

Lesson Two: For Eighth Grade

"George Washington's Terrible Dilemma": *Letter from Washington to Secretary of War Benjamin Lincoln (5 June 1782)*.

Background:

Eight months after the British surrender at Yorktown, Washington is seeking his old friend's advice about whether to execute a young British prisoner in retaliation for the killing of an American prisoner of war. Read the background information in this link

<http://www.masshist.org/objects/2007october.cfm> to explore a particularly tough and terrible dilemma that brings out interesting aspects of Washington's approach to making agonizingly difficult decisions. It also underscores that even great leaders are conflicted and that situations are rarely black and white, but usually quite complex and complicated.

Framing Questions:

Why did Washington find himself in this dilemma?

What are the questions that Washington is asking himself and Benjamin Lincoln?

What does this letter reveal about George Washington? What specific evidence can you cite for your answer?

Why does this issue represent a dilemma and not a simple, obvious decision for Washington?

How was Washington eventually able to resolve the situation? What people and actions played a part in this resolution?

Further Investigation:

List the pros and cons of each possible choice which Washington could make, outlining the short-term and long-term effects of each.

If you were Washington's trusted friend Lincoln, what would you counsel him to do? Defend your advice.

Do you agree with the way in which the episode ended? If so, why? If not, what might have been a better ending? (Is there a case to be made for procrastination at some times?)

What are some lessons we could draw from this case study of Washington in a difficult situation? Cite a circumstance in our time (either from national or world news or a more local situation) where those lessons could be applied and back up your explanation with evidence.