

Curriculum subject: History  
Key Stage: 3, 4 and 5

Theme: Magna Carta today

Topic: How can a peace treaty become an enticement to go to war?

### **Rationale**

Magna Carta in its original context was designed to make peace. Yet the symbolism of rights, liberties, freedoms and heritage that it took on created the perfect rationale for Magna Carta to be used over 700 years later as a justification to go to war. This provides a fascinating insight into not only the influence of Magna Carta on other nations, but also its lasting legacy. This activity focuses on modern Anglo-American relations through the lens of Magna Carta using primary source material. This activity is aimed at pupils in upper Key Stage 3, but could also be used by pupils in Key Stages 4 and 5 studying modern international relations or Anglo-American relations. Some knowledge of the history of America and the original 13 states as a British colony, plus the course of World War II will be beneficial.

### **Content**

#### **Historical sources:**

- [Thomas Jefferson's Draft of the American Declaration of Independence \(1776\)](#)
- [Dunlap Printing of the Declaration of Independence \(1776\)](#)
- [Cabinet papers proposing that Magna Carta be gifted to the USA, with annotations by Sir Winston Churchill \(1941\)](#)
- [Virginia's Declaration of Rights \(1784\)](#)
- [Magna Carta, 1215](#)

#### **Recommended reading (short articles):**

[Modern America and Magna Carta](#) by Matthew Shaw

[Early America and Magna Carta](#) by Matthew Shaw

#### **Films:**

- [Animation: 800 years of Magna Carta](#)

## Key questions

- How can a 700 year old peace treaty become an enticement to go to war?

## Activities

- 1) How would pupils describe relations between America and Britain today? Why? Has this always been the case?
- 2) Introduce/recap the founding of the original 13 states of America as a British colony. This could be done through map work.
- 3) Ask pupils to look at the American Declaration of Independence. What words can pupils pick out that might help to describe British relations with America in 1776? How does the declaration justify the need to become an independent from Great Britain? Can pupils find any reasons given that might go against those ideas set out in Magna Carta?
- 4) Look at the laws of Virginia and a translation of Magna Carta. Are there any similarities? Where?
- 5) Next, split pupils into groups and set the scene:

It is the end of 1940, Britain is gripped by war. The situation is worsening and the Battle of Britain has begun. Britain wants America to join the war. As the War Cabinet, how might pupils persuade America to join the war?

You may wish to use some supporting images and sources to evoke this. Ask them to work in groups to produce a proposal to be sent to the American President. Feed proposals back to the class

- 6) Now compare this to a real proposal to gift a copy of Magna Carta, which the British Cabinet believed might entice America to join the war. How close were the pupils' own proposals to this? Ask pupils in their groups to consider the real proposal. What reasons does it give for making this gift? Why might it be successful according to the source? Do pupils think it is convincing?
- 7) Ask pupils to consider this course of action in light of the arguments made in the proposal, their own proposals and their own knowledge. What were the strengths and weaknesses of this plan? Complete a SWOT analysis in groups and then feedback. Of course, one consideration to make is that the Cabinet didn't seem to consider whether the Lincoln copy of Magna Carta was theirs to offer as a gift in the first place!
- 8) What can the fact that Magna Carta was thought a possible temptation for US entry to the war tell us about the significance of Magna Carta to Americans?