

THE DUST BOWL

A FILM BY KEN BURNS

A New Deal

Lesson Overview:

In the mid-1930s, the southern Plains were gripped by drought, high winds, and massive dust storms that threatened the health and safety of tens of thousands of people. To aid in the crisis, the Roosevelt administration was willing to experiment, see what worked, abandon what didn't and move on. But these solutions sometimes ran afoul with political opponents who felt government shouldn't step in or objected to the cost, or felt the solutions didn't go far enough. Groups affected by the Dust Bowl had varied views about how to solve the problems, but which solution provided the most effective remedy? How could different groups deliberate a common solution?

In this activity, students work in groups, representing different views on what policy to implement to address the problems of the Dust Bowl, and develop collaborative solutions to address these problems.

Grade Level: 9–12 (lesson may be adapted for middle school students)

Related Academic Subjects:

U.S. History, Government/Civics, Language Arts, Earth Science

Time needed to complete lesson: Three class periods with additional time possibly needed for research and preparation.

- Opening Activity and video viewing activity: One class period (may be extended as homework should students need to view video segments multiple times).
- Main Activity: Two to three class periods

Materials needed to complete lesson:

- Computers with Internet access for research.
- Copies of lesson graphic organizers for students.

Lesson Objectives:

The student will:

- Analyze liberal and conservative political philosophies

- Understand views of various groups regarding the causes and solutions for Dust Bowl problems
- Develop strategies to effectively work with persons with other views and political philosophies
- Develop collaboration and cooperation skills to develop effective solutions

Video Segments Used in the Lesson:

All clips are from Episode 2: “Reaping the Whirlwind”

“Relief”

Social worker Dorothy Williamson describes her experiences talking with victims of the Dust Bowl. What help there was came from Washington, D.C., with programs such as the CCC, NYA, or WPA. The video clip introduces the controversy surrounding the agencies as government waste, but testimonials from Dust Bowl victims are overwhelmingly in favor of the programs because, in their words, they were “the difference between starving and having food to eat.”

“Recovery”

In 1935, 850 million acres of topsoil are swept off the Great Plains, with more dust storms to come. President Franklin Roosevelt’s inner circle does not want the area to turn into an “Arabian Desert.” Policy struggles within the Roosevelt administration center around Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, who thinks new agricultural policies could keep farmers on their land. But Interior Secretary Harold Ickes questions whether any attempt should be made to save the land or the people of the Dust Bowl. The Resettlement Administration, a New Deal agency, is established to provide low-interest loans to help people restart... somewhere else. The Roosevelt administration also created the Soil Conservation Service, an agency whose job it was to teach better agricultural practices to the nation's farmers.

Reform (Finnell’s system)

In the summer of 1936, Roosevelt takes a whistle-stop tour across the Midwest and Northern Plains to see the crisis himself. He inspires enthusiastic, but weary, audiences. At the same time, Hugh Bennett, head of the Soil Conservation Service, begins instituting his program of agricultural reform and offering incentives to those farmers who will adopt the new farming methods. The film clip notes that, “The final [government] report estimated that 80 percent of the Great Plains was in some stage of erosion, and pointed to what Bennett called “the basic cause” of the problem—“an attempt to impose upon the region a system of agriculture to which the Plains are not adapted.” But, it concluded, the nation “cannot afford to let the farmer fail.”

Government Reform Program

By 1937, the Dust Bowl farmers are asking for government help in regulating the land by forcing other farmers to take better care of their soil. They even consider declaring martial law. For many farmers who had previously demonstrated independence and suspicion of government, this is a substantial ideological turnaround. Eventually, conservation districts are established to enforce better farming methods and gradual progress is made.

Lesson Methodology:

Open the lesson by reminding students that President Franklin D. Roosevelt sought to solve Depression-era problems by providing government solutions via “relief,” “recovery,” and “reform.” Explain to the class the meaning behind each of FDR’s “Three R’s.”

Relief: Actions the government can take to solve the immediate problem, in this case, the destruction of people’s livelihoods caused by the Dust Bowl.

Recovery: Actions by government to return people and the land back to their condition prior to the Dust Bowl.

Reform: Policies created by government to ensure that destruction caused by the Dust Bowl does not recur in the future.

Conduct a class discussion in which students identify New Deal agency legislation that fits one of the “Three R’s”. Ask students why their selection is a good example of “relief”, “recovery”, or “reform”.

Ask students to view the four video clips and complete the “Video Notes Organizer” on the segments, answering the content and discussion questions. (Note: You may also assign the video segments as homework to allow students to view the clips multiple times or pause the clip if needed to write notes or answer questions. You may want to make arrangements for students without home Internet access to view the clips during class time, study hall, or non-instructional period.)

Main Activity:

At the start of the next class period, ask students to share the information they collected in the “Video Notes Organizer,” and review the Discussion Questions with the entire class.

Next, divide the class into six groups. Assign each group one of the ideological roles listed in the “Ideological Group Descriptions” handout. Based on their experiences viewing the video clips and answering the questions, the teacher may wish to allow students to join groups that closest fit their own political leanings or the teacher may assign groups randomly.

Once groups are assigned, give students five minutes to look at their group’s background and ideological position as described in the handout.

Distribute copies of the “Deliberations Procedures” handout to student groups, and review the procedures with the whole class. Tell students they will be working with their group to develop a collaborative solution for at least one of the “Three Rs” issues identified. Remind students that while their goal is to reach a collaborative solution, they also should seek to maintain, support, and promote the viewpoints of their ideological group.

Give sufficient time for student groups to discuss and deliberate, with each group developing a solution providing the most benefit with the least cost.

Next, each group presents their decision, and students vote as a class to determine which solution is the best one. Students vote as individuals and are not required to vote as a group.

At the end of the activity, students write a one page essay (letter of recommendation) in which they list the problems and concerns faced by southern Plains farmers during the Dust Bowl era, summarize the solutions suggested by class groups, and critique the solution voted on by the class

Assessment Strategies:

- Student groups should submit graphic organizers for assessment
- The teacher should grade completed student essays as described in the lesson.

Extension Activity:

- Students can conduct a talk show featuring various “players” in the Dust Bowl debate regarding possible solutions to the crisis.

Resources:

THE DUST BOWL: <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/thedustbowl>

American Experience: Surviving the Dust Bowl:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/dustbowl/>

EH.net (Economic History Association) Dust Bowl page:
<http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/cunfer.dustbowl>

Wessel’s “Living History Farm” (York, Nebraska) Dust Bowl page:
http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/water_02.html

FDR and the New Deal Response to an Environmental Catastrophe (Roosevelt Institute):
<http://www.rooseveltinstitute.org/new-roosevelt/fdr-and-new-deal-response-environmental-catastrophe>

Report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee (New Deal Network):
<http://newdeal.feri.org/hopkins/hop27.htm>

Related Academic Standards

This lesson meets the following standards set by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>)

U.S. History:

- Standard 16: Understands how the rise of corporations, heavy industry, and mechanized farming transformed American society
- Standard 22: Understands how the United States changed between the post-World War I years and the eve of the Great Depression
- Standard 24: Understands how the New Deal addressed the Great Depression, transformed American federalism, and initiated the welfare state
- Standard 24, Level III, Benchmark I: Understands renewed efforts to protect the environment during the Great Depression and their success in places such as the Dust Bowl and the Tennessee Valley
- Standard 24, Level III, Benchmark 5: Understands various challenges to the New Deal (e.g., arguments of leading opponents, the roots of opposition to Roosevelt's policies, the ideas of the Townsend Plan and the "Share the Wealth" program of Dr. Francis Townsend and Senator Huey Long)

Historical Understanding:

- Standard 1: Understands and knows how to analyze chronological relationships and patterns
- Standard 2: Understands the historical perspective

Civics:

- Standard 11: Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs, and civic beliefs in an increasingly diverse American society
- Standard 12: Understands the relationships among liberalism, republicanism, and American constitutional democracy
- Standard 13: Understands the character of American political and social conflict and factors that tend to prevent or lower its intensity
- Standard 14: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life
- Standard 21: Understands the formulation and implementation of public policy
- Standard 28: Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals

Language Arts:

- Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes
- Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

Earth Science:

- Standard 1: Understands atmospheric processes and the water cycle
- Standard 2: Understands Earth's composition and structure

About the Author

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PBS films, including THE CIVIL WAR, THE WAR, HORATIO'S DRIVE, BASEBALL, and PROHIBITION. He is currently president of the Board of Directors of the Indiana Computer Educators, is a moderator for the NCSS Network, and is a list editor for H-HIGH-S, a secondary social studies teachers' listserv.

Video Notes/Discussion Organizer

Instructions: View the four video segments. Take notes on each one and summarize the main points in the clip. Review the content and discussion questions included for each segment and be ready to discuss those in class.

Segment 1: Relief
Content Question:

What did the New Deal do to provide relief for the general population during the Depression? How did these programs provide relief to Americans? (Be sure to list specific program names mentioned in the video in your notes for this segment.)

| New Deal Programs | Relief Provided |
|-------------------|-----------------|
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Discussion Question

What reasons are given in the clip for the controversy of or resistance to the New Deal relief program? Explain why these concerns sound realistic, or do not seem realistic to you.

| Reasons for Controversy of or Resistance to New Deal Programs | Check if Realistic | Check if Not Realistic | Reasons Why |
|---|--------------------|------------------------|-------------|
| | | | |

Segment 2: Recovery

Content Questions:

Summarize Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes' views on how to deal with the problems of the Dust Bowl. Why would this solution be highly controversial?

| Summary of Secretary Ickes' Views | Reasons for Controversy |
|--|--------------------------------|
| | |

Discussion Question

How did the views of Hugh Hammond Bennett and Howard Finnell contrast with those of Secretary Ickes? Describe what they wanted to do to help the southern Plains recover from the Dust Bowl.

| Views of Secretary Harold Ickes | Views of Hugh Hammond Bennett and Howard Finnell |
|---|---|
| | |
| Description of Bennett's and Finnell's Plans to Promote Recovery | |
| | |

Segment 3: Reform (Finnell’s system)

Discussion Questions:

1. Listen to and summarize FDR’s Fireside Chat in this video segment regarding southern Plains farmers and the Dust Bowl. How do his words instill a sense of confidence and commitment to reform farming practices on the southern Plains and help ensure that conditions that caused the Dust Bowl would not recur?

| Summary of FDR’s Fireside Chat | Explain How FDR’s Words Instill Confidence and Commitment |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| | |

2. How did soil scientist Howard Finnell plan to convince farmers to try his theory of contour plowing? Be sure to include information from the video clip about Soil Conservation Service Director Hugh Bennett’s report regarding the “basic cause” of the Dust Bowl problem. According to author Donald Worster, why would many farmers be resistant to this sort of reform?

| Describe Howard Finnell’s plan based on Hugh Bennett’s report | Reasons for Resistance to Plan |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| | |

Segment 4: Government Reform Programs

Discussion Questions:

1. How does historian Pamela Riney-Kehrberg explain why normally “independent” farmers would allow themselves to be “meddled” with?

2. Compare Timothy Egan’s quote with that of Donald Worster in the clip. What sorts of powers or authorities did they suggest farmers wanted exercised? Who should exercise that power or authority, according to Worster?

| Summarize Quote from Timothy Egan | Summarize Quote from Donald Worster |
|---|--|
| | |
| Describe What the Farmers Wanted Exercised and by Whom | |
| | |

3. What sorts of reforms were instituted by the federal government, according to the clip? In your own words, use evidence from the clip to evaluate the success or failure of the government's action.

| Federal Government Reforms | Success or Failure of Each Reform |
|-----------------------------------|--|
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Ideological Group Descriptions

Resettlement Advocates

This group includes persons concerned about the plight of farmers in the southern Plains, but who believe, such as Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, that the problem is too difficult for the New Deal to solve. They want to use the authority of the Resettlement Administration to move these settlers to other areas more adaptable to settlement. They point to the severity of the Dust Bowl and the statement of Stephen Long in 1820 that noted that this (the Great Plains) was a land “wholly uninhabitable by a people who are dependent on agriculture.”

Conservative Dust Bowl Farmers

Farmers in the southern Plains are an independent lot. Optimistic farmers envision ongoing prosperity and wealth through agriculture. They believe that this prosperity would continue through their lifetime and into subsequent generations, providing wealth to their children and their children’s children.

In the 1930s, the sustained drought convinces many that the “Dust Bowl” might be permanent and farmers begin to despair. However, many farmers subscribe to the notion that government interference into what they could plant is unnecessary and unacceptable. As a result, many farmers do not give much credence to these reform solutions.

But with the increased severity of the Dust Bowl, they become more militant in the belief that something needs to be done, whether it was by the New Deal, or something else. Full-time southern Plains farmers begin to call for martial law and federal punishment for those who don’t follow New Deal guidelines regarding soil conservation. To many farmers, long-term solutions are not the answer.

Small Town Mayors and Civic Officials in the Dust Bowl Regions

Mayors and civic officials in small towns and communities in the Dust Bowl region are faced with a major problem in the 1930s. The Dust Bowl significantly cuts farm incomes, which cuts tax revenues. As a result, many communities find their operating budgets significantly diminished, and civic services such as police and fire protection, sanitation, and street repair are sharply reduced or eliminated.

The migration of groups such as the “Okies” causes a population drop in these communities, which results in further erosion of tax revenues as well as the closing of schools due to lack of enrollment. To many municipal officials, this is not only an economic problem, but a sociological problem as well... Civic leaders look for someone to find a possible solution to the slow but steady destruction of their communities.

Concerned Farm Families

This group of families is more concerned about feeding their children than anything else. Many have had to deal with the ravages of the Dust Bowl for several years and have seen their families fall into despair because they are unable to successfully grow a crop. They also have dealt with the pressure of trying to keep a home clean because of incessant dust storms. In many instances, the interiors of their homes are constantly coated with a layer of dust, which makes it difficult to breathe or clean the dust from dishes and clothes. They have seen members of their families become ill with dust-related illnesses, especially “dust pneumonia,” which causes permanent lung damage or even death.

In some instances, parents suffer nervous breakdowns because of the inability to keep their family safe from the negative health effects of breathing in dust. In the worst cases, husbands or wives have deserted their families or have committed suicide.

These people are desperate for some sort of solution. Their major priority is their family, and whether government or nature solves the problem isn't important. What is important is the safety and welfare of their families and that relief comes soon.

Agricultural Reformers

Some New Dealers and reformers, such as Howard Finnell, believe that the causes of the Dust Bowl are related to poor farming methods and attempts “to impose upon the region a system of agriculture to which the Plains are not adapted.” They cite a 1935 report that estimated 850 million tons of topsoil were lost on the southern Plains, where 4 million acres in 100 counties were blowing. Finnell and others believe this could be offset by more effective farming techniques, such as contour plowing, using the “old-style” two-bladed plow, planting different types of crops, and finding ways to capture as much moisture in the soil as possible, instead of relying on rain to irrigate the ground. While these solutions seem to provide some success and effectively save the land as well as the livelihood of farmers in the southern Plains, they also are long-term in nature. They will not solve problems overnight.

American Taxpayers Concerned About Government Spending

While many ordinary Americans want to see the effects of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl reduced or eliminated, many taxpayers are concerned about their hard-earned tax money being wasted by “boondoggle” projects—New Deal “alphabet agency” jobs that provide an income to the unemployed, but do not provide meaningful results. Many of these jobs, in the eyes of some, are more often than not simply laborers leaning on shovels, doing nothing. While these taxpayers do not object to spending, they want to ensure that their tax money is spent for a good purpose. Other conservatives worry over the sheer cost of New Deal legislation. A common theme of then-President Hoover's run for re-election in 1932 is that plans suggested by candidate Roosevelt would significantly cripple the Federal Treasury, put nearly one-third of the nation in federal jobs, and would undermine the basic foundation of American economic tradition. Citing

FDR's proposals as "frivolous," Hoover suggests using various federal agencies already in place, such as the Federal Reserve System, Farm Board, and Land Banks, as well as more utilization of private relief and private business and industry to rebuild the nation's economy.

Deliberation Procedures

You represent members of your constituency who are interested in developing effective policies to solve problems caused by the Dust Bowl. Remember, the New Deal seeks to solve problems of the Depression by attacking the following three areas:

- Relief: solving the immediate problem of the situation (in this case, the Dust Bowl)
- Recovery: returning things to the way they were prior to the Depression
- Reform: making sure that what happened does not recur

You will be working with other constituent groups that also want to find a workable solution to address at least one of the areas above. But, they have different views and perspectives than you, and want to make sure that their views and perspectives are represented in the final decision.

The goal of the deliberation exercise is to develop a public policy that addresses at least one the following questions:

1. How do we solve the immediate problems we saw caused by the 1930s drought and Dust Bowl?
2. How do we return (or can we return) the southern Plains to the level of productivity it enjoyed prior to the 1930s drought?
3. How do we make sure that Dust Bowl does not recur?

Your constituent group should use the film clip organizers as well as outside research to arrive at a policy decision that best represents the views of your group.

1. Opening Statements:

Each constituent group should select one member to make an opening presentation not longer than one minute. Use the notes you took from the video and your role description to formulate your point of view. Your statement should include answers to the questions: *What group do I represent? What policies would I like to see enacted?*

2. Statement of Premises:

Look at the “common assumptions” on the “Negotiations Records” handout. Be sure your proposed solutions in the next step address as many of these assumptions as possible.

3. Identifying Options:

The group should identify one specific problem they face as a result of the Dust Bowl. The group members should come up with an option solution as a public policy and write it down in the appropriate box on the “Negotiation Records” chart.

4. Evaluating Options:

The class should review the solution options proposed by each group. Through class discussion, list the costs and benefits of each solution, and write those on the “Negotiation Records” chart.

5. Deciding on the Best Option:

Each group should study the costs and benefits of each proposed solution and determine the best public policy solution by voting. The “best solution” is one that addresses at least one of the “three Rs”, listed above, and at least one of the following questions listed in the Deliberations Procedure introduction. Group members can vote as individuals and are not necessarily required to stay with other group members’ positions.

6. Letter of Recommendation:

After the vote, each class member should write a one-page “letter of recommendation” essay. The essay should include listing the problems and concerns faced by southern Plains farmers during the Dust Bowl era, summarize the solutions suggested by class groups, and critique the solution voted on by the class. Do you agree with it? Why or why not?

Negotiation Records

Common Assumptions

1. Many people are suffering as a result of the drought and the Dust Bowl.
2. Current farming techniques aren't working.
3. Solution needs to be found quickly.

| Costs and Benefits | | |
|--------------------------------|-------|----------|
| Ideological Group Options | Costs | Benefits |
| Resettlement Advocates | | |
| Conservative Dust Bowl Farmers | | |

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|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Small Town Mayors and Officials | | |
| Concerned Farm Families | | |
| Agricultural Reformers | | |
| Concerned Taxpayers | | |

