

**National History Day 2025 Topic Ideas for Eighth Grade:
“Revolution, Reaction, and Reform in History”**

Your topic may be any exploration of Revolution, Reaction, and Reform in American history between Colonial times and the end of World War I. Some, but not all, revolutions are political, including a violent overthrow of a government. Many others are economic, social, or even artistic changes that stimulated momentous reactions and reform. Each bold-faced term represents one topic; many others are possible.

Revolution, Reaction, and Reform - Native Americans

Metacom, known to the English as King Philip, united the Natives in *revolution* against the English but failed.

Squanto and **Samoset** *reacted* to English settlers by cooperating.

The Proclamation of 1763 was a *reform* by the English government intended to prevent future Indian revolts. Americans *reacted* by violating the law, and it became a cause of the American *Revolution*.

Tecumseh *revolutionized* Native American politics when he united several tribes to fight against the United States, but he died in the War of 1812.

John Ross, a mixed-race Cherokee, *reacted* to the *revolution* of white rule by learning white legal strategies and battling in court to keep Cherokee land. He won, but President Jackson refused to enforce the ruling.

The Indian Removal Act (1830) overturned Native American control of their historic territories in the Southeastern U.S.

William Clark, a leading explorer of the Louisiana Purchase, also became active in *reform* and fair treatment of Native Americans.

The Comanche Indians attempted *revolution* against Mexico, which *reacted* by encouraging American settlements. The result was an easier conquest by Texas in 1836 and by the U.S. a decade later.

Helen Hunt Jackson led a *reform* movement to improve the treatment of Native Americans. Her novel Ramona is in the classroom; she wrote A Century of Dishonor in 1887 to influence Congress.

California's 1850 Act for the Government and

Protection of Indians allowed settlers to take Native children as “wards” or apprentices. Was this *revolutionary*? How did various people *react*? When did the practice *reform*? [ACLU Website](#)

The Dawes Act of 1887 was a well-intentioned *reform* that caused a lot of suffering. It forced Native Americans to live like whites.

In **Winters v. United States** (1908), the Supreme Court ruled that tribal reservations must have an adequate water supply. Was this *revolutionary*? What was the *reaction*? Did *reforms* result? [Summary of case.](#)

Revolution, Reaction, and Reform - African-Americans

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 included an early milestone in the *revolution* against slavery. This law outlawed slavery in territories that were not yet states.

Amistad was a slave ship taken over by slaves in 1839. The ship was recaptured and the Supreme Court had to decide whether to release the captives. John Quincy Adams argued for the slaves; they were returned to Africa.

Gag rules in the U.S. Congress made it impossible to debate slavery between 1836 and 1840. This was a *reaction* to the coming *revolution* ending slavery.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 turned upside down 30 years of compromise between North and South. The legislation inspired Lincoln's return to politics.

Harriett Beecher Stowe ignited a firestorm of passion against slavery with her *revolutionary* novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin.

William Lloyd Garrison was a *revolutionary* abolitionist and publisher of The Liberator.

Frederick Douglass was an African-American *revolutionary*. He published The North Star.

John Brown was a *revolutionary* who encouraged slaves to rise up against their masters.

John Fremont was a *revolutionary* when he declared – without authority – that all slaves in Missouri were free.

Jesse Benton Fremont stepped outside her traditional role to travel 1,000 miles by train to argue with Lincoln about it.

Henry Ward Beecher was a prominent minister who raised money for Brown and promoted Lincoln's candidacy in New York.

Theodore Weld contributed to the *revolution* by publishing a newspaper and promoting the political careers of William Seward and Abraham Lincoln. (Weld married Angelina Grimke.)

The Grimke sisters grew up in white Southern society but became active abolitionists.

The Lincoln-Douglas Debates were one phase of the *revolution* that ended slavery.

The brutal beating of Charles Sumner on the floor of the U.S. Senate was a *reaction* to the *revolution* that was ending slavery.

The Dred Scott Decision was a *reaction* to the beginning of the *revolution* that ended slavery.

The Republican Party formed as a tool in the *revolution* that ended slavery.

The Civil War was a *revolution* that ended the rule of white plantation owners. Both the North and the South believed that they were just like the Patriots in the American Revolution.

Northern Military Strategy *revolutionized* warfare. Generals who modernized warfare successfully included **Ulysses S. Grant**, who introduced more flexibility and was willing to sustain huge losses; and **William T. Sherman** and **Philip Sheridan**, the architects of “total war”.

Black military service was a small *revolution* within the larger revolution of the Civil War. **The 54th**

Massachusetts was a famous division.

The Emancipation Proclamation was a legal document that contributed to the overall *revolution* of ending slavery.

The Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were *reforms* that followed the *revolution* of the Civil War and the *reaction* of southern whites.

The Reconstruction Act of 1867 authorized military rule by the north over the south. This was a *reaction* or a *reform*.

Thaddeus Stevens was a Pennsylvania congressman and Radical Reconstructionist who was committed to the *revolution* of ending slavery.

Robert B. Elliott was an African-American congressman during Reconstruction.

The Civil Rights Act of 1866 guaranteed basic legal equality to African-Americans. President Andrew Johnson *reacted* by vetoing it, but Congress overrode the veto. Southerners *reacted* by ignoring it, making the Reconstruction Act necessary.

The Civil Rights Act of 1875 took the *revolutionary* step of protecting social equality, and guaranteeing access to public facilities. White southerners *reacted* by going to court, and it was struck down.

The Compromise of 1877 was a *reform* that followed violent *reaction* by the South to the presence of Northern troops.

Andrew Johnson's impeachment was a *reform* following his *reaction* of not cooperating with policies enforcing anti-slavery laws.

Lincoln's assassination was a *reaction* to the *revolution* ending slavery in the south.

The Freedman's Bureau was a *reform* helping African-Americans after the war. It was *revolutionary* in its use of the federal government as a social service agent.

Booker T. Washington, an African-American leader in the 1890's, promoted *reforms* (especially education) to improve living conditions for African-Americans.

Reconstruction was a huge *reform* effort. **General**

Adelbert Ames enforced *reforms* in Mississippi, successfully protecting black civil rights until armed mobs took control of an election and forced him out.

W.E.B. DuBois founded the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), a powerful *reform* organization still functioning today.

Ida B. Wells was a *reformer* who worked – through newspaper writing and public speaking -- to end lynching of black people throughout the post-Civil War South.

Racial Segregation was a *reaction* to the *revolution* that ended slavery. The 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson* provided the legal foundation for segregation. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ended it.

Revolution, Reaction, and Reform – Leaders vs. People
Federalism was a new method of sharing power between the states and the nation.

Jeffersonian Democracy favored policies that helped ordinary independent farmers instead of wealthy Americans.

Andrew Jackson inspired **Jacksonian Democracy**, empowering a wider range of people to vote. He also *revolutionized* the presidency by exercising veto power and taking more personal power than any president before him had done.

The Free Soil Party of the 1850's had a *revolutionary* goal – to keep wealthy slave owners from taking over more land and putting it out of reach of ordinary people.

The Homestead Act (1862) *revolutionized* the idea of liberty by granting – for \$0 – 160 acres of Western land to anyone able to farm it successfully for five years.

The **Progressives** were a party of *reformers*, initially led by Teddy Roosevelt, who favored social services, fair wages, safe working conditions, and an income tax.

Hiram Johnson made California a leader in direct democracy by giving the state processes for initiative, referendum, and recall (1911). These are still very powerful elements in state politics. [Textbooks summary](#).

Robert LaFollette was a founder of progressivism, and fought for *reforms*, including reducing the influence of corporations on government. He was a senator from Wisconsin and ran for president in 1924. Hiram Johnson ran as his VP.

Direct election of senators *revolutionized* state politics by giving the people (instead of the state legislature) the right to elect senators.

The Sixteenth Amendment (1913) gave Congress the power to levy income taxes. They did not have to share the revenue with the separate states. This was *revolutionary* because it guaranteed to increase the size of the federal government.

Anarchists were *revolutionaries* who believed in no government at all. In 1901 an anarchist assassinated President McKinley, making Teddy Roosevelt the president.

Revolution, Reaction, and Reform - Social Change

The Land Ordinance of 1785 (passed before the Constitution but after the Revolution) set aside land for public schools – a *revolutionary* commitment to having an educated voting public.

Sojourner Truth was a *revolutionary* force who helped change the role of women and the role of African-Americans.

Horace Mann believed in public education as “the great equalizer.”

Dorothea Dix *reformed* policies toward mentally ill people.

Jane Addams *reformed* conditions for the urban poor. **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** and **Susan B. Anthony** were *revolutionaries* who led the fight for a woman's right to vote.

Carrie Chapman Catt finally won the fight for women's suffrage. The **19th Amendment** passed in 1920.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman *revolutionized* attitudes towards women's traditional concerns (economics, home life, and children's education) by publishing thoughtful books on these subjects.

Temperance (the fight against alcohol) was a major *reform* effort that launched many women into politics.

Carrie Nation carried around an ax, chopping up bars.

Revolution, Reaction, and Reform - Nation vs. State

Ogden v. Nash, a Supreme Court case, *revolutionized* business by allowing freer competition. States could no longer set aside lucrative monopolies for friends of politicians. Cut-throat competition became normal as people born into money could not just sit back and relax.

Conscription (Military Draft) *revolutionized* the role of the national government during the Civil War. The federal government could now force you to fight.

Secession was a *revolution* that failed: the South attempted to turn upside-down the supreme place of nation over state articulated in the Constitution.

Daniel Webster, in his famous "Liberty and Union" speech, *revolutionized* citizenship, identifying people primarily as American citizens, not citizens of their states.

States' Rights and Nullification – the belief that a state could ignore a law within its own boundaries -- was a *reaction* of states to the *revolution* of growing federal power.

Revolution, Reaction, and Reform in the Arts

The Hudson River School *revolutionized* landscape painting. **Albert Bierstadt**, **Thomas Cole**, and others created a uniquely American form of art.

Frederic Remington *reacted* to industrialization by preserving the memory of the Wild West in painting and sculpture.

Spirituals were African-Americans' *reaction* to oppression. Some songs served a *revolutionary* purpose as well.

Ragtime *revolutionized* popular music with its syncopation and upbeat feel.

Jazz was *revolutionary* in including improvisation.

Winslow Homer *reacted* to the Civil War by illustrating it.

Photography *revolutionized* people's thinking about war. **Matthew Brady** and **Alexander Gardner** both chronicled the Civil War. Gardner had the rank of captain and traveled with McClellan. Brady had a famous Washington studio.

Thomas Nast used political cartoons to *reform* politics.

Emily Dickinson was *revolutionary* in her use of short, relatively unstructured verse to express human feelings.

Nathaniel Hawthorne *revolutionized* Americans' perception of themselves. He encouraged a freer American spirit that rejected old Puritan ideas.

Walt Whitman was *revolutionary* in his development of freer verse forms and in his perception of the importance of American writing.

Mark Twain was *revolutionary* in the use of regional dialect in his writing.

Revolution, Reaction, and Reform - Religion and Philosophy

The Great Awakening and the Second Great

Awakening were spiritual renewals that contributed to Americans' ideas of liberty and individual self-worth.

Quakers *revolutionized* religion by affirming the equality of all people, including women and African-Americans.

Shakers *reacted* to industrial progress by favoring simplicity.

Transcendentalism *revolutionized* the relationship between the individual and society, placing individual experience in a much more important position and viewing society and its rules with much suspicion.

Henry David Thoreau, a leading Transcendentalist, committed a *revolutionary* act by refusing to pay taxes that supported the Mexican War, and then going to jail.

His justification for disobeying the law was the *revolutionary* philosophy of **civil disobedience**.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, another leading Transcendentalist, valued nature and human spirituality, individualism, and self-reliance.

Revolution, Reaction, and Reform in the Colonies

Roger Williams established the *revolutionary* principle of separation of church and state when he left Massachusetts for Rhode Island in the 1600's.

Anne Hutchison *revolutionized* worship, holding meetings and preaching in her own home without permission.

Town Meetings, a form of direct democracy, were *revolutionary* when compared to authoritarian forms of government in England at the same time.

The Virginia House of Burgesses and the **Massachusetts General court** were earlier colonial (state) governments gave a *revolutionary* amount of power to citizens.

The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut balanced power between the governor and the people.

England's Glorious Revolution sparked much *reaction* and *reform* in America. **Increase Mather** traveled from America to England in 1688 during their *Revolution*. He succeeded in restoring many rights to colonists in America.

Peter Zenger started a *revolution* in journalism by criticizing a colonial governor in his newspaper. The

reaction was to put him on trial and the *reform* was a ruling in favor of freedom of the press.

Revolution, Reaction, and Reform – Independence

Patrick Henry inspired others to join the *Revolution* with his words “Give me freedom or give me death!”

Samuel Adams rallied Boston, starting the *Revolution*.

James Otis was another rabble-rousing Son of Liberty, coining the expression “taxation without representation is tyranny.”

Mercy Otis Warren (James’s sister) argued for *revolution* by writing plays.

Thomas Jefferson wrote the manifesto of the *revolution*: The Declaration of Independence. As President, he purchased the Louisiana Territory, doubling the size of the country. He led a party that believed in small government and a weak presidency.

John Adams helped spread *revolutionary* fervor from Boston to the rest of the colonies. He pushed for, and got, the **Declaration of Independence**. When the states *reacted* by revising their colonial charters into state Constitutions, he wrote the Massachusetts Constitution.

Abigail Adams influenced the *Revolution* through letters.

John Dickinson tried to prevent the Revolutionary War by proposing *reforms*, which the British rejected. A true lover of his country, he did serve in the military and in Congress.

Benjamin Franklin contributed to the *Revolution* by serving on the committee that drafted the Declaration. He guided the French *reaction* to gain their assistance during the war, and was a leader in *reforms* which became the Constitution.

Thomas Paine stirred up *revolution* with his publications, *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis*. He participated in the French *revolution* as well, nearly dying in prison when the aristocracy *reacted*. His pamphlets *The Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason* influenced government *reforms* that followed *Revolution*.

Lafayette brought French military aid to America and took our ideas back to France.

Alexander Hamilton participated in the *Revolution* and the *reform* that followed, by promoting the Constitution and serving in the first Cabinet as Washington’s Secretary of the Treasury.

John Jay was a leading *revolutionary*, serving as president of the Continental Congress from 1778-1779. After the war, he worked to write and ratify the Constitution. He negotiated an important treaty with Great Britain, served as the nation’s first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and contributed to *reform* by introducing and passing New York’s anti-slavery legislation. All slaves in New York were free prior to his death.

Revolution, Reaction, and Reform in the Constitution

Daniel Shay *reacted* against the new American government by rioting against taxes; that inspired the Constitution.

The Three-Fifths Compromise and **The Great Compromise** were *reforms* that balanced power. **The Presidency (executive branch)** was a reform that solved some of the problems of Shay’s Rebellion.

James Madison *reformed* government writing the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

George Mason and other anti-Federalists insisted on a Bill of Rights, *reforming* the Constitution.

The Federalists, led by Hamilton and Adams, *revolutionized* government by strengthening central authority. **The Democrat-Republicans**, led by Jefferson, *reacted* by forming an opposition party and voting them out.

John Marshall’s principal of **judicial review** was *revolutionary* – seizing for the Supreme Court more power than anyone had imagined.

California’s 1849 Constitution was written in both Spanish and English and opened with a Bill of Rights. What was most *revolutionary* about the document? How did the nation *react*? Were *reforms* necessary? [CA Archives Summary](#)

California wrote a new Constitution in 1879. Was it *revolutionary* in its changes? Who *reacted* positively or negatively? What *reforms* became necessary? [Textbook summary.](#)

Revolution, Reaction, and Reform in Foreign Policy

Aaron Burr tried more than one *revolution* that failed.

Having lost a bid for the presidency and having killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel, he attempted to establish an empire in the Southwest. Captured, tried for treason, and acquitted, he settled down to get rich practicing law.

John Quincy Adams and **James Monroe** *revolutionized* relations with Europe when they published the Monroe Doctrine, stating that an act of aggression by a European power against any country in the Western hemisphere was an act of aggression against the U.S..

Manifest Destiny *revolutionized* the vision of America – no longer an inferior nation struggling to stay free of European influence, the country saw itself as inevitably spreading from sea to shining sea.

William Walker, an American businessman, managed to start a *revolution* in Nicaragua, gained control of the country, and made money controlling the ferry and railroad traffic as people moved west to California. After a few years, the Costa Ricans kicked him out and the U.S. Navy arrested him.

The Texas Revolution (1836) created an independent republic, which then requested annexation to the U.S.

The Mexican War ended Mexican control and imposed American control over a large portion of Mexico.

Reforms were slow in coming; many Mexicans lost property and mining rights.

The Bear Flag Revolt (California's Revolution)

succeeded because everyone was busy with the Mexican War. John Fremont was the instigator. What were the *reactions*? What *reforms* followed? [University summary](#). Americans assisted with the final push in the **Mexican Revolution** in 1867 when Benito Juarez finally pushed out the last of the Europeans.

The Open Door Policy (1895) *revolutionized* world relations with China, encouraging trade between China and a wider range of nations. **John Hay**, former secretary to Abraham Lincoln, was the diplomat who negotiated the policy. China experienced the Boxer Rebellion as a result.

The Spanish-American War (1898), begun as America's assistance in Cuba's *revolution* against Spain, ended by establishing American control over Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. Many Americans *reacted* by joining the Anti-Imperialist League.

Teddy Roosevelt *revolutionized* the country's policies with **gunboat diplomacy**. Large gunboats paraded around the world to persuade foreign nations to follow American policies. He also obtained land for the **Panama Canal**.

Woodrow Wilson *revolutionized* America's role, moving the country into a position as a world diplomatic power. He was the president during World War I. Wilson also had many ideas for *reform*, including his Fourteen Points, a blueprint for peaceful international relations, and the League of Nations, a precursor to the United Nations.

The Industrial Revolution

Henry Clay introduced **The American System** in 1815 to support industrial development. The country built roads and canals to encourage development.

The Erie Canal opened the Ohio Valley to settlement and trade.

Telegraphs *revolutionized* communication, making possible long-distance planning in politics, finance, and war, and helping to unify the country.

Railroads *revolutionized* transportation and at the same time, changed farming by controlling the price of bringing crops to market. Farmers *reacted* by organizing and protesting. **Munn v. Illinois (1877)** was the case that brought *reform*: it established government's right to regulate the railroads.

Railroad time standardized time across the continent (to prevent collisions) and *revolutionized* the way people interacted. Suddenly, punctuality was a sign of competence.

Cornelius Vanderbilt *revolutionized* business by establishing monopolies in the ferry and railroad business and becoming the nation's first real tycoon.

John D. Rockefeller *revolutionized* the oil business, amassing a huge fortune, and controlling entire industries.

Sears and Montgomery Ward revolutionized shopping by publishing catalogs and delivering merchandise by railroad.

Immigration was a *reaction* to America's industrial growth. New York's **Ellis Island**, built to manage the large numbers of people entering the country, was a *reform* of immigration practices. California's **Angel Island** was a *reaction* against the large influx of Asian immigrants.

The Chinese Exclusion Act (1885) was a strong, racist *reaction* to Asian immigration.

The No-Nothing Party (later the **American Party**) was a *reaction* against immigration – it favored anti-Irish, anti-German, and anti-Catholic policies. Later they dropped (most of) the racism and joined the Republicans.

Populism was a political movement that *reacted* to industrial power. They attempted to limit the power held by wealthy industrialists (especially railroads).

The Grange movement was a specific farmer's organization that tried to balance the railroad's influence on prices.

Upton Sinclair inspired *reform* with his 1906 novel *The Jungle*, which spotlighted nasty conditions in meat-packing plants. It inspired regulation.

The Sherman Anti-Trust Act (1890) and **The Clayton Antitrust Act (1914)** are *reforms* intended to preserve competition and protect the public from predatory monopolies. These laws are still in place today.

The Federal Reserve Act (1913) was a *reform* to control the money supply and prevent financial panics.

Ida Tarbell was *revolutionary* in her use of journalism to bring down corporations she believed were too powerful. When her reports caught the public's attention, Teddy Roosevelt had almost no choice but to break up Standard Oil, headed by Rockefeller.

Samuel Gompers was the president of the American Federation of Labor, a *revolutionary* union attempting to *reform* working conditions for ordinary people.

The **Socialist** party of the late 1800's and early 1900's tried to increase wages and equalize power between workers and business owners. Eugene Debs was its leader.

Eugene Debs, pressing for *revolutionary* changes in working conditions, led a railroad strike in 1894 and ran for president in 1880.

The Knights of Labor was *revolutionary* and *reformist* in its ability to improve wages and in its decision to admit women and minorities.

Mother Jones founded the United Mine Workers of America and was an active Communist, working to *revolutionize* the relationship between big business and labor.

The Shirtwaist Factory Fire in 1911 led to *reforms* in worker safety conditions. 148 women died.

Revolution, Reaction, and Reform in Sports

Professionalism *revolutionized* baseball a few years after the Civil War.

Bicycle Riding had a *revolutionary* effect on women in the 1890's, increasing their mobility.

Basketball started in 1891 through the *reform* efforts of the YMCA, which was busy providing healthy activities for young men in crowded cities.

Revolution, Reaction, and Reform in the Environment

John Muir was *revolutionary* in his vision of nature and his commitment to preserve it.

Teddy Roosevelt *revolutionized* the nation's concept about its resources – understanding the need to preserve (not just exploit) them. What were the *reactions*? Did *reforms* follow?

Philip Sheridan, a Civil War general and leader in the Indian wars in the West, saved Yellowstone.

California's Water Management began in the 1870s with a report by Colonel B. S. Alexander and a new State Engineer's office to manage drainage and flood control.

[History – Department of Water Resources](#)

California's Air Pollution Controls pre-date the nation's. In 1946, the California Legislature authorized county air pollution control districts. In 1950, the San Francisco Bay Area counties joined to form a single district. What were the *reactions*? What *reforms* resulted?

[History of Air Districts.](#)