

Both Sides of the Issue

War with Iran Revisited

stosselintheclassroom.org

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Objectives

Students will be able to:

- outline the main claims each speaker makes about the justification for or against U.S. military action in Iran.
- apply the constitutional provisions cited in the videos to determine whether the military action described meets the legal standards for going to war.
- differentiate between the national security arguments and the constitutional arguments presented across both videos.
- judge which speaker makes the stronger overall case and defend that judgment with specific evidence from both videos.

Concepts & Key Terms

The following terms appear across both videos in this pairing. Understanding them will help students follow the arguments and engage in discussion.

Article I, Section 8: the section of the U.S. Constitution that grants Congress the power to declare war, raise armies, and maintain a navy. Representative Massie cited this provision as the legal foundation for requiring congressional authorization before military action.

Commander-in-Chief: the constitutional role of the president as the top authority over the U.S. armed forces. While the president directs military operations, the Constitution reserves the power to initiate war for Congress.

Imminent Threat: a danger that is immediate and unavoidable, often cited as justification for preemptive military action. Bolton argued the threat from Iran did not need to meet the imminent standard; Massie noted the Department of Defense conceded there was no evidence of an imminent Iranian strike.

Isolationism: a foreign policy position that favors avoiding alliances and military involvement in other countries' affairs. Bolton used this term to criticize Vice President J.D. Vance and others who opposed military intervention in Iran.

Nuclear Proliferation: the spread of nuclear weapons or weapons-making technology to nations that do not already possess them. Bolton cited Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons as a primary justification for regime change.

Preemptive War: a military strike launched to prevent an anticipated attack from an adversary, rather than in response to one that has already occurred. Massie characterized the U.S. action against Iran as a preemptive war that lacked constitutional authorization.

Regime Change: the replacement of one government or ruling authority with another, often through military intervention or support of internal opposition.

Bolton argued that overthrowing the Iranian regime was the only path to lasting peace and stability in the Middle East.

Separation of Powers: the constitutional principle dividing government authority among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Both videos touch on the tension between the president's operational military authority and Congress's constitutional power to declare war.

War of Choice: a military conflict that a nation enters voluntarily rather than in direct response to an attack on its territory or citizens. Bolton described the Iran engagement as a war of choice and argued that most wars are wars of choice.

War Powers Resolution (1973): a federal law intended to limit the president's ability to commit U.S. forces to armed conflict without congressional approval. Massie cited its three conditions—a declaration of war, specific statutory authorization, or a national emergency created by an attack on the United States—arguing that none had been met.

Discussion Questions

The questions below will help students achieve a better understanding of the arguments made on either side of a contentious topic. Because these questions often touch upon statements made briefly in the videos, we recommend reading the questions before watching each video.

Students are encouraged to take notes during the videos, and it may be helpful for students to break into groups, each taking responsibility for only a few questions, before coming together for discussion.

1. What are the opposing ideas in these two videos?
2. In the PBS video, John Bolton said he doesn't think the U.S. needs to make the argument that Iran presented an imminent threat. What does it mean for a threat to be imminent? Should the presence of an imminent threat be the standard for attacking another country? Why/Why not?
3. Representative Thomas Massie read the following quote from James Madison: "The constitution supposes what the history of all governments demonstrates: that the executive branch of power is the most interested in war and most prone to it. It has accordingly, with studied care, vested the question of war in the legislature." What did Madison mean by that? Is it relevant today? Why/Why not?
4. John Bolton described the U.S. engagement with Iran as a "war of choice." What is a "war of choice"? Is the war with Iran a "war of choice"? Why/Why not?
5. Rep. Massie said that the 1973 War Powers Resolution may only introduce U.S. forces into hostilities if at least one of three conditions is met. What

were those three conditions? Did the situation in Iran meet any of those conditions? Why/Why not?

6. John Bolton said that "the idea that somehow we were tricked into this doesn't give Trump enough credit." What did he mean by that?
7. Rep. Massie said: "We owe our military servicemembers a clear mission." What did he mean by that?
8. When asked if the Trump administration has a plan for the next steps in Iran, John Bolton said: "No, and I don't think it's possible to have a plan." What did he mean by that? Do you agree with him? Why/Why not?
9. Rep. Massie said American families want to know how the attacks on Iran will help them pay for groceries or pay for housing. Should these concerns take priority over war with Iran? Why/Why not?
10. John Bolton said that the Founding Fathers of the United States didn't have a plan when they changed the regime of the United States by signing the Declaration of Independence. Is this an accurate comparison to what's happening in Iran? Why/Why not?
11. Rep. Massie said a sustained war with Iran "will radicalize new generations of terrorists." What did he mean by that? Is this concern reasonable? Why/Why not?
12. John Bolton called Vice President J.D. Vance an "isolationist." What is an isolationist?
13. Rep. Massie said: "Some told us this war was about nuclear weapons, but six months ago we were assured our last strike on Iran decimated their nuclear program." If true, does this inconsistency call into question the argument that Iran was a nuclear threat? Why/Why not?
14. John Bolton argued that Iran is an international terror threat and stands in the way of peace in the Middle East. If true, does that justify going to war with Iran? Why/Why not?
15. Rep. Massie argued that Congress, not the president, has the power to declare war. If true, what are the advantages of this power being held by the legislative branch instead of the executive branch? What are the disadvantages?
16. Did these two videos share any common ground? Were there any points on which they agreed? If so, what were they?
17. Should one of the arguments we heard carry more weight than the other? If so, which one? Why?
18. Did you have an opinion on this topic before watching these videos? If so, what was it? Has your opinion changed? If so, how? What did you learn from these videos that affects your views on this topic?

19. What else would you like to learn about this topic?

Activities

Activity 1: Evidence Mapping

In this activity, students chart the specific claims, evidence, and assumptions each speaker uses to build his argument. This helps students move beyond surface-level reactions and examine the logical structure of each position. Distribute the worksheet below and have students complete it while reviewing their notes from both videos.

After completing the chart individually, students should pair up and compare their findings. Each pair should identify at least one place where the two speakers use different evidence to support opposing conclusions and one place where they interpret the same fact differently.

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____ Period _____

Teacher _____

Evidence Mapping: War with Iran Revisited

Directions: For each category below, record the specific claims and evidence used by each speaker. Use your notes from both videos.

1. Bolton's main argument FOR military action in Iran:

2. Massie's main argument AGAINST military action in Iran:

3. What specific evidence does Bolton cite to support his position?

4. What specific evidence does Massie cite to support his position?

5. Identify one fact or claim that both speakers would agree on:

6. Where do they interpret the same situation differently? Explain:

Activity 2: Perspective Swap Debate

Students argue for the side they personally disagree with. This exercise builds empathy, sharpens reasoning skills, and forces students to engage seriously with the opposing perspective—the core purpose of the Both Sides series.

(For other tips on how to have students put themselves in another person’s shoes, check out [Undivide Us](#), particularly the lesson plan that accompanies the video.)

Divide the class into two groups. Students who initially agree more with Bolton’s position (that military action against Iran is justified and necessary) must argue Massie’s position (that the war is unconstitutional and counterproductive). Students who initially agree more with Massie must argue Bolton’s position. Give each group 10 minutes to prepare, using specific evidence from the videos. Then hold a structured debate with timed opening statements (2 minutes per side), rebuttals (1 minute per side), and closing arguments (1 minute per side).

After the debate, hold a brief debrief discussion. Ask students: What was the hardest part of arguing for the other side? Did the exercise change how you view the opposing argument? What surprised you?

Activity 3: Letter to a Legislator

After considering both perspectives, students write a letter to a member of Congress expressing an informed position on whether the U.S. should continue military operations in Iran. This activity connects classroom learning to civic participation and requires students to synthesize arguments from both videos into a coherent, evidence-based position.

Letters must meet the following requirements: (1) State a clear position on continued U.S. military action in Iran. (2) Reference at least one argument from Bolton’s interview and one from Massie’s speech. (3) Acknowledge the strongest counterargument to the student’s position and explain why he or she finds it less persuasive. (4) Reference at least one constitutional provision discussed in the videos (such as Article I, Section 8 or the War Powers Resolution). (5) Maintain a respectful, professional tone appropriate for correspondence with an elected official.

If time allows, have volunteers read their letters aloud and invite the class to evaluate whether each letter met the five requirements.

Activity 4: Socratic Seminar Prep

Students generate open-ended questions that probe the weaknesses in both arguments, then use those questions to fuel a student-led discussion. This activity develops higher-order thinking by requiring students to identify what each speaker left unaddressed or assumed without evidence.

Working individually, each student writes at least three questions: one that challenges Bolton's argument, one that challenges Massie's argument, and one that neither video answered but that a thoughtful citizen would want addressed. Questions should be open-ended (not yes/no) and grounded in specific claims from the videos.

Examples of strong Socratic questions for this pairing:

- *Bolton says the Iranian regime will never abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons. What evidence would he need to prove that claim, and did he provide it?*
- *Massie argues that Congress must authorize war, but Congress has not formally declared war since 1942. Does that history weaken or strengthen his argument?*
- *Both speakers reference the costs of the conflict. Are they measuring "cost" in the same way? What costs does each speaker leave out?*

Arrange desks in a circle. One student poses a question, and the seminar proceeds with students responding to one another (not to the teacher). The teacher's role is timekeeper and facilitator, stepping in only to redirect if the discussion stalls. Aim for 15–20 minutes of student-led dialogue.

Activity 5: Cost-Benefit Analysis

Students chart the costs and benefits of continued U.S. military action in Iran as presented by each speaker, then weigh whether the benefits justify the costs. This activity applies economic reasoning to a foreign policy question and reinforces the SITC.org theme that every policy involves trade-offs.

Distribute the worksheet below. Students fill in the chart using evidence from both videos, then answer the reflection questions at the bottom. Afterward, facilitate a brief class discussion focused on which costs and benefits are easiest to measure, which are hardest, and whether the two speakers would even agree on what counts as a "cost" or a "benefit."

Name _____ Date _____
Class _____ Period _____ Teacher _____

Cost-Benefit Analysis: War with Iran Revisited

Directions: Using evidence from both videos, list the costs and benefits of continued U.S. military action in Iran. Then answer the reflection questions.

Benefits of Military Action (as argued by Bolton):

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Costs of Military Action (as argued by Massie):

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Reflection Questions:

1. Which costs and benefits are easiest to measure? Which are hardest? Why?

2. Do Bolton and Massie define "cost" the same way? What does each speaker count as a cost that the other does not? _____

3. Based on your analysis, do the benefits of military action outweigh the costs? Explain your reasoning. _____

