

A House Divided: Civil War

Fighting Fair

Overview: After completing this activity, students will better understand the role of technological innovations in the course of the Civil War.

Age Group/Grade Level: 14-17 years, grades 9-12

Subject Area: Social Studies, Visual Arts

Duration: approximately 75 min.

Background

Sharpshooter appeared in *Harper's Weekly* on November 15, 1862—seven months after the Siege of Yorktown, Virginia, in April 1862, when Homer first observed sharpshooters. This wood engraving included a caption that did not specify when and where it was drawn, so it could be applied to army actions months later.

Innovations such as the minié ball (a type of bullet), telescopic sight, and rifle boring allowed soldiers to hide up to 400 yards away from the enemy and inflict grievous bodily harm. These new technologies changed battle strategies and gave rise to trench warfare.

Some saw the work of sharpshooters in the army as blurring the line between combat and murder. In fact, after sketching in a letter the view he saw through the sight on a sharpshooter's rifle, Homer wrote, "The above impression struck me as being as near murder as anything I ever could think of in connection with the army."

Discussion

Open the conversation by having students define the term "fair fight." Share Homer's *Sharpshooter* and extend your conversation by asking students:

- What advantages does this sharpshooter have over his target?
- What might this soldier be thinking as he takes aim?

Explain that, while it looks old to us today, the weaponry in this print was cutting-edge. Introduce background information about the minié ball, the telescopic sight, and rifle boring.

- How might these technologies have changed battle?
- How does the artist seem to feel about the new role of the sharpshooter? What do you see that makes you say that?
- How does this image mesh with your definition of a fair fight?



Winslow Homer, *The Army of the Potomac--A Sharpshooter on Picket Duty*, from *Harper's Weekly*, November 15, 1862, 1862, wood engraving on paper, image: 9 1/8 x 13 3/4 in., The Ray Austrian Collection, Gift of Beatrice L. Austrian, Caryl A. Austrian and James A. Austrian, 1996.63.50.

Activity

Divide students into small groups. Have students conduct a brief Internet search for background on the following technologies (circa 1861), assigning one topic to each group:

- Medicine
- Railroads
- Weaponry
- Newspapers/magazines
- Photography
- The telegraph

Have students report on their findings. Continue the discussion by asking students:

- Which side seemed to have the competitive edge, technologically? How might the technologies you researched have changed the course of the war?

Pair small groups (telegraph and newspapers, weaponry and medicine, etc.) and have students develop an infographic demonstrating the causes and effects related to various technological developments, as well as their interplay. Continue the discussion by asking students:

- Some historians call the Civil War the first modern war. Based on what you learned, would you agree? Why or why not?
- How does technological evolution affect the "fairness" of battle?
- How does this issue play out today?

For a full-size image of Winslow Homer's *Sharpshooter*, visit:
https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-1996.63.50_1