

How do you “Ensure Domestic Tranquility”?

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Grade level: 6-8

Objectives: Students will be able to:

- Explain what domestic tranquility meant to the Founder and today
- Identify ways to measure and compare domestic tranquility
- Analyze and draw conclusions about how well the United States has met the goal of ensuring domestic tranquility, supporting their conclusions with evidence
- Brainstorm ideas for promoting domestic tranquility

Background: What is “domestic tranquility”?

One of the goals or purposes set forth in the Preamble to the United States Constitution was to “ensure domestic tranquility.” This phrase refers to peace within the country as opposed to the phrase which follows, “provide for the common defense,” which asks the states to work together against threats from other nations. Under the Articles of Confederation, each state viewed its own sovereignty and power as paramount to the national good. This led to frequent arguments between the states. Almost every state had its own militia. When the Framers were writing the Constitution in 1787, they wanted the federal government to be able to resolve territorial disputes among states and keep them from warring with one another. This was one of the meanings they had in mind for “ensuring domestic tranquility.”

Just before the Federal Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, a year-long series of violent protests had taken place in Massachusetts and other states. Farmers protested against state and local enforcement of tax collections and judgments for debt. One of the protests was Shays’ Rebellion, named after its leader, Daniel Shays of Massachusetts, a farmer and former captain in the Continental army. The rural population, mostly poor farmers, believed that the merchant class was imposing unfair economic terms on them by not extending credit and the state was crushing them with higher taxes. Led by Shays, some 4,000 rebels armed themselves, closed the courts, and tried to take over the federal arsenal at Springfield. The rebellion effectively ended when its forces failed to capture a federal armory. (For more background, see [Shay’s Rebellion](#)).

The Framers drawing up the U.S. Constitution were truly alarmed by Shays’ Rebellion. The federal government had been unable to gather a combined military force from the separate state militias to respond. The Framers wanted to be sure that the federal government had the authority and power to stop such uprisings in the future.

Today, the term “domestic tranquility” more generally means the political stability of the government and the government’s ability to protect and encourage peaceful demonstrations and assemblies. (See [Freedom of Expression](#))

Brainstorming Activity: How can we measure “domestic tranquility”?

Ask students to work together in small groups to brainstorm how to measure “domestic tranquility”. Have a class discussion about their responses, which might/should include:

- Civil wars
- Peaceful transfers of political power without political coups (What is a political coup or coup d’etat? A sudden, illegal, and usually violent, seizure of power from a government. A “coup” is a strike or blow in French. A “coup d’etat” is literally a strike or blow against the state.)
- Trust in government
- Crime
- Violence in the streets (peaceful protests excluded)
- Students might get more philosophical and include poverty since poverty may be seen as something that might cause violence.
- Other ideas

Quick think: How do we ensure domestic tranquility?

Through:

- Laws
- Police to enforce the laws
- National Guard to help with domestic issues
- Enabling public participation in governance through elections, criticism of government actions, public protests and petitioning the government

Research and Critical Thinking Activity: How well has the United States ensured domestic tranquility?

Using the criteria established from the class discussion regarding how to measure “domestic tranquility,” have students individually consider how well the United States has ensured domestic tranquility. Students should be encouraged to research and compare the domestic tranquility of the United States with that of other countries. It is okay for students to use basic information from Wikipedia for this purpose. The activity might be done in the format of a class discussion or as individual student essays (which might be used as an assessment). Responses should include:

- Civil Wars:
 - Many countries around the globe have experienced years of civil wars, including (for example) Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Mexico, Somalia, Libya, and Myanmar.
 - In the almost 250 years of its existence, the United States has had one civil war.
- Peaceful transfer of political power versus political coups:
 - Wikipedia includes a long list of coups and attempted coups around the world at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_coups_and_coup_attempts. The list is extensive, including several in Athens and Rome in BC; in Europe (France, Sweden, Netherlands, Denmark, Spain) during the 1700 and 1800s; dozens in South America in the 1800s (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico);

continuing around the globe through the 1900s until today (including Russia, China, Japan, Thailand, Turkey, Iraq, Ethiopia, Egypt, Algeria, Albania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Germany, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Cuba, among others).

- By comparison, the only event coming close to a failed coup in the United States was the efforts on January 6, 2021 to not certify Joseph Biden as president even after several courts had found no significant fraud in the November 2020 presidential election. While more than half of the country may have disagreed with the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Bush v. Gore* that settled a recount dispute in Florida by deciding the 2020 presidential election in favor of George Bush rather than returning it to the people of Florida, there were no protests in the streets.
- Trust in government:
 - The OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), an international organization of countries that works to shape policies that foster prosperity, equality, opportunity and well-being, periodically conducts a survey of trust in government in its member countries. The OECD defines "trust in government" as the share (percentage) of people who report having confidence in their national government. In the 2020 survey, those surveyed in Switzerland indicated the highest level of trust in their government at 84.6%; Those surveyed in Chile indicated the lowest trust in their government at 17.1%. See <https://data.oecd.org/gga/trust-in-government.htm>
 - Trust in government by those surveyed in the United States was at 46.7%, by comparison. See <https://data.oecd.org/gga/trust-in-government.htm>. This means that more than half of the population does not trust the government.
- Crime
 - Crime in the United States has been recorded since the early 1600s. Crime rates have varied over time, with a sharp rise after 1900 and reaching a peak between the 1970s and early 1990s. After 1994, crime rates began to fall. However, violent crime increased significantly again in 2020. Overall, the total crime rate of the United States is higher than developed countries, in Europe and East Asia, but lower than many South American countries and Russia.
 - Overall crime statistic comparisons are difficult to conduct, as the definition and categorization of crimes varies across countries. However, the definition of "homicide" is fairly consistent. The homicide rate in the United States is substantially higher: 5 per 100,000 population, as opposed to 1.1 in England, 1.2 in Australia and .8 in Germany.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime_in_the_United_States#International_comparison
- Violence in the streets (peaceful protests excluded)
 - The United States has had its share of violent or destructive protests, starting during colonial times and continuing through the 1900s (e.g., Boston Tea Party in 1773; New York City draft riots in 1863, Haymarket riot in Chicago in 1886, Chicago Race Riot in 1919, Tulsa Race Massacre 1921, Zoot Suite riot in 1943, riots in Newark and Detroit in 1967 and the LA Riots in 1995)(See <https://www.history.com/tag/riots>)

- Most protests, however, have been peacefully held by those marching or boycotting (e.g., Women's Suffrage Parade, 1913; Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1956; California Grapes, 1960s; The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 1963; I have a Dream Rally, 1963; Stonewall Riots, 1969).
- A protest may turn into a riot when it involves the destruction of property, the use of weapons, or when it results in people becoming injured. Then it becomes necessary for law enforcement to intervene.
- Poverty
 - Some studies by sociologists, criminologists and economists have concluded that poverty is connected to the level of crime and that an increasing equality gap creates problems like poverty and crime. See, e.g. <https://journalofeconomicstructures.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40008-020-00220-6>
 - While the U.S. is not in the group of nations with the highest income inequality (such as South Africa, Zambia, Brazil and Mozambique), it is also not in the group of nations with the lowest income inequality (such as the Czech Republic, Belgium, Iceland and Finland). It is in the middle, along with Ivory Coast, Peru, and Bulgaria) See <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/wealth-inequality-by-country>
 - Unfortunately, income inequality in the United States is growing and is higher than in most other advanced economies. See <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/#income-inequality-in-the-u-s-has-increased-since-1980-and-is-greater-than-in-peer-countries>.
- Have students individually or the class as a whole draw conclusions about how well the United States has met its goal of ensuring domestic tranquility, supporting their conclusions with evidence.

Extension Brainstorming Activity: How could we encourage greater domestic tranquility?

Ask students: How can we encourage greater domestic tranquility? Have a class discussion. Ideas might include:

- Engage more police and put more people in jail
- Train police officers to act as mediators in domestic and other disputes
- Provide a guaranteed income for each person so that nobody would disturb the peace because they were hungry or homeless
- Encourage more people to become counselors to work with individuals with problems who might be mentally unbalanced and act violently
- Others thoughts!