

**Title of Lesson: *Dueling Telegrams: 1963 Verbal Power Play Between Wallace and JFK***  
(Suggested grade level: 11<sup>th</sup> Grade American History)

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**Background Information:**

In 1963, the University of Alabama became one of the last universities in the state to be integrated. Although Autherine Lucy, a young black woman, had been admitted as early as 1956, within three days of her admittance, hostile mobs began threatening her safety. Claiming a need to protect Ms. Lucy's life, the university immediately suspended her, and, in spite of a law suit filed by the NAACP, eventually expelled her. Several years later, when Vivian Malone and James Hood were seeking admission to UA, the university continued its legal efforts to keep blacks out. Finally, in May of 1963, a federal district court in Alabama ordered the university to enroll the two students. George Wallace, recently elected governor of the state of Alabama on a campaign promise to support segregation ("...segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever"), decided to stand in the doorway of Foster Auditorium on June 10, 1963 in direct defiance of the federal order. It wasn't until later that same day, after President Kennedy had federalized Alabama's National Guard, that Wallace finally stepped aside and allowed Malone and Hood to enter the university. Although the most public and dramatic moment had passed, violence on the campus remained a strong possibility. In this atmosphere of danger and uncertainty, Wallace and Kennedy began exchanging telegrams, firing verbal shots at one another over several political issues (state sovereignty versus the power of the federal government) as well as moral issues (who would bear responsibility if violence broke out?). Each challenged the other in a kind of high-stakes blame game. The most fascinating element of the telegrams, however, is their human dimension. In spite of very formal and restrained wording, a great deal of anger rises to the surface. It's quite clear that these two men have diametrically opposed ideas, but, in addition and perhaps more importantly, they seem to dislike each other. (Much of that stemmed from an earlier confrontation in April and May when racial violence in Birmingham seemed out of control.) The tension evident in these telegrams lends a sense of drama to the documents, which makes them compelling reading, even for students.

**Overview of Lesson:**

Doing justice to the civil rights movement is a challenge. The advantage of this lesson is that it's relatively short and can be used to highlight certain dimensions of the movement as a whole (the threat and use of violence by people opposed to the movement, the key role of the federal government forces, the critical importance of individual leadership, etc.). The lesson calls for students to "read between the lines" as they analyze three telegrams exchanged between Governor George Wallace and President John F. Kennedy shortly after Wallace attempted to prevent the admittance of two black students to the University of Alabama by making his famous stand in the schoolhouse door on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1963. The telegrams constitute a politely worded but clearly heated exchange between the two men over issues of who was in charge in the days after the initial confrontation, when violence on the campus remained a distinct possibility. Using a guiding template and working in pairs, students identify various messages contained in each telegram, ones that are implied as well as stated. This exercise is designed to help students learn about the incident, develop their capacity for drawing inferences, and expand their understanding of what influences someone's point of view. At the conclusion of

the lesson, everyone writes their own telegram, explaining what they learned about the civil rights movement from studying these telegrams.

## Content Standards

*Alabama Course of Study: Social Studies* (Bulletin 2004, No. 18)

Grade 11

Content Standard 12

- Tracing the federal government's involvement in the modern civil rights movement, including the abolition of the poll tax, the desegregation of the armed forces, the nationalization of state militias, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965
- Identifying people and events in Alabama that influenced the modern civil rights movement, including Rosa Parks, Autherine Lucy, John Patterson, George C. Wallace, Vivian Malone, Fred Shuttlesworth, the Children's March, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, and the Selma-to-Montgomery march.

## *National Standards for History, 1996*

Standards in History for Grades 5-12

Era 9: Domestic Policies after World War II

Standard 4: The struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties.

- 4A: The student understands the "Second Reconstruction" and its advancement of civil rights
- 5-122: Explain the resistance to civil rights in the South between 1954 and 1965. [Identify issues and problems in the past.]

## *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, (Bulletin 111, 2010)

*Standard 6: Power, Authority, and Governance*

*Standard 10: Civic Ideals and Practices*

## Primary Learning Objective(s):

Students will:

- Learn basic facts about how the University of Alabama was integrated in 1963
- Analyze telegrams written by Governor Wallace and President Kennedy in June, 1963
- Identify the tension between state sovereignty and federal power
- Understand what it meant when President Kennedy 'federalized' Alabama's National Guard
- Practice drawing logical inferences from the telegrams
- Offer possible explanations for both Wallace's and JFK's points of view
- Write a telegram to either Wallace or Kennedy identifying and explaining one insight they gained about the civil rights movement from studying their exchange

**Time allotted:** 60 minutes

## Materials and Equipment:

- Transcribed copies of [three telegrams](#) used in this lesson.
- [PowerPoint Presentation: Dueling Telegrams 1963-Verbal Power Play Between Wallace and JFK](#)
- [Optional Template for Western Union telegram](#)
- Instructions for telegram (includes rubric)

### Technological Resources:

- [Alabama Department of Archives and History](#) (has original copies of each of the three featured telegrams, plus six others)
- [Birmingham Civil Rights Institute](#)
- [Encyclopedia of Alabama](#) article about George Wallace
- Brief [National Public Radio segment](#) (4:48), tracing the history of telegrams. It was first aired in February, 2006, shortly after Western Union sent its last telegram.
- [Western Union](#) site that gives the history of the telegram
- [Library of Congress site](#) about the origin of the telegraph

### Background/Preparation for Students:

- This lesson could be used to introduce some of the main civil rights events in the early 1960s, so it isn't necessary that students have deep factual background in advance.
- At some point, either before or after this lesson, students should learn that Governor Wallace and President Kennedy had clashed with each other on an earlier occasion, when demonstrations and bombings occurred in Birmingham in April and May. (A lesson plan, Spring Jubilation Part II and an accompanying *PowerPoint* is available on Alabama Department of Archives and History [web site](#).) The situation had escalated to the point that President Kennedy sent several units of the armed forces (trained in riot control) to military bases near the city, so they would be available if needed. Governor Wallace objected strenuously and sent a vehement telegram to the President outlining his reasons. That conflict helps explain the level of animosity in the later telegrams.
- Some students may not know that in 1963, National Guardsmen were men who had had military training but worked in civilian jobs and only trained with each other on weekends and during the summer. Under normal circumstances, a National Guard unit would be under a governor's command unless he or she specifically requested that the President of the United States take control. Presidents, however, can legally "federalize" guardsmen on their own. It's been done several times in history. (George Washington federalized state militias during the Whiskey Rebellion.) In June, 1963, President Kennedy, however, federalized the Alabama National Guard without Wallace's permission, thus raising the issue of state sovereignty versus federal power. (Wallace remained in control of Alabama state troopers.)

### Procedures/Activities:

- **Engagement/Motivation Activity:** Show the five slides on the *PowerPoint*: [Dueling Telegrams 1963-Verbal Power Play Between Wallace and JFK](#).
- Slide # 1 displays a telegram, asks students if they can identify what kind of document it is (many may not be able to do that). Encourage them to figure out the different component parts. (First line was for the date, the time, and some in-house codes. Second line indicated who the recipient was. The last line showed who sent the telegram.) If students look closely, they can figure out why this particular telegram is significant. The place and date indicate that it was sent from Honolulu about a week after the bombing at Pearl Harbor. The sender, Gerald Halterman, obviously wanted to reassure Thomas Halterman (probably his father or brother) that he was still alive. Since the

telegram's only message was that a letter from Thomas was on its way, the most important value of a telegram becomes apparent – its speed. (If time permits, you could ask students what has made telegrams – telephone, faxes, voice-mails, e-mails etc.)

- Slides #2-5 introduce students to the central event that occasioned the telegraphic exchange between Governor Wallace and President Kennedy: the integration of the University of Alabama campus in Tuscaloosa on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1963. Two black students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, had already been admitted by the time Wallace and Kennedy wrote these telegrams, but, because of the continuing possibility of violence on the campus (the Ku Klux Klan had a strong presence in Tuscaloosa), a struggle emerged between the two leaders as to which kind of law enforcement officials would be in charge: the National Guard soldiers whom President Kennedy had “federalized” on June 10<sup>th</sup>, or state troopers and local police under Governor Wallace’s command? Additionally, there was an important moral question at stake: who would bear responsibility if people were hurt or killed?
- Tell students that, although the university campus remained tense for some time, violence did not break out.

<b>Step 1</b>	<p>Give each student a transcribed copy of Telegram #1. Display the original version. Have a student read it out loud. Using the questions below and working with the whole class, help students locate important facts and draw inferences.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Who sent this telegram and who received it?</li><li>2. What facts are asserted in this telegram that seem important to understanding the nature of the situation on the University of Alabama campus as of June 13, 1963?</li><li>3. After reading this telegram, would it be logical to infer (assume) that the man who wrote it meant to imply, “I am a blameless victim. You are the bad guy.”? What words did the author use that would either support or refute that inference? (Remind students that an inference is a conclusion someone draws from what they think someone implied, but didn’t directly state, through their words...sort of like reading between the lines.)</li><li>4. What are some other possible inferences a reader could reasonably draw from this telegram? What textual support is there for those inferences?</li><li>5. What might help account for this man’s opinions? Why might he need (or simply be inclined) to portray things as he does? What does he stand to gain or lose in this situation? (Wallace, as governor of Alabama, had a political need to take a pro- state’s rights, pro-segregationist stance since white people who endorsed those viewpoints had recently voted him into office. It was also to his political advantage as a national figure to be seen as a scrappy underdog, fighting against a powerful and invasive federal government. In addition, questions of personal pride may have entered into the situation. Wallace may have felt that if he didn’t strenuously object to President Kennedy’s actions, he would appear weak and ineffectual.</li></ol>
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<b>Step 2</b>	Distribute copies of the other two telegrams to every student, along with the sheet entitled "Reading Between the Lines." Have students form pairs, and give them time to read the telegrams and complete the sheets (every student should complete both sheets, one for each telegram).
<b>Step 3</b>	After collecting the sheets, discuss the two telegrams with the whole class, eliciting as many inferences and explanations of point of view as possible, accepting those that students can support logically and textually. Ask students how they think each man reacted to the telegram from the other? What might they have said to themselves or to their close associates as they processed the telegram?
<b>Step 4</b>	Distribute directions for student-composed telegrams. An optional Western Union template is attached. Students could type their words and then paste them into the blank space on the template.
<b>Step 5</b>	Collect, evaluate (rubric is attached), and post telegrams around the room for students to read.

**Assessment Strategies:**

- Use the rubric (on the bottom part of the student instruction sheet) to evaluate the telegrams.

## EXCHANGE OF TELEGRAMS

### Telegram #1

June 13, 1963

The Honorable John F. Kennedy  
President of the United States  
The White House  
Washington, D.C.

My Director of the Department of Public Safety of the State of Alabama has informed me by telegram of this date that your Military Commander in Tuscaloosa, Alabama ordered the removal of all State Troopers from the campus as of 7 a.m. June 13, 1963, stating that the presence of State Troopers is no longer required. In spite of this fact and the fact that military troops have assumed full responsibility and control of the University of Alabama Campus, I have instructed my Public Safety Director to keep State Troopers in the Tuscaloosa, Alabama area. It is extremely unfortunate that you, the Justice Department Officials and your Military Commanders do not have a better understanding of the situation which you have created at the University of Alabama. You must be aware of the fact when federal military forces occupied the campus that civil control was rendered ineffective. I am deeply concerned for the safety and welfare of all the students and personnel of the University of Alabama which has been jeopardized [endangered] by unwarranted and illegal actions of the Federal Government. The Federal Government usurped [took over, hijacked] my powers as Chief Executive of this State and Chief Law Enforcement Officer and I hope you will realize the great responsibility which now rests on your shoulders for the safety and well-being of all persons on the campus of the University of Alabama which your troops now occupy.

GEORGE C. WALLACE  
Governor, State of Alabama

## Telegram # 2

June 15, 1963

HONORABLE GEORGE C. WALLACE

THE ALABAMA NATIONAL GUARD WAS FEDERALIZED AND ELEMENTS OF IT WERE SENT TO TUSCALOOSA TO PREVENT INTERFERENCE WITH ORDERS OF THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF ALABAMA. CONSISTENT WITH THE TEXT OF EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 11111, RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF LAW AND ORDER ON THE CAMPUS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA CONTINUES TO REST WITH LOCAL AND STATE AUTHORITIES.

REGRETFULLY, IT WAS NECESSARY TO ENFORCE THE COURT ORDERS. MAINTENANCE OF LAW AND ORDER, HOWEVER, REMAINS YOUR LEGAL AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY. I KNOW YOU WERE OPPOSED TO THE ADMISSION OF THE NEGRO STUDENTS, BUT THAT IS NOW PASSED. THEY ARE ATTENDING THE UNIVERSITY, AND I WOULD LIKE TO WITHDRAW THE TROOPS AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. I AM ADVISED THAT TUSCALOOSA HAS A SMALL BUT EXCELLENT POLICE FORCE WHICH, IF BACKED BY STATE LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES, CAN MAINTAIN LAW AND ORDER IN THE TUSCALOOSA AREA. IT WILL BE UNFORTUNATE IF MEMBERS OF THE ALABAMA NATIONAL GUARD NOW IN FEDERAL SERVICE ARE REQUIRED TO REMAIN AWAY FROM THEIR HOMES AND JOBS FOR ANY EXTENDED PERIOD THIS SUMMER. THE DURATION OF THEIR DUTY IS LARGELY UP TO YOU. MY RESPONSIBILITIES WILL REQUIRE ME TO CONTINUE THE ACTIVE STATUS OF THE NATIONAL GUARD UNTIL I AM ADVISED BY YOU OR BY LOCAL LAW OFFICIALS THAT ITS PRESENCE IS NOT REQUIRED.

I HAVE ALWAYS FELT THAT THESE MATTERS SHOULD BE HANDLED BY LOCAL AND STATE AUTHORITIES. I WOULD THINK THAT THE PEOPLE OF ALABAMA WOULD RATHER HAVE THESE RESPONSIBILITIES MET BY PAID, EXPERIENCED LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS THAN BY FEDERALIZED MEN OF THE ALABAMA NATIONAL GUARD. IT IS BETTER FOR THE PEOPLE OF ALABAMA AND BETTER FOR THE NATIONAL GUARDSMEN CALLED TO DUTY.

THEREFORE, I HOPE YOU WILL COOPERATE BY DOING ALL YOU CAN TO TAKE THE NECESSARY STEPS LEADING TO THE DEFEDRALIZATION OF THE NATIONAL GUARD.

JOHN F. KENNEDY

## Telegram #3

June 17, 1963

Honorable John F. Kennedy

I can and will guarantee that there will be no sustained violence in the State of Alabama, but with our limited resources, physical and financial, Alabama cannot insure absolutely the personal safety of individual students. Surely you realize a continuous cause of the tension in Alabama is the presence of the three Negro students on the campuses of the University, and I suggest you immediately secure their withdrawal.

Your public statement that unless the demands of Negro agitators are met, Negroes will return to the streets, is an open invitation to violence and has worsened an already dangerous situation throughout the nation.

The State of Alabama has preserved law and order on the campuses of the University of Alabama under extreme provocation, as you know. In my telegram of June 12 I advised you of the schedule of the withdrawal of my special law enforcement officers from the University.

You have created the situation existing in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. You must assume the responsibility. You cannot usurp [take over, hijack] the powers reserved to the State of Alabama and then place the burdens thereby created on my shoulders.

You called the National Guard into Federal service without consulting me or without complying with the statutes of the United States. Therefore, the defederalization of the Guard is a matter than you will have to determine yourself. I will not be intimidated by your calculated attempt to pass to me the responsibility for the duration of duty of the National Guard.

George C. Wallace

## READING BETWEEN THE LINES

<b>TEXT:</b> <i>Jot down important words/phrases from the telegram in the spaces below. (You may abbreviate.)</i>	<b>SUBTEXT:</b> <i>What unstated message is contained in those words? (This is called an <b>inference</b>.)</i>

How would you account for what this person said and how he said it? Think in terms of his position, frame of reference, personality or goals. **Write your response below.**

## DIRECTIONS FOR TELEGRAM

Sending a letter in the 1960s was relatively cheap; sending a telegram was expensive. It was priced by the word, and a word that didn't contribute to the overall message was a waste of money. While cost wasn't a consideration for Governor Wallace or President Kennedy, in this assignment, it will be for you. We're going to assume four things:

1. Every word costs \$1.00
2. Punctuation marks are free
3. You can leave out small words (such as "the" and "a") as long as whatever you omit doesn't cloud the meaning of the message.
4. The maximum amount of money you can spend is \$75.

The goal is to respond to the prompt appropriately and get the most "bang for your buck". Writing 75 words as opposed to, let's say 500 words, may sound like a piece of cake, but it's actually quite challenging. (If you're familiar with tweeting, writing a telegram is very similar to composing a tweet. A tweet can't exceed 140 characters, and it's not easy to say something meaningful within such a limited structure.) Your telegram has to get to the point right away and stay focused throughout. Success depends on "testing" each element, in this case every word, to see if it actually helps express your central thought.

Here's the prompt: "What was the most important insight you gained about the civil rights movement during the 1960s from reading these telegrams? Explain how the telegram(s) support your conclusion."

YOUR TELEGRAM WILL BE GRADED ON THESE CONSIDERATIONS:

- 1) Does it stay within the word (money) limit?.....20 points
- 2) Does it respond to the prompt appropriately?.....20 points
- 3) Has the author supported his/her insight by referring to something within at least one of the telegrams?.....20 points