these questions:**

- Was this map easy to decipher? Why or why not?
- Could this map affect the events of the war? If yes, how so? If not, why not?
- If you were a Civil War–era newspaper editor, would you publish this map? Why or why not?

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