

Victory and Defeat

2015 marks the 150th anniversary of the surrender of Lee to bring about the end of the Civil War. The conclusion of this war 150 years ago certainly had much more to it than the seemingly cordial exchange of telegrams between Generals Grant and Lee, but their exchanges on the battlefield and eventual correspondences in search of an acceptable end to the hostilities led to generations of historians debating the true meaning of victory and defeat for our nation and its citizens. What did this victory bring? What was the consequence for the defeated?

In recognition of this significant anniversary, the 2015 Michigan Social Studies Olympiad theme is “**Victory and Defeat.**”

There is much more to this theme than merely studying the winners and losers of war and conflict throughout history, and the expectation is that students and coaches will look deeper into this theme to explore the many possible interpretations. The following ideas have been put together by the Olympiad Committee and are offered here as a way to help participants think about the theme from different perspectives and as it relates to a variety of topics and disciplines.

Civics – Victory and defeat can be as clear cut as election winners and losers or as confusing as, well, the Electoral College. To win the popular vote but still lose the election is certainly one way to snatch victory from defeat. The great compromises citizens and governments must make to balance the security of our core democratic values (think individual rights versus the common good) also brings into question whether this is such a thing as absolute victory in politics.

Economics – FDR and his allies found unparalleled political success during the height of the greatest economic depression in US history. FDR chose to attack the depression with his so-called New Deal, a series of economic programs passed during his first term in office. These programs greatly expanded the size, scope, and power of the federal government, giving the President near-dictatorial status. Were these programs a victory for all? How do nations work to defeat recessive economic trends today?

With his army surrounded, his men weak and exhausted, Confederate General Robert E. Lee realized there was little choice but to consider the surrender of his Army to the Union Army leader General Ulysses S. Grant. After a series of notes between the two leaders, they agreed to meet on April 9, 1865, at the house of Wilmer McLean in the village of Appomattox Courthouse. The meeting lasted approximately two and one-half hours and at its conclusion the bloodiest conflict in the nation's history neared its end.

*HEADQUARTERS ARMY OF
NORTHERN VIRGINIA,
April 9, 1865*

Lieut. Gen. U. S. GRANT:

I have received your letter of this date containing the terms of surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia as proposed by you. As they are substantially the same as those expressed in your letter of the 8th instant, they are accepted. I will proceed to designate the proper officers to carry the stipulations into effect.

*R. E. LEE,
General.*

History – Often times, history reminds us that ideas and plans that initially seem like failures, often result in unexpected success. Participants may consider the character traits that lead to victory or a study of people or events in history that were impacted by defeats or challenges and rose above them. Perseverance more than anything else may be what brings victory following a string of defeats. A good example of this is Abraham Lincoln. Born into poverty, Lincoln was faced with defeat throughout his life. He lost eight elections, twice failed in business and suffered a nervous breakdown before becoming one of the greatest presidents in the history of our country.

Geography – The history of the world is sometimes told through the lens of conflict and cooperation, but which type of interaction is most conducive to achieving success? Scientists such as Jared Diamond have posed the question of why the peoples of certain continents succeeded in invading other continents and conquering or displacing their peoples. Diamond’s background in geography in particular informs his integrated vision of human history. He suggests that success, and failure, depends on how well societies adapt to their changing environment.

Victory and Defeat topics to consider include (but are certainly not limited to):

- The victory of new or revolutionary ideas and the defeat of old or outdated thinking
- The Civil War and Lee’s surrender at Appomattox
- “Dishonorable” Victory: Indian Wars and the “Trail of Tears”
- The World at War (WWI and WWII) -- VE and VJ
- Victory Gardens and the Arsenal of Democracy (War on the Home Front)
- The Victors and the Vanquished: Oppression, Reconstruction, Reconciliation
- War and Failure: The Inspiration for Invention
- The “Art” of Victory and Defeat: Paintings, Statues, Monuments and Memorials
- Victory through Non-Violence: Gandhi, Dr. King, Peaceful Protests that brought about positive change
- Memorable Political Victories or Defeats
- Sports: “The Thrill of Victory and the Agony of Defeat”
- Perseverance: Victory in spite of obstacles
- “The Cowboy in the White Hat”-- Do the “good guys” always win?
- “And the Winner Is...” Competition and the Media: Reality TV shows, Award shows, Game shows, etc...
- Quotes – for example:
 - “To the victor belong the spoils.” (Senator William L. Marcy)
 - “Victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan.” (John F. Kennedy)
 - “The only victories which leave no regret are those which are gained over ignorance.” (Napoleon)
 - “What is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival.” (Churchill)
 - “The credit belongs to those who are actually in the arena, who strive valiantly;...who at best know the triumph of high achievement; and who, at worst, if they fail, fail while daring greatly, so that their place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.” (T. Roosevelt)
 - “Somewhere in the world there is a defeat for everyone. Some are destroyed by defeat, and some made small and mean by victory. Greatness lives in one who triumphs equally over defeat and victory.” (John Steinbeck, *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*)
 - “Victory attained by violence is tantamount to a defeat for it is momentary.” (Mahatma Gandhi)
 - “An honorable defeat is better than a dishonorable victory.” (Millard Fillmore)
 - "Victory isn't defined by wins or losses. It is defined by effort. If you can truthfully say, 'I did the best I could, I gave everything I had,' then you're a winner." (Wolfgang Schadler)
 - “We must expect reverses, even defeats. They are sent to teach us wisdom and prudence, to call forth greater energies, and to prevent our falling into greater disasters.” (Robert E. Lee)

What’s your favorite quote about **Victory and Defeat**? Tweet it using [#mssolympiad](#).