

Both Sides of the Issue

War with Iran?

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Objectives

Students will be able to:

- describe the central disagreement between Vice President JD Vance and Representatives Thomas Massie and Ro Khanna over the U.S. strike on Iran.
- interpret the constitutional question about whether the executive branch or Congress holds the authority to declare war.
- compare the assumptions each video makes about how the United States can prevent further conflict in the Middle East.
- defend a position on whether congressional authorization should have been required before the strike on Iran, drawing 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.

Bipartisan: involving cooperation, agreement, or support from members of two political parties that usually disagree with each other.

Declaration of War: a formal statement issued by a government, typically through its legislature, announcing that a state of war exists between itself and another nation. Under the U.S. Constitution, this power belongs to Congress.

Diplomacy: the practice of conducting negotiations and managing relationships between countries through dialogue and agreements rather than military force.

Enriched Uranium: uranium that has been processed to increase the proportion of the isotope U-235. Low-enriched uranium fuels civilian nuclear reactors; highly enriched, or weapons-grade, uranium can be used to build a nuclear weapon.

Executive Branch: the branch of the U.S. government, headed by the president, that carries out and enforces federal laws and directs foreign policy and the armed forces.

Imminent Threat: a danger that is immediate and unavoidable. Under the War Powers Resolution and longstanding interpretation of the Constitution, the president may use force without prior congressional authorization only in response to an imminent threat to the United States.

Isolationism: a foreign policy position that favors avoiding political and military involvement in the affairs of other countries. Both representatives in the second video reject this label as a mischaracterization of their views.

JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action): the 2015 agreement between Iran and several world powers, including the United States, that limited Iran's nuclear program in exchange for relief from economic sanctions. The United States withdrew from the agreement in 2018.

Military-Industrial Complex: a term coined by President Dwight Eisenhower describing the close relationship between a nation's armed forces, its government, and the defense industry that profits from military spending.

Neoconservative: a political viewpoint, often associated with active U.S. involvement abroad, that supports using American military and economic power to promote democratic governments and confront perceived threats.

Non-Interventionism: a foreign policy approach that avoids entering wars and military conflicts in other countries while maintaining diplomatic and economic relations. Representatives Massie and Khanna distinguish this from isolationism.

Nuclear Proliferation: the spread of nuclear weapons, weapons-capable materials, and the technology needed to build them to nations that do not already possess them.

Peace Through Strength: the idea that maintaining a powerful military and a credible willingness to use force discourages other nations from attacking and therefore preserves peace.

Regime Change: the replacement of one government with another, often by force or foreign intervention. Vice President Vance states that regime change is not the goal of the U.S. strike on Iran.

War Powers Resolution (War Powers Act of 1973): a federal law passed by Congress that requires the president to notify Congress within 48 hours of committing U.S. armed forces to military action and limits such action to 60 days without a declaration of war or specific authorization.

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 ABC News video, Vice President J.D. Vance said: "[W]e're not at war with Iran...we're at war with Iran's nuclear program." What did he mean by

this? Is it reasonable for the U.S. to attack a foreign country and then claim it's not at war with that country? Why/Why not?

3. In the CBS video, Margaret Brennan said that Rep. Thomas Massie and Rep. Ro Khanna are on "completely different ends of the political spectrum." Why do you think politicians from both ends of the political spectrum agree on this topic? Is it significant that there's some bipartisan agreement? Why/Why not?
4. Vice President Vance said that the strike on Iran accomplished "a very core American national objective: Iran cannot have a nuclear weapons program." Should this be a "core American national objective"? Why/Why not?
5. In the CBS video, Rep. Massie talked about reining in the executive branch. What did he mean by this?
6. Vice President Vance said that the strike on Iran stopped Iran from enriching uranium to weapons-grade uranium. Is that goal worth the risk of a war with Iran? Why/Why not?
7. Rep. Massie said that congress has the "sole authority to declare a war and to engage or authorize the engagement of acts of war." Were you aware that congress has this sole authority? Has the executive branch respected this authority? Why/Why not?
8. Vice President Vance said: "[W]e're going to have a serious conversation about how to get rid of Iran's nuclear weapons program permanently." What did he say that would entail?
9. Rep. Massie used the term "imminent threat." What is an "imminent threat"? Does that term apply to Iran? Why/Why not?
10. What two things did Vice President Vance say would result in "overwhelming force from the Americans"?
11. In the CBS video, Rep. Khanna said: "The tragedy in this country is that we keep entering this overseas wars...and then we're left with Americans bearing the consequences for decades." Do you agree that this is a tragedy? Why/Why not?
12. In the ABC News video, we saw a clip of President Trump saying: "We will measure our success not only by the battles we win, but also by the wars that we end and — perhaps most importantly — the wars we never get into." What did he mean by this? Is his statement consistent with the strike on Iran? Why/Why not?
13. Rep. Massie said: "I wouldn't call my side of the MAGA base 'isolationists'.... We're non-interventionists." What is an isolationist? What is a non-interventionist? What are the key distinctions?

14. Vice President Vance said: “[W]e believe the way that you achieve peace is through strength.” What did he mean by this? Do you agree with him? Why/Why not?
15. Rep. Massie expressed skepticism that the U.S.’s involvement would be limited to three bombings. Is his skepticism justified? Why/Why not?
16. Vice President Vance mentioned “regime change.” What is regime change?
17. Rep. Khanna said that U.S. foreign policy has created a “generation of hate.” What did he mean by this?
18. Did these two videos share any common ground? Were there any points on which they agreed? If so, what were they?
19. Should one of the arguments we heard carry more weight than the other? If so, which one? Why?
20. 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?
21. What else would you like to learn about this topic?
22. For more on this topic, see **Both Sides**: "[Foreign Policy](#).”

Activities

Activity 1: Letter to a Legislator

In the second video, Representative Thomas Massie and Representative Ro Khanna introduced a war powers resolution to require Congressional authorization before U.S. forces engage in hostilities against Iran. Have students write a one-page letter to their U.S. Senator or Representative arguing for or against the resolution. Letters must engage with arguments from both videos.

Student directions:

1. Identify your own U.S. Senator or Representative. (You can find them at [Congress.gov](#).)
2. In the opening paragraph, state clearly whether you support or oppose the war powers resolution discussed in the second video and why this issue matters to you.
3. In the body of the letter, present at least two pieces of evidence that support your position. At least one piece of evidence must come from each video. Use direct quotations or paraphrases and identify the source.
4. Acknowledge the strongest argument from the side you disagree with. Explain why you still hold your position despite that argument.

5. Close with a respectful, specific request: a vote, a public statement, a constituent meeting, or another concrete action.
6. The letter should be one full page, single-spaced, and formatted in standard business-letter style with a date, salutation, and closing.

Activity 2: Stakeholder Analysis

Foreign policy decisions affect many groups beyond the people making the decisions. In this activity, students identify the stakeholders who would be helped or harmed by each side's position and consider whose interests are represented in the public debate.

Teacher instructions: Distribute the Stakeholder Analysis worksheet (next page). Students may work individually or in small groups. After completing the chart, lead a class discussion: Which stakeholders are most often quoted in news coverage of this issue? Which stakeholders are rarely heard from? Whose interests should weigh most heavily in foreign policy decisions, and why?

Name _____ Date _____

Class _____ Period _____ Teacher _____

Stakeholder Analysis: War with Iran?

For each stakeholder below, write one specific way that side's position affects them. In the final column, mark which side's position better serves that stakeholder, in your judgment: V (Vance), M/K (Massie & Khanna), or B (Both/Neither).

Stakeholder	Effect under Vance's position	Effect under Massie/Khanna's position	Better served by
U.S. service members deployed in the Middle East			
Civilians living in Iran			
Members of Congress			
American taxpayers			
Allies in the region (Israel, Gulf nations)			

Reflection: Whose voice is loudest in the news coverage you have seen on this issue? Whose voice is hardest to hear, and why?

Activity 3: Cost-Benefit Analysis

Both videos make implicit cost-benefit arguments. Vice President Vance argues that the immediate strike carries lower long-term costs than allowing Iran to develop a nuclear weapon. Representatives Massie and Khanna argue that bypassing congressional authorization carries serious constitutional and strategic costs that outweigh any short-term security benefit.

Teacher instructions: Distribute the Cost-Benefit Analysis worksheet (next page). Students chart the costs and benefits of each position using specific evidence from the videos. After completing the chart, students write a two- to three-sentence conclusion identifying which position carries the better balance of costs and benefits and why.

Name _____ Date _____
Class _____ Period _____ Teacher _____

Cost-Benefit Analysis: War with Iran?

For each position, list at least two costs and two benefits drawn from the videos. Costs may include lives, money, constitutional or diplomatic consequences, or risks of escalation. Benefits may include security, deterrence, peace, or constitutional principle.

Position	Costs	Benefits
Vance: Strike was justified; speed and surprise required executive action.		
Massie & Khanna: Strike required congressional authorization; bypassing Congress sets a dangerous precedent.		

Conclusion (2–3 sentences): Which position carries the better balance of costs and benefits, and why?

Activity 4: Devil's Advocate Round

Students often gravitate toward whichever side they already agree with. This activity forces them to defend the opposite position using only evidence from the videos. Doing so strengthens critical thinking and reveals weak points in their original views.

Teacher instructions: Begin by polling the class on the question "Was the U.S. strike on Iran justified without congressional authorization?" Group students by their initial position. Then assign each student a prompt card from the side they did NOT initially support. Give students ten minutes to prepare a one-minute oral defense of that position, drawing on at least one specific quote, claim, or piece of evidence from the corresponding video. Conduct a round-robin in which each student delivers his or her one-minute defense. Close with a second poll: did anyone change positions, and if so, what changed his or her mind?

Prompt cards (cut apart and distribute):

Defend Vance's position #1 The strike served a core American interest by stopping Iran from enriching uranium to weapons-grade. Argue why this goal justified acting without a congressional vote.	Defend Massie & Khanna's position #1 Article I gives Congress the sole power to declare war. Argue why protecting that constitutional authority is more important than acting quickly.
Defend Vance's position #2 Vance argues that "peace through strength" prevents larger wars. Argue why a limited, decisive strike is more likely to produce peace than diplomatic delay.	Defend Massie & Khanna's position #2 Khanna argues that the United States repeatedly enters wars and pays the consequences for decades. Argue why the historical record supports requiring a vote before military action.
Defend Vance's position #3 Vance argues that there was no "regime change" goal and the operation was narrowly tailored. Argue why a precise, limited strike is fundamentally different from starting a war.	Defend Massie & Khanna's position #3 Massie expresses skepticism that U.S. involvement will end after three bombings. Argue why congressional debate is the best safeguard against gradual escalation.

Activity 5: Real-World Connection

The debate over executive war powers is not unique to Iran. Similar disputes have arisen over U.S. involvement in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and other conflicts. This activity asks students to find a current news story about U.S. military involvement abroad and apply the framework from these two videos.

Student directions:

1. Find a news article published within the last six months about U.S. military action, the threat of military action, or a debate over military authorization in any country. Use a reputable source such as the Associated Press, Reuters, the BBC, or a major U.S. newspaper.
2. Summarize the situation in three to four sentences.
3. Identify which arguments from Vice President Vance's side appear in the article (such as deterrence, national security objectives, or peace through strength).
4. Identify which arguments from Representative Massie and Representative Khanna's side appear in the article (such as constitutional authority, congressional approval, or risk of escalation).
5. In a closing paragraph, explain how the war powers debate from the second video applies to this current situation. Has Congress voted on this action? Should it? Why or why not?
6. Submit the article (or a link to it) along with your written analysis.